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### Silent Subversions

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**SILENT SUBVERSIONS:**  
EXPLORING THE ENIGMA OF  
FEMALE SPECTATORSHIP  
IN SILENT CINEMA

By  
Derek Dubois

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the  
Master of Art in  
The Department of Art

Rhode Island College  
2009

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# 1: Introduction

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Since the early 1970's, feminist film theorists have argued that classical Hollywood cinema denies female filmgoers a symbiotic relationship with the flickering light and shadows on the movie screen. They argue that the codes of cinematic spectatorship reflect our dominant patriarchal ideology creating a cinematic spectator forged through the male unconscious. But feminist film theory has rarely examined cinema's germination and early development in terms of gender and has not adequately addressed whether classical Hollywood cinema emerged as a medium designed for men or evolved into one. What, then, can be said about female spectatorship during the burgeoning years of motion pictures?

There is a moment in the 1913 D.W. Griffith film *The Painted Lady*, where a female character glances out of her bedroom window. The following shot reveals the landscape of a park in the distance. This simple sequence is striking for a number of reasons. A point of view is established in which the spectator in the audience is spatially situated in the eyeline of this female character. The juxtaposition of these shots demonstrates a great deal about socio-cultural coding of the time and about cinema's genesis as a narrative form. As motion pictures evolved from their primitive incarnation into the classical Hollywood model of today, codes solidified to situate viewers into specific subject positions in relation to film. There are many different routes motion pictures could have taken but feminist film theory argues that the path narrative cinema

took virtually eliminated the role of the female spectator. With classical Hollywood cinema, the specialized codes of film language would solidify to yield pleasure for male spectators. Simultaneously, these codes contain and punish female characters thus denying female filmgoers a similar position of power and pleasure in their film viewing experience. The narrative repercussions for the central female character in *The Painted Lady* define the film as among the earliest examples in this tradition of serving male pleasure.

Nevertheless, during this transition to classical Hollywood cinema, motion pictures hinted at alternative possibilities for female spectatorship. Griffith's *The Painted Lady* is an enigmatic film, representative of many during the early teen years: trapped between the experimental milieu of the primitive era and the rigid reinforcement of patriarchy found in classical Hollywood cinema. This is a film whose editing and construction would suggest what could have been while its narrative has already planted one foot firmly on the soil of patriarchy. It would be almost another decade before the many components required for female spectatorship would coalesce. Ultimately Griffith's film is engaging because it places, if only momentarily, a female character in control. It is she, a woman, who looks.

## **THE LOOK**

Aspects of this language of spectatorship and attendant notions of power through the look are essential components of post-structuralist film theory. In the

1960s, Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz began focusing on spectator relations and soon feminists turned to examine gender inequality in visual representation. Feminist theory exploded into film theory with the 1975 publication of Laura Mulvey's pioneering "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In this essay, Mulvey analyzes the dominant phallogentric and patriarchal mechanisms that operate within classical narrative cinema. What Mulvey argues is that there is a fundamental pleasure found in looking and that the pleasure classical films offer is gendered. As Mulvey states, "the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film" (27). The protagonist of a film is usually an active male character: agent of action and controller of the look. The woman is the object of the narrative created "to-be-looked-at" (32). It is the look that according to Mulvey organizes women on screen as passive, objectified figures through psychological processes of voyeurism and fetishism.

The concept of gendered spectatorship has a long history in art of the western world and has come to define our current modes of representation. Examples of females on display for male pleasure can be seen in western art from Renaissance nude oil paintings through the history of cinema and into advertising and contemporary mass media. As John Berger has illustrated in his study of gendered representation, the significant Ways of Seeing (1972), western art features women, often nude, as passive tableaux designed to serve the male. Berger contends that women become complicit in their own objectification. "Men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at" (47). These *ways of seeing* guide and define our lives, our social mores, and even

our artistic representations, teaching us to code artistic and visual work in this way and thus continue the tradition of inequitable gender representation.

Berger establishes western religion as the catalyst in privileging the male spectator through mimetic representation. Christian Creationism begins in the Bible with the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God creates man in his image and gives him dominion over all living things. God then fashions Eve, a woman, from his rib. They are told to abstain from eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge. In the third chapter of Genesis a serpent tempts Eve to eat of the fruit. She does. And then she convinces Adam. God sees this and as John Berger states:

They become aware of being naked because, as a result of eating the apple, each saw the other differently. Nakedness was created in the mind of the beholder. The second striking fact is that the woman is blamed and is punished by being made subservient to the man. In relation to the woman, the man becomes the agent of God. (48)

Berger understood that religious institutions' positions on what it means to be man and woman would drastically inform future cultural ideology. To Berger, from this moment on western visual culture clearly shows a demarcation between gender in its representations.

Since the twentieth century has been marked by film as the defining popular medium, it behooves us to explore the way in which this art form has constructed gender. Feminist film theory has opened up this territory but was generated from



classical Hollywood sound cinema and the motion pictures it refers to are drawn from this body of films. I am interested in moving beyond this range of texts to explore the concept of spectatorship in relation to gender in the earliest period of film history in the U.S., the silent era. Certain theorists such as Judith Mayne and Miriam Hansen have begun this work but it is far from complete. Did film emerge as a medium designed to serve the pleasure of the male spectator from the start or did films evolve or possibly transform into the system Mulvey describes for classical narrative sound film? Or, is Mulvey's theory not applicable to silent film? When and how did spectatorship itself develop and when and how did it evolve? What was the social, cultural, economic, political and legal position of women in the early twentieth century and how might such cultural constructs impact issues of spectatorship? Specifically, how did the social spheres that defined gender during the early twentieth century in the U.S. operate in terms of cinema and spectatorship? How did Hollywood cater to the rising demographic of female consumers and moviegoers? The ultimate goal of my thesis is to explore the concept of female spectatorship and its possibility during the age of silent cinema. What I intend to argue is that a new and different mode of spectatorship will emerge for women, specifically during the 1920s, which utilizes the extra-diegetic components of spectacle in theater design, new customized genres for female filmgoers, the cult of fandom, plus the subversive sexuality of exotic male film stars.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As indicated by the subtitle of my thesis, *Exploring the Enigma of Female Spectatorship in the Silent Era*, I have limited myself to the silent era, beginning with the first motion pictures in 1895 and concluding shortly after the advent of sound in 1927. I have focused primarily on feminist film theory, which itself is based on psychoanalytic theory, and on cultural studies as my methodological models. This focus arose from the initial difficulties I had encountered in trying to reconcile feminist theory with the silent era, issues that I felt had not yet been accounted for at a theoretical level. Since this study is concerned with the female spectator, I will largely ignore the blossoming field of masculinity studies. I have undertaken a review of key silent era films and considered other primary source materials as well. Female spectatorship in the silent era must be investigated through a myriad of theoretical, critical, and historical lenses in order to consider the various socio-cultural effects of the new medium and the place of the female spectator within it.

Feminist film theory is rooted in psychoanalysis, in the revolutionary work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Psychoanalysis, as developed by Freud, was not initially intended as theory to dissect literature, art, or cinema but instead served to treat hysteria and neurosis in his patients. Nevertheless, it wasn't long before Freud himself soon used psychoanalysis to examine the coding of art and literature. His techniques had been appropriated first in literary analysis and then in film analysis. Psychoanalysis, as it applies to film studies, is an examination of the unconscious forces

that shape cinema. As E. Ann Kaplan has stated, “the psychic patterns created by capitalist social and interpersonal structures required at once a machine (the cinema) for their unconscious release and an analytic tool (psychoanalysis) for their understanding” (24). More recently, feminist film theory has taken essential components of psychoanalysis and used them as tools to uncover the gender inequality within motion pictures. It is the feminist film model which I will be working with, although, feminist theory will not in and of itself be adequate enough to encompass this broad topic.

Cultural studies will serve as another valuable model for my thesis. As a relatively new theoretical field, cultural studies has been described as “a view of culture that acknowledges its social and political role” (Jordan and Weedon, 246) and as such it steps outside of the individual, which psychoanalysis is so concerned with, to investigate a work of art within social and cultural frameworks, particularly ideology. This model looks very closely at the implications on both the creator of the artwork and the perceiver experiencing it at a particular historical moment in time. By using cultural studies along with feminist film theory and psychoanalysis, I will have the tools to study the role of the spectator as well as the greater social and cultural frameworks of the culture in which motion pictures were produced. This will allow me to place cinema in the nexus of history, culture, and gender which has determined the role of women as both subjects on screen and as spectators in the audience in the silent era.

## **SURVEY OF CRITICAL RESEARCH**

As noted, the body of textual work to emerge from the feminist film theory movement has been derived almost exclusively from classical Hollywood cinema. Classical Hollywood cinema is a term used to define the typical aesthetic of U.S. films once they had developed a standardized mode of address. This method was, and has been, the primary institutional practice for major Hollywood studios as narrative and continuity devices codified in the post-primitive era. It was not long however before feminist critics found problems generalizing their theory across other cinematic traditions and periods. Christine Gledhill was an early guide in this regard arguing in her 1978 article, "Recent Developments in Feminist Film Criticism," that it is necessary to view cinema not only as a theoretical practice but as a social practice informed by history. Claire Johnston, in 1980's "The Subject of Feminist Film Theory/Practice," takes up the work of Gledhill, arguing that feminist theory must address "the audiences as constituted socially" and also examine "the power and role of recognition and identification" in spectatorship (295). Johnston argues that film should be seen as a "textual practice rather than an autonomous object of...consumption" (297) positing that the relationship between film and viewer is not a one-way street but a complicated discourse impacted by social forces and historically constructed.

Soon feminist theorists would turn to the silent era. One of the very first to do so was Judith Mayne who argued that primitive cinema is gender coded and a female spectatorial position may be found in certain primitive films. Primitive Cinema is a term

used to describe the earliest form of motion pictures, prior to the systematization of narrative and subsequent strategies for spectator positioning. In her analysis of “keyhole films” (1901-1905), primitive films with voyeuristic themes, Mayne acknowledges that men are already looking at erotically-charged women. This small body of films often features a main character peering through the keyholes of different doors, a framing device to reveal mini-narratives that take place as point-of-view shots within the larger story. While the voyeur is almost always male, Mayne has uncovered several films which reverse this trend and present females looking. Although Mayne ultimately does concede that “a female voyeur can peek but does not possess the authority necessary to penetrate the room” (178), her rediscovery of this curious genre of “keyhole films” reveals that motion pictures may not have always specifically targeted male pleasure and female characters could sometimes actively look.

Lynne Kirby was another early feminist theorist to turn her attention to silent cinema. In “Male Hysteria and Early Cinema,” Kirby uses the psychoanalytic approach to explore the function of cinema as catharsis to a burgeoning modern industrial society of turn of the century America. By linking the cinematic experience with train travel – another relatively recent technological development - Kirby maintains that motion pictures dismantle viewers by exploring their repressed fears of loss of control. She begins with an analysis of how train travel initially altered conventional modes of perception by situating passengers before large framed windows which completely manipulated time and space in ways for which they had not been prepared. Kirby

considers that primitive cinema generated the same effect and she compares cases of “railway shock,” a condition common in male passengers, to the effect produced by primitive films on male spectators positing that both elicit hysteria (considered a symptom of psychological repression in the wake of fast moving industrial societies). She states that “the early male viewer [is] ‘undone...uncoded, a subject whose sexual orientation vis-à-vis spectatorship is broken down, put into crisis – hystericized” (72). According to Kirby, the “shock” of primitive cinema, which both hystericized and feminized the viewer, could be equally applied to both female and male viewers. Unlike Mayne, Kirby’s intriguing work surmises that the viewer of early cinema is not predicated on gendered coding.

While these feminist theorists were exploring the effects of historical specificity, a new generation of film historians was dedicated to a more rigorous approach towards film history, one which necessitated addressing how audiences interacted with the images they saw. These historians and critics developed different models for cinematic viewing, some of which open up more space for a female position. Among the first was Tom Gunning who in “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde” argued that without the sophisticated structure of narrativity, primitive films were not locked into the cinematic coding and underlying ideological mechanisms of classical cinema. These films were exhibitionistic; the subjects in them are aware of the audience. On-screen characters will often glance directly into the camera and shots seem designed as if composed within limited theatrical space.

Gunning notes that spectatorship, as it evolved in later classical cinema, did not yet exist in primitive film, which he renamed the “cinema of attractions.” Gunning writes: “The cinema of attractions directly solicits audience attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event...that is of interest in itself” (58). Gunning implies that primitive cinema’s audiences did not watch films from the type of gendered positions constructed by later classical cinema. Like avant-garde cinema, primitive films operated outside cinematic conventions, skirting patriarchal coding and since sophisticated codes of spectatorship are not yet in place, these films operate in a general milieu – an anything goes environment of experimentation – which opens up possibilities to watch from non-patriarchal-coded gender positions.

Soon theorists, historians, and critics were expanding their work on spectatorship in silent cinema into larger book-length publications. In 1985’s *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, Kathy Peiss utilizes feminist theory and cultural studies to establish the role of cinema and other such amusements in the leisure lives of women. Motion pictures came into fruition along with other cultural milestones such as popular dance and the department store, which contribute to the creation of a new class of women who acquire the freedom to look in the public sphere. It is, notes Peiss, within this early modern environment that women finally obtain the power of the gaze. Although Peiss doesn’t concern herself with filmic patterns of identification, her work is essential because it establishes the

encroaching role of motion pictures and fandom on young women of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Peiss writes, “the movies quickly generated a young woman’s culture oriented around the adulation of movie stars and being a fan” (153).

Similar to *Cheap Amusements*, Lauren Rabinovitz’s *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (1998) offers perspective on the New Woman, a term used to describe the archetypal young female who demanded her independence and autonomy, and in some instances, the vote as well. Like New York, Chicago at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century became a hotbed of social change as the New Woman crusaded for her deserved rights in the public sphere. Rabinovitz details the concept of the *Flaneur*, or wandering gentleman as defined by Walter Benjamin, demonstrating that while men were given the power to peruse the modern city, alone and exploring, women were not granted similar permission to gaze in public. Women wanted this right to gaze and found the power and pleasure of looking rewarded in motion pictures. Nevertheless, women were still positioned in these motion pictures as objects to be looked at. Rabinovitz remarks that “women were images for consumption in the theatrical space of the movie theater while they were also the most important patrons” (181). Primitive cinema provided the arena in which women could find equality with men in opportunities of utilizing their gaze. According to Rabinovitz, while the subject of this cinema may have been their own objectified bodies – the importance of these new modes of looking for women far outweigh their objectification.



Shelly Stamp, in her recent contribution to this line of inquiry, *Movie Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (2000), provides insight into the emerging role of women in cinema both on screen and as viewers. Stamp focuses on the 1910s, after the primitive era, as classical Hollywood cinema was standardizing its codes. This major shift from primitive to narrative cinema was hard on women. Female audiences were “frequently accused of being unable to adopt the viewing position demanded of classical cinema” (25). Stamp’s work points to the inability of classical Hollywood cinema to code itself to women and opens up the possibility that female spectatorship cannot be found in the same patterns of identification which lead to male spectatorship. Female identification may not occur on screen at all but rather through the extra-diegetic fantasies of *movie-struck girls*. Stamp asks us to look outside of films themselves and into the extra-filmic role of stardom and other auxiliary devices. It is cinema, combined with these devices, that incites female pleasure and sets the stage for female spectatorship. Taken together, Peiss, Rabinovitz, and Stamp move the discussion of female spectatorship in a new direction, towards extra-diegetic conditions which complicate, and thus break open, traditional theories of spectatorship predicated solely upon the representation of gender on the screen.

In 1991 Miriam Hansen published Babel and Babylon, an essential profiling of the entire silent era and the development of spectatorship as cinema matured into a dominant art form. Her work exploring the systematization of narrative cinema has become the definitive model of spectatorship for the early silent era. Essentially

primitive cinema has *viewers*, not *spectators*, according to Hansen, and she bluntly asserts that “early films...lacked the mechanisms to create a spectator in the classical sense” (24). Here, Hansen is aligned with Kirby and Gunning (and in disagreement with Judith Mayne) in arguing that spectatorship requires the classical coding of cinema, which will evolve through the introduction of narrativity and the classical continuity style.

Babel and Babylon continues by tracing the advancement of spectatorship in the post-primitive era. In the final portion of her book Hansen uses the figure of Rudolph Valentino in an attempt to generate a very specific model of female spectatorship. The 1920s saw Valentino reach heights of superstardom as a matinee-idol and general conqueror of women everywhere. Using stardom, Hansen argues for a female spectatorship based on a unique application of psychoanalysis that ultimately positioned Valentino as an erotic object for female pleasure. She writes, “Valentino’s films challenge the assumption of perceptual mastery implied in such a concept both on account of the star system and because of the peculiar organization of the gaze” (281). Adding to this she notes that “female identification in Valentino films could be constructed to entail the full range of transformations proposed by Freud” (298). Her concept of female spectatorship functions as an inverse of the basic idea of male spectatorship that Mulvey proposed. Thus, in the films of Rudolph Valentino, narrative gives way to a spectacle of erotic objectification of the male body just as it will do for the female body in classical cinema. This early cinematic transgression functions as “an

institutional opportunity to violate the taboo on female scopophilia” (277). And while Babel and Babylon is an invaluable read and makes immense headway in tackling the emergence of spectatorship during the silent era, I feel that Hansen’s model of female spectatorship, which derives from applications of Freudian psychoanalysis culled from Freud’s “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” is ultimately problematic because it is not applicable outside of Valentino’s singular cinematic role.

In response to Hansen’s work with Valentino and the female spectator, Richard DeCordova wrote a brief *Dialogue* rebuttal in *Cinema Journal* in 1986. In this piece DeCordova asserts that the connections between female pleasure and female modes of address are actually to be found extra-diegetically – outside of films themselves. He cites the numerous fan magazines and tabloid stories which worked to create and maintain fantasies about male stars, stating that

[a] tension has historically existed between the institutions of the star system and the narrative and visual codes of the dominant cinema. While the [narrative and visual codes] seem, as Hansen argues, to repress female scopophilia, the [the star system] has quite clearly exploited it by presenting glamour photos of the stars and photographs of the details of their ‘private’ lives. (56)

Ultimately DeCordova generates a model for female spectatorship along the lines of Peiss, Rabinovitz, and Stamp. Through the phenomenon of the star system and other advertising and consumer tie-ins, women were targeted to buy into this illusory cinematic world which promised them the power to look. For DeCordova, like Peiss,

Rabinovitz, and Stamp, it is outside of the film text where the process begins for the female spectator.

The end of the silent era finds a cinema which has all but standardized into classical Hollywood coding. Many theorists have explored this specific period (which F. Scott Fitzgerald dubbed The Jazz Age). One of the most exhaustive historical accounts of male stardom in relation to female audiences comes from Gaylyn Studlar's This Mad Masquerade (1996). Studlar creates an intertextual examination of four of the biggest male movie stars of this era profiling Douglas Fairbanks, John Barrymore, Rudolph Valentino, and Lon Chaney in tandem with important socio-historical moments geared to the on screen and off screen personalities of each respective star. It is her profiling of Valentino that really explores the ways in which masculinity was constructed for women's pleasure; specifically marketed to female audiences with a subversive masculinity that emphasized exotic sexuality. This form of masculinity contrasts sharply against the more conventional masculinity of Fairbanks marketed to male audiences. While Studlar's historical research is dazzling, she doesn't really focus on the construction of a female spectator. Her work establishes how male stars were created differently for male and female audiences but female spectatorship is not her stated purpose and a theory for it never quite materializes.

## **LOCATING THE FEMALE SPECTATOR**

As the preceding survey of literature demonstrates, little scholarship has been devoted to generating a working model of female spectatorship across the silent era – only Hansen makes an attempt and hers hinges on a complex psychoanalytic argument relegated to Rudolph Valentino films. However, taken together, the work presented in the previous section seems to point in a fairly singular direction: that female spectatorship may be more fruitfully explored through components of a model of alternative viewing that evolves alongside classical Hollywood cinema during the mid-to-late silent era. Chapter 2 will explore the evolution of motion pictures from primitive cinema through the classical Hollywood model. Along the way it will be fruitful to profile the role of lower and middle class women as they crusaded for equality during this same period. An in-depth examination of Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" kicks off Chapter 3 as my goal is to first establish the dominant system of patriarchy formulating during the post-primitive years. Then I will revisit the socio-cultural status of women in the 1920s as the New Woman and Flappers exude confidence and sexual independence. Lastly, the chapter will close with the presentation of my own model of female spectatorship which exists uniquely during the 1920s.

If cinema systemically creates a hierarchy of gender representations through the devices of classical Hollywood cinema, then it is the look which serves as the card to stack the deck against the female spectator. Due to its complicated nature, its enigmatic guise, critics and theorists remain divided on female spectatorship. I will

define this unique spectatorship as a mode of address for women in the audience which works to target their own pleasure without the repercussions of patriarchal punishment. I have no reservations about the feminist position during the years of classical sound cinema. From cinema's inception much of its offerings have been geared toward male pleasure. However, I am convinced that this position cannot be generalized across all of silent film so easily. Many films of the late silent era appear to cater to female pleasure. During this very period the public sphere was opening for a new consumer culture of women, women who shopped in department stores and went to see movies. During the silent era the New Woman emerges and I now welcome you to discover her and the possibility of female spectatorship.

## 2. Women & Motion Pictures: 1895 - 1920

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The development of motion pictures coincided with great cultural change in the United States. New tropes of modernity and consumerism – propelled by the massive forwarding of technology – propagated an atmosphere of chaos and excitement. This sensation has been deemed “hyperstimulation” by historian Ben Singer who wrote of the period: “rapid industrialization, urbanization, and population growth...modernity, in short, was conceived of as a barrage of stimuli” (73). It has been well documented that there was difficulty for people, especially the working class, to keep up with such massive changes both physically and psychically. Cinema’s unique evolution, which awed and captured the imaginations of audiences in the United States, and throughout the world, developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It progressed as a form of mass entertainment in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century until its transformation around 1906/1907 whereby cinematic codes slowly forged into a system which fashioned spectators out of viewers. I will argue that the construction of gender within primitive cinema (1895-1907) was very different from what feminist theorists argue about the construction of gender in classical Hollywood cinema. The primitive era was an era of voyeuristic films, of spectacle, which openly emphasized distance between viewer and film and inhibited audience identification. Since modes of spectatorship did not yet exist, these films have no spectators, merely viewers. Only through the rise of narrative and classical coding, that is the codes to position a viewer in relation to

narrative, does a spectator finally emerge in cinema – and here I agree with feminist film theorists like Laura Mulvey that this spectator is predicated upon patriarchy: its goal is to deliver male pleasure. But before this occurred, motion pictures had to grow into their role as the dominant form of popular art.

### **THE PRIMITIVE ERA**

In the 1890's Thomas Edison's employee W.K.L Dickson was developing the Kinetoscope, born out of Edison's desire to unite his previous discovery of the phonograph with motion pictures to synthesize the first home-entertainment system. Eventually, Edison refocused on the Kinetoscope, a peep-show machine arranged with loops of short film that ran for one viewer at a time. Individuals would watch a film unfurl through a small viewing window in the machine. Kinetoscope films were brief segments (lasting only a few seconds or so) of spectacular events that presented patrons with titillating or exciting scenes which they would not have normally experienced in their everyday lives: from subway grates lifting up women's dresses to the graphic electrocution of elephants. Primitive cinema is a cinema of spectacle, of light, illusions, and technological marvels. Sometimes staged vaudeville acts, Kinetoscope films were more typically sensationalized slices of real life called *actualities*. *Black Diamond Express* (1896) features a speeding train rounding a bend as men work to repair the tracks while *Sky Scrapers of New York City from North River* (1903) was shot from the deck of a boat observing the New York skyline as it passes. *Actualities* often



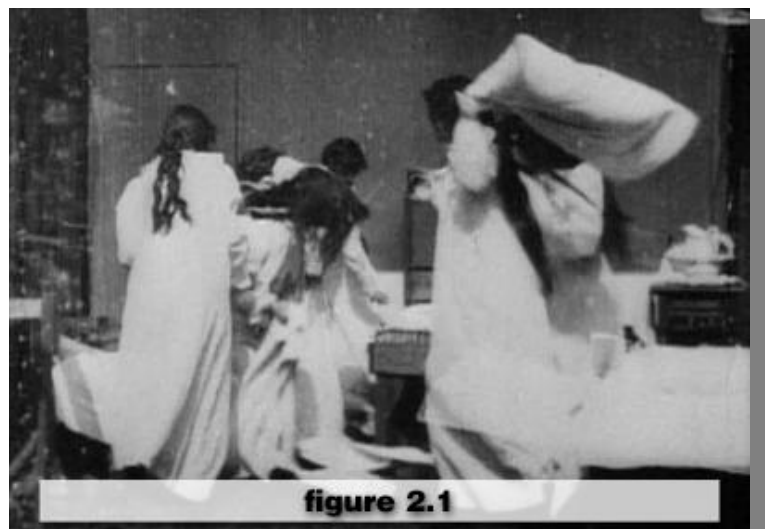
attempted to capture, dissect, and better understand the role of technology within this new modern world.

Film historian Kristen Thompson has argued that in primitive cinema a viewer functioned as an audience member at a show, positioned outside the “edge of narrative space” (158). An early Kinetoscope film, *The Kiss* (1896), demonstrates this positioning. In fact, *The Kiss* was based on a highly controversial scene from a popular 1895 play *The Widow Jones* and thus affirmation of the appeal of such spectacle. In it, a woman sits beside a man with nothing but a black backdrop behind them. They nuzzle briefly until the man pulls away, twirls his mustache, and finally moves in to kiss her. The entire 18-second film consists of a single shot with flattened space, a static focal length, and no set or props. As Miriam Hansen notes, “‘primitive’ style is the theatrical style...the shot is perceived as a unit of relative autonomy...the frontal and uniformity of viewpoint is clearly the mark of the presentational – as opposed to representational – conception of space and address” (34). Ergo, *The Kiss* is a perfect example of the primitive style.

This critical difference between primitive cinema and later classical cinema, the presentational as opposed to the representational, imbues primitive films with an inherent distance between film and viewer so that while these films incited a sense of voyeurism, they also curbed any possibility for emotional connection. Shots were not yet juxtaposed through editing patterns to combine and develop an illusion of three-dimensional space. For the few films that did experiment with editing, the goal was not to situate a viewer within this constructed narrative space but only to enhance views of

stimulating imagery. In the case of *The Gay Shoe Clerk* (1903), a woman in a shoe-store is being fitted by a clerk as she lifts her dress and offers a scandalous view of her lower leg. Her leg is in turn represented through a close-up. As Tom Gunning notes, “many of the close-ups in early film differ from later uses of the technique precisely because they do not use enlargement for narrative punctuation, but as an attraction in its own right” (58). The close-up in *The Gay Shoe Clerk* is not a point-of-view shot from the perspective of any of the characters, as will be seen through the later development of classical editing devices, but exists only to enhance a viewer’s glimpse of the woman’s lower leg. It is interesting then to posit that developments in narrative storytelling and cinematic coding may have been driven by, among other things, a desire to view more of the eroticized body.

Many early Kinetoscope films promote the spectacle of the body by incorporating subjects such as dancers and other performing figures. *Annabelle Dances* (1895) featured the salacious and serpentine movements of a woman dancing specifically for the camera. For several



seconds she lifts and twirls her dress, gyrating her body and kicking her legs. Lauren Rabinovitz described such films as “the sexual titillation of dancing female bodies being

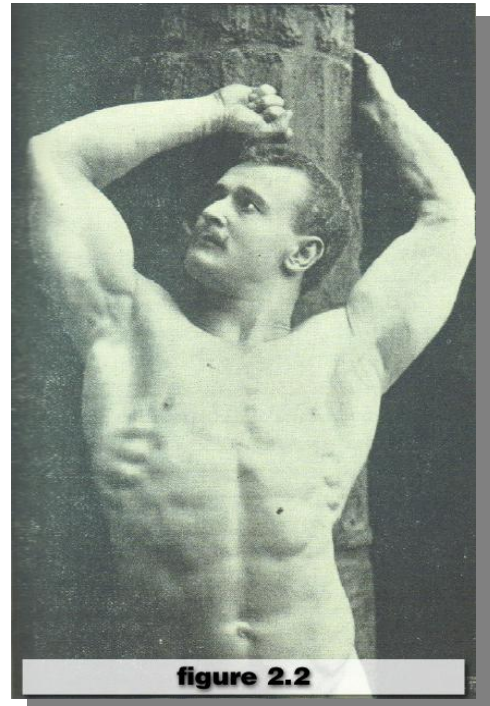
exhibited for the camera" (107). In *Seminary Girls* (1900), a bedroom full of young women in dressing gowns suddenly erupts wildly into a group pillow fight (see figure 2.1). Their arms and legs flail about the screen in a grand display of flesh for the camera. As historian Charles Musser notes, "subjects like these appealed to male [viewers] who not only wanted to peep but to control the unfolding of the image, perhaps searching for that frame which most revealed these women's bodies" (176).

By 1904, after Edison adopted large screen projection, a sub-genre of motion pictures known as burlesque films emerged which featured women in and around burlesque houses. *A Fire in a Burlesque* (1904) mixes thrills and sex as firemen rush to carry scantily clad dancers out of a burning building. Four women are carried out, one at a time, each progressively more in peril than the last. The women rely on firemen to save them all the while dressed in bawdy, revealing costumes. Likewise, in *From Showgirl to Burlesque Queen* (1904) a woman enters a room, strips down to her dressing gown before the camera, steps behind a screen and changes dresses. While she is changing, the camera lingers on the screen and observes a gratuitous display of her bare arm as she reaches for her new outfit. Soon the voluptuous young woman emerges from behind the screen wearing a shimmery, burlesque costume and the film ends.

The female form is on display in countless primitive films; nevertheless, erotic spectacle of the human body was not limited solely to the presentation of women. In one of Edison's original Kinetoscope films, *Sandow No. 1* (1896), legendary bodybuilder

Eugen Sandow poses, nearly nude, in various displays of his muscular finesse (see figure 2.2).

In addition to *Sandow*, an early boxing match – *The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight* (1895) is a three hour document of two fighters clashing in the ring. The film shows two brawling men, also nearly nude, and was a huge success among both male and female audiences. As Hansen notes, *The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight* “attracted large



**figure 2.2**

audiences [and was] heavily attended by women” adding that “the film’s success with female audiences was more or less accidental” (2). *Fight* was made at a time before filmmakers were actively targeting specific genders. Male bodies were as much a part of the primitive milieu as were female bodies and as Hansen reminds us, it is essential to note, whether purposeful or not, that women were watching.

Primitive cinema’s lack of spectatorial coding extended into its advertising as well. Here one can view visual texts that also position the human body as spectacle. The *Biograph Bulletins* were advertisements from American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, a major studio of the time (one of its founding partners was W.K.L Dickson)

and one such Biograph advertisement from 1900, *The Birth of the Pearl*, depicts a larger than life clam shell opening to expose “Pearl,” a scantily clad woman in a seductive pose (Nivers 57). This one sheet poster uses evocative imagery of a sexualized woman and demonstrates the same presentational construction as primitive film. As with primitive films, primitive advertising often showcased male bodies too. Here, in the *Biograph Bulletins*, Sandow makes another appearance. An advertisement from *Sandow* (1902) consists of “the famous strong man” posed in yet another display of muscular flexing (Nivers 23). Though the *Sandow* bulletin is seemingly just a still from the film it advertises, its importance lies in the exhibitionistic quality of its presentation of the male body.

Although primitive films were often explicitly about the showcase of the body through exhibitionism, they did not position viewers according to gender. Eroticized images of men and women were equally available to male and female viewers. Lauren Rabinovitz argues rather matter-of-factly that “it is impossible to generalize a female spectator produced by this setting” (119). Bodies had become the subject of many of these primitive films but the films did not situate audiences into specific subject-positions and cannot be said to cater to spectatorship of either gender. Primitive cinema’s preoccupation with the exhibition of the human body may have established the basis for its future evolution. As Jonathan Auerbach has argued, the motion of bodies would be attributed to the development of cinema:

If motion largely defines the distinctive logic of the medium, helping to distinguish moving pictures from other media, then moving pictures that make such movement their primary subject would seem to hold the key for understanding how viewers learned to negotiate the shift from showing to telling. (88)

Spectatorship is a term which must be cautiously applied. In primitive films, Gunning has stated that the “theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe” (59). Primitive films do not conform to classical strategies which construct them as narrative nor do they engage viewers with protagonists as on-screen surrogates through continuity editing; hence, there are no identification processes at work. It is precisely both of these missing elements, narrative and identification, which must be brought together to transform viewers into spectators. When cinema reinvents itself as a narrative medium, only then can it begin to promise the allure of male pleasure.

### **THE NEW WOMAN**

During the same period of time in which primitive film was developing, women were striving for suffrage as well as greater independence and autonomy over their lives. For the first time in the United States, women’s leisure expanded outside of their domestic duties into the public sphere. Consumerism gave rise to women shopping and

working in department stores with a cultural calibration towards a new focus on stimulation. This modern landscape provided women with opportunities to engage in public dancing and excursions to working class amusements. It also allowed them to negotiate heterosocial relations with the opposite sex. The birth of cinema just happened to coincide perfectly with this newfound possibility of women in public space and soon became a major institution in promoting women's pleasure.

The morals of the Victorian era came into conflict with newly independent women as the concept of distinctly separate public and private spheres began to erode. The Victorian age had solidified the public as a space for men, especially when it came to recreation, and stigmatized any woman venturing into this sphere as an unrespectable girl or prostitute. Kathy Peiss notes that, "over ten thousand saloons [catering to men] were in business throughout greater New York in 1900" (17). Men found their leisure in these public bars, billiards, and clubs whereas women were expected to find their pleasure in the private sphere: that of the home and domesticity. It was predominantly the lower-class immigrant and working class groups who found themselves in the melting pot of urban spaces and while, Peiss writes, "some immigrants rejected the modern culture, seeing a threat to age-old customs...their children anxiously converted to the American standard, reveling in commercial entertainment" (29). Slowly, this Americanized youth of Old World communities and the working class begins pushing for social freedoms and a much more integrated meshing of the sexes not segregated by dying Victorian mores. A major component of

this rebellious American youth included the working girl, often the daughter of immigrants, who found her symbol in the New Woman.

The rise of the department store functioned as one of the first public spaces accessible to women. In England, Selfridge's, established in 1909, crusaded to dispel the notions of separate public and private spheres and positioned the department store as a leader in women's reform. According to Erika Rappaport, "Selfridge[s owner] argued that mass retailing reunited elite and popular culture, which he saw as having been separated during the Victorian era" (39). By this point in history, the United States was already wading in consumerism and celebrating the dawn of retail emporiums. Gimbels opened in 1887 and Macy's Department Store followed in 1898. These behemoth shopping centers advertised themselves as environments, much more than retail outlets, where women could be transported from mundane work-oriented lives into pampered luxury. In short, the department store branded the idea of a woman's pleasure being derived from public space. Stunningly, these stores even promoted themselves as integral to modern life because "in these commercial environments, customers were asked to see buying not as an economic act but as a social and cultural event" (Rappaport 31).

The department store was a marvel of aesthetic design both literally in an architectural sense and culturally significant for the way in which it catered to the New Woman. Sumiko Higashi has argued that "the feminization of shopping, this conversion of women into retail shoppers, began... [a] redefinition of middle-class women as



consumers [which] meant their decreased privatization at the cost of their increased commodification” (89). By catering to the New Woman through retail, the very ideology of buying and selling pleasure became the norm. This notion ingrained in women that expressions of self could be outwardly directed through tangible goods and leisure commodities. Historian Jennifer Scanlon writes that, “we convey messages about social class or social aspirations through our home decorations; in fact, one could argue, we speak to each other through the language of things” (2). Through consumerism the New Woman could construct her space within the public sphere.

The changing roles of women were not wholly embraced by all Americans however. A schism erupted between those who still held Victorian ideals and those who embraced the modern ideas of the New Woman. Resistance to women’s reform could be found in the philosophy of no less than President Theodore Roosevelt, a virulent symbol of stalwart American masculinity. In Roosevelt’s address to the National Congress of Mothers in 1905 he proclaimed, “Save in exceptional cases the man must be, and [the woman] need not be, and generally ought not to be, trained for a lifelong career as the family bread-winner” (138). Roosevelt stressed the role of woman as mother, explaining that it was her American duty to remain in the domestic sphere, raise children, and support her working husband. As he also said: “the lives of these women are often led on the lonely heights of quiet, self-sacrificing heroism” (138).

As women solidified their roles in public space, it is easy to see how they would soon become an attractive market for motion pictures. When studios began to target

middle class audiences, and most importantly women, they latched onto the same ideas promoted by the paradigms of consumerism and its archetype, the department store. The department store window, much like the framed “window” of the movie screen, would become a symbol for a sanctified place where women were allowed to utilize their gaze. And utilizing a woman’s gaze was all in the service of consumption. Much in the same ways that the department store promoted a woman’s leisure and luxury, so too would the newly reformed cinematic medium, both in the theatrical environment and in film form. Catering to women meant that ameliorating movies into a classier, well-respected art form was not far behind.

### **THE RISE OF CLASSICAL CINEMA**

In an effort to expand economically and increase audiences in the years following the economic Panic of 1907 and the ensuing recession, filmmakers began to reinvent film form by introducing complicated, self-contained stories and developing a grammar to tell these stories. Suddenly, women and the middle class seemed integral to the survival of motion pictures and seeking to reach out to these new demographics, studios had to drop the vaudeville and burlesque indignity of the primitive era and align films with more respectable forms of entertainment. According to Shelly Stamp,

cinema's cultural ascendance throughout [the post-primitive] years has often been yoked with the industry's campaign to build its female audience, since women, middle-class women in particular, embodied the same respectability tradesmen sought for motion pictures: social propriety, refined manners, and impeccable taste. Cinema-going began to transform the pleasure-seeking habits of women.... (6)

In this newly reformed cinema, women would find an atmosphere of escapism as movie palaces became places for channeling desires and exploring the public sphere. Women and motion pictures together negotiated the evolution of the medium.

The inclusion of narrative is one essential component in the reformation of cinema. In the years immediately following the primitive era, popular fiction and drama provided models for much of the development of plot and character on screen. This transformation began swiftly as historian John Ellis estimates:

The majority of films made [in the primitive era were] actualities, which outnumber fiction films until roughly 1906, when the percentage of story films begins to increase dramatically and actualities become less and less popular. The shift from one kind of cinema to the other takes place rapidly. By 1908, 96 percent of all American films tell stories. (10)

Kristen Thompson regards narrative as requiring "a unified chain of causes and effects, varied by complication circumstances (the development), concluding with a definite action which resolves the chain into...the climax... which lingers to establish a new

situation of stasis at the end” (175). Narrative hinges on situations of change to consistently drive plot until reaching a neat conclusion. Miriam Hansen has commented upon the phenomenon of this transformation adding that in order to appeal to new groups, many films began adapting respected literary or dramatic works. For example, while a primitive film such as *The Kiss* certainly drew on popular theater, it only sampled a momentary risqué action whereas going forward, films adapted entire arcs of story and didn’t resolve to just showcasing titillating imagery. This new model of motion pictures “depended upon the development of a particular mode of narration, based on psychological motivation, on standards of ‘realism’ and subjectivity descended, through a series of mediations, from the nineteenth century novel” (Hansen 64).

An ideal example of this new narrative form can be found in D.W. Griffith’s *The Girl and Her Trust* (1913). In the film a young woman, the telegraph operator of a train station, is left in charge of overseeing a recent delivery of money. The woman, Grace, is attacked by two tramps who intend to make off with the safe containing this money but they are not prepared for the battle of wits she’ll wage with them. Here we can see the emergence of psychologically based characters with defining traits, goals, and motivations. Grace leaps off the screen as a three-dimensional character who is given an emotional arc and even a name (surprisingly absent in primitive film). Each scene builds as a concatenation of cause and effect which drives the adventure and these mechanisms work to foster a sense of space and realism. Additionally, the plot of the

film is much more complex than what was found in the primitive era, having largely to do with the need to expand films to feature length. The ever increasing popularity of cinema ultimately affirmed the shift to narrative as a positive move for the industry.

With narrative, motion pictures could offer the middle class, and women, quality stories but these stories were far too complex for the crude cinematic tools of early cinema. The introduction of the continuity system was a second piece of cinema's evolution in the post-primitive years. The technical challenge of inventing a virtual language was a slow process of trial and error but eventually solidified the toolset for filmmakers to construct narrative. Primitive films such as *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) had already begun linking several shots together to tell rudimentary stories but over the course of the next decade those stories and cinema's own visual language grew more and more elaborate. Editing devices such as the 180-degree axis of action, match on action cutting, eye line matches, shot/reverse shot exchanges, cutting to close-ups, and parallel editing were designed to work invisibly and to seamlessly integrate viewers into filmic space. As Thompson asserts, the ultimate goal of the continuity system has: "the story as the basis of the film, the technique as an indiscernible thread [and] the audience as controlled and comprehending" (195). Additional technical developments in set design, framing, and lighting generated lavish mise-en-scene which promoted realism and allowed for the suspension of disbelief. Lastly, the introduction of a subtle American acting style and

the addition of title cards emerge to facilitate identification with viewers and convey narrative stories in a clear, concise manner.

*The Girl and Her Trust* is constructed with many of these new continuity editing devices, most notably parallel editing, the 180-degree axis of action, eyeline matching, and cutting to close-ups. In one of Grace's ingenious ploys, she lodges a stray bullet in the keyhole of the door which separates her from dangerous tramps. She hammers the pin of the bullet with a tool to fire the round and scare the men off. This sequence is constructed through several cuts and is often registered in close ups, though they are not point-of-view. The climax of the film strands Grace on a handcar with the two tramps as they try to make off with stolen loot. Viewers are meant to understand that the tramps as shown in one particular shot are spatially and temporally related to the telegraph operator in the next. Griffith utilizes parallel editing to juxtapose these shots of the tramps and the telegraph operator and cultivate a sense of tension in his viewers. It is no surprise then that Griffith is seen as a master of the chase scene. The editing here is rhythmically paced and Griffith even throws in a tracking shot during the climax which places us as viewers alongside a speeding train. Although deemed novel techniques on the heels of the primitive era, these editing devices would soon become internalized by viewers as the new language of motion pictures.

Through the development of narrative and continuity devices, a model of spectatorship arises which strengthens the link between film and viewer. It is Kristen Thompson's work on "The Formulation of Classical Style" that seems the most detailed

in charting this evolution. In it she argues that the primary difference between primitive and classical cinema can be found in each era's respective positioning of the viewer. Unlike primitive cinema, "the omnipresent narration of the classical cinema situates the spectator at the optimum viewpoint in each shot" (214). Only here can we begin to use the term *spectator* as it was when classical cinema fully crystallized in the teens that this term becomes applicable. While primitive cinema's theatrical framing prohibited identification on a spectatorial level, the evolution of filmic devices and the incorporation of narrativity eventually align spectators properly and connect them psychologically to the diegetic world of the film.

Spectatorship has been called "a new language" by Hansen and her work in Babel and Babylon asserts that motion pictures are the only medium, at this point in history, that structured visual representation through these specific spatial and temporal codes. Spectatorship is fundamentally the psychic relationship that develops between film and film viewer when the complex devices of the continuity system and elaborate narrative stories come together to synthesize an experience. Hansen maintains that "the transition from primitive to classical narration corresponded to a shift in the conception of the spectator – from a participant in a concrete and variable situation of reception to a term that informs the structure of the film as product" (79). The term *spectatorship* implies an active relationship which is why *viewer* (which connotes passivity) is no longer applicable during these teen years. The aforementioned devices of the continuity system such as the 180-degree axis of action, match on action

cutting, eyeline matches, etc. not only systematize a grammar for filmmakers but imbue viewers in a dialectical two-way relationship of form and meaning.

To look at *The Girl and Her Trust* through the paradigm of spectatorship is to see the codes of narrative and the continuity system fuse an audience's role into an active relationship. While narrative services story and the continuity system creates filmic space, spectatorship "offers the viewer a position of imaginary coherence and omnipotence, the illusion of a unified, transcendental subject" (Hansen 81). Griffith's film situates audiences as they follow all central characters objectively and freely without limits of time or space. Although Griffith only shows what is needed to be seen in order to develop an emotional connection, spectators are made to believe they themselves are in control of the images flickering over the screen. Spectators voyeuristically spy on Grace, as she is attacked by the tramps and understand that they share the same space with her yet cannot cross the boundary into her filmic universe to assist her. Spectatorship positions Grace as an on-screen surrogate to the action; spectators feel the same emotional state by proxy.

Motion pictures would become a booming industry with the transition to illusionistic narrative film. As Eileen Bower has noted, "Chicago, probably the biggest movie-going town of all in those days, had 407 picture houses in 1909 for a population of slightly over two million...by October 1912 there were said to be 732" (6). The classical model of spectatorship is one that is entirely illusory and is unquestioned by its viewers. As the Hollywood model of spectatorship solidified, gender would complicate



it. Spectatorship came to be designed around the psychological methods of male viewers and, in turn, it denied female viewers a similar position of power. This notion of cinema as the male unconscious will be explored more fully in chapter three.

### **THE TROUBLE WITH WOMEN**

The emerging model of spectatorship in the classical Hollywood paradigm did not accommodate women. It was the male spectator who was at the center of this new model. Miriam Hansen laments that the classical model of “spectatorship offered a mechanism to regulate and contain forms of scopic desire” but channeled scopic desire through a gendered hierarchy (86). Consequently, there is a contradiction to be found in motion pictures of the teens: they both pandered to women’s newly acquired right to gaze but denied them a subject position from which to do so.

As classical Hollywood cinema was beginning to construct spectators under a phallogocentric system, women began to have difficulty watching and enjoying films. Shelley Stamp notes that female viewers “were frequently accused of being unable to adopt the viewing position demanded of classical cinema, because they were too distracted by friends or too consumed with their own appearance” (25). A public image began to emerge of female viewers: boisterous, chatty, more interested in conversations and more concerned with their own appearances than watching films. Some women conversed through entire showings. Consumerism and the rise of the department store encouraged women to explore new possibilities of fashion and

women found the cinema an ideal venue to display themselves as a form of spectacle. For example, some women wore large hats, so large in fact that they obstructed the sightlines of the poor viewers who had the misfortune to be seated behind them. The New Woman combined fashion, entertainment, and spectacle into her leisure within the public sphere. Stamp writes:

Department stores mobilized the female gaze in the service of consumption, teaching women new ways of seeing that they put to use at the cinema, [but] we must also stress how ‘the gaze distracted by the lure of consumption’ often did not fit comfortably with the absorbed model of film viewing ever more prevalent in the early teens. (25)

Stamp articulates a general sense of unease around the issue of the female viewer and in the post-primitive years, a public backlash against female filmgoers ensued.

In primitive cinema, the appeal of motion pictures for audiences had been derived primarily from elements of spectacle, what Gunning termed a “Cinema of Attractions,” (57) and while spectatorship in the post-primitive era began to engage male spectators in active, complex relationships with narrative, female viewers still held onto that spectacle. Lauren Rabinovitz argues that “female identity was formed at the cinema [through] embracing a sensory fascination with movies...it was not purely a process of identification with what was happening on the screen” (136). Rabinovitz continues by noting, “spatial, perceptual, and programmatic organization made movie-going both [a] social interaction and sensory stimulation” for women (118). This

stimulation was a form of pleasure for women but considered a distraction for the well-attuned male spectator. Since the complex structure of classical narrative film was moving beyond spectacle in cinema, so too was it moving beyond pleasing women. Female filmgoers came to represent agents of chaos.

Because spectatorship was evolving to accommodate male viewers and no longer comfortably fit female viewers, this did not stop studios from finding other ways to accommodate the female demographic. Studios certainly did not wish to alienate a key segment of their audience and in order to better cater to female audiences, studios in the teen years developed alternative modes of viewing for women, based upon three factors: the spectacle of improved theater design, new genres customized to women, and the extra-diegetic role of fandom. Together, these factors utilized the female filmgoer in new ways.

Female viewership began with the makeover of the theatrical environment. Studios began seeking inspiration from the department store in order to bring the panache of spectacle out into the movie theater. It is at this time that the legendary movie palaces begin to emerge. Stamp notes: "Many of the modifications in theater design and layout recommended to exhibitors during this period such as improved lighting and ventilation, mirrored common areas, perfumed deodorizers, and uniformed attendants, borrowed heavily from department store interiors" (20). The introduction of movie-theater lobbies added spaces which bridged public/private arenas and allowed patrons to socialize before showings. The added incorporation of mirrors in these

lobbies encouraged women to monitor their appearances as well as their social status as they mingled with others while waiting for the next showing.

The new motion picture theater lured filmgoers of all types, most notably women, with grandiose displays of excess. Historian David Naylor has remarked that the modification of theaters used “forms and styles that made them stand out from their surroundings” (21). While the exteriors of these new motion picture theaters were designed around the gravitational pull of their architectural flair, interiors showcased exotic opulence. This design was worn as a badge of the new consumer culture. Charlotte Herzog notes that large theaters held upwards of “three-thousand people” (15) and due to the encroaching business monopolies of vertical integration, major studios, which controlled such movie palaces, were able to offer the appeal of such lavish extravagance at relatively low cost for working and middle class patrons.

At this time new methods of etiquette developed within public space for women in their new social roles. Many publications promised women a form of acculturation tailored to their new public positions. This had a strong effect at movie theaters.

A sign of private and public spheres intersecting in the art of self-theatricalization, middle class women learned how to gesture and pose according to these [guides of etiquette]...in ostentatious public settings such as theaters, department stores and museums. (Higashi 40)

In the modern movie palaces women were expected to imbibe and participate in the spectacle of presentation, or as Higashi calls it, “self-theatricalization” (40).

In addition to the glamour of the theater, variations of film genre began to emerge marketed explicitly towards the female filmgoer. One such genre, the movie serial, exploded as a phenomenon during this period. Serials were short films that unfurled over multiple episodes featuring the same characters in various complication situations. These serials “offered female audiences ongoing narratives” according to Stamp, “that contravened classical plot structures and promoted unique modes of ongoing, intertextual, even desperate, enjoyment that challenged typical viewing habits” (102). Popular serials such as *The Hazards of Helen* and *The Perils of Pauline* were films anchored by feisty, active female characters cast in the hero role. Historian Richard Abel has written that these films reflect

both the constraints and the radical transformations of the cultural construction of womanhood around the turn of the century-and in intertextual terms, as the extension of an already pervasive popular mythology of the New Woman....The genre as a whole is...animated by an oscillation between contradictory extremes of female prowess and distress, empowerment and imperilment. (164)

These films were often action-adventure films which flew in the face of the encroaching Hollywood narrative model by ending with cliff-hangers that deferred closure and that “by cultivating an interest in the star’s private life, fans become the central catalyst” according to Shelly Stamp (103). These films also used star power in self-reflexive ways that diminished their ability to situate viewers within illusory narrative space.

For Richard DeCordova the appeal of the movie serial for women is obvious: it stems from the growing popularity of the star system. DeCordova notes that diegetic characters in movie serials were typically named after whichever popular actor portrayed them. This works to dissolve the fictional world of films by fluidly oscillating the female filmgoer in and out of the diegesis. He writes that “the leading actors of [movie] companies were cast regularly in [serial] roles; it is not surprising that they themselves became idealized as their reality became established in discourse” (89). By emphasizing the construction of a film rather than the invisibility of classical Hollywood films, movie serials brought female filmgoers closer to their on-screen celebrity idols. The movie industry promoted itself as glamorous and through exploiting alternative filmic construction in the serials, female filmgoers could feel a part of the moviemaking process. It entrenched them in spectacle.

In addition to the serial, a second genre of motion pictures emerged during the teen years again, geared specifically for the female filmgoer. This genre became known as the Woman’s film and centered on melodramas pertaining to familial relationships and conflicts within the domestic sphere. While melodrama predates the rise of the Woman’s film, during the teens it became tailored to female filmgoers. Annette Kuhn suggests in her essay, “Women’s Genres,” that the appeal of melodrama for women “is its construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point-of-view” (301). These films were marketed to women as narratives that represented their daily struggles. However, it is important to

point out that although the Woman's film was designed to appeal to women, these films were often made by men. "The films in this genre were largely produced by men, creating stories that *they* thought would attract a female audience" according to Benshoff and Griffin (220). Much of feminist film theory, as will be discussed in the next chapter, is concerned with the textual processes of melodrama on female viewers and these theorists do not always agree on melodrama's ultimate value as a woman's genre – as we shall see. What is often overlooked, however, is that melodrama, specifically Woman's film, was not a product of sound cinema but initially rose to prominence with female audiences during the mid-to-late silent years.

The third component of this specialized mode of female viewership relies heavily on extra-diegetic material. Even during the teen years studios began to realize that marketing to women would require more than encouraging identification with on-screen characters: it would hinge largely on auxiliary filmic devices. During this era, a soaring rise in the popularity of movie-related magazines emerged in such examples as *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (February 1911), *Photoplay Magazine* (August 1911), *Motion Picture Album* (June 1912), *Movie Pictorial* (1913), *Moving Picture Stories* (January 3, 1913), *Motion Picture Times* (1915), *Who's Who in Moving Pictures* (1915), *Motion Picture Mail* (1915), *Photoplay Vogue* (1915), and *Weekly Movie Record* (1915) to name just a few. These magazines were products to consume repeatedly and they expanded the illusory world of cinema outside of the theater. They could be bought, owned, and taken home by women enraptured in the delights of the filmic universe.

Fan magazines were cultural objects that emerged during the teen years to promote the motion picture celebrity as an idol to be worshipped. Richard DeCordova has written about fan magazines:

The ecstasy of the stars was unashamedly celebrated...as long as it was a very specific kind of ecstasy...The presentation of the star's behavior was, in some ways, limited by traditional codes of morality. Yet, in another respect, the star was worshipped as a creature completely free to express him or herself by pursuing the pleasures afforded by the emergent consumer culture. (109)

Consumer ideology fused cinema and fandom into something that appealed psychologically to female filmgoers. "This motif of the female performer," writes Jennifer Scanlon, "easily lent itself to appropriation as a symptom of the pervasiveness of illusion and spectacle in the generation of modern forms of desire" (20). The rise of the movie star inspired the New Woman in both physical and psychological ways. Birgette Sjøland writes: "Films, in particular, played a crucial role in the shaping of [women's] ideals. When young women went to the movies, they closely watched not only the clothes and hairstyles of female stars, but also their poses, gestures, and general physical demeanor" (58). These objects of fandom were carefully contrived devices which sculpted movie stars into archetypes who commanded respect yet also appeared conventional enough to connect to movie fans as like-minded individuals, human beings with humble beginnings.



During the post-primitive years these three components, improved theater design, customized genres, and fandom, combined to create a new way of watching for female filmgoers. Taken together these components worked to heighten the spectacle of cinema, be it literally in the posh makeover of movie houses, or figuratively in exciting cliff-hanger serials or in motion picture magazines. Spectacle was the very element being systematically eradicated through the rise of the classical Hollywood model. However, spectacle did not disappear and one of the ways it continued was through these alternative modes for female filmgoers. Spectacle offered women new ways of watching films and encouraged them to collapse the illusory world of cinema into reality forging one idyllic place that could fuse their lives with luxury and glamour just as department stores were promising. The cult of fandom allowed female filmgoers closer to their favorite stars than ever before, and serials capitalized on the power of this fandom by luring repeat customers with deferred closure as well as intertwining stars and their characters into larger than-life idols. Finally, the Woman's film centered narratives on the emotional concerns of female viewers (although there will be issues with this genre discussed in the next chapter).

Alternative viewing strategies for women largely developed simultaneously with the notion that women were inept as spectators. As the Hollywood model of spectatorship solidified (Miriam Hansen dates this around 1916), women became constructed as erotic objects positioned for the male spectator. It is ironic then that women played such an important role in establishing the system that would eventually

relegate them to passive figures under a patriarchal hierarchy. As Rabinovitz has argued, “women were both part of the audience and the performance...they helped legitimize a woman’s role as sexual spectacle” (121). But female spectatorship, whose roots can be seen here in the teen years, fruitfully emerges during the 1920s. This transient moment in the history of motion pictures, produced what I am prepared to call female spectatorship. This new mode of address utilized the components of spectacle, genre, and fandom developed in the teens, the increasing role of New Women in public space, and exotic, eroticized male stars (such as Rudolph Valentino) frequently objectified within films.

### 3: The Perfect Storm: 1920 - 1927

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During the teens, three components of female viewing coalesced: improved theater design, customized genres, and fandom. Each of these elements functioned in one way or another as a form of heightened spectacle for women. At this time, New Women were continuing the crusade for universal suffrage and social equality and seeking pleasure in forms of leisure such as motion pictures. This demand was met by exhibitors who erected lavish cinematic auditoriums that housed thousands. Certain genres shown at these theaters were marketed explicitly to women: serials and a subgenre of melodrama, the Woman's film. And fandom expanded the filmic universe outside of motion pictures to synthesize relationships between filmgoers and movie stars. In the 1920s, an additional component emerged: the allure of exotic male sexuality. Films constructed male characters just as classical Hollywood cinema had constructed erotic female characters. While classical Hollywood cinema featured both eroticized and fetishized female characters and utilized narrative containment and punishment for female characters who acted outside patriarchal structures, a new subgenre of the Woman's film emerged at this time which promoted the erotic escapades of women. These films were often set in foreign locales and featured dangerously exotic male characters that were domesticated by the film's end. The lure of these new male stars, combined with this new form of melodrama, elicited an almost rabid fandom and female spectators swooned under the spell of these men. These

factors all converge in the 1920s to create a veritable perfect storm, which allowed for a brief historical moment, a model of female spectatorship to emerge from the intense collision of these social, cultural, and cinematic forces.

### **CINEMA AS THE MALE UNCONSCIOUS**

Classical Hollywood cinema evolved during the post-primitive years and by roughly 1916 was firmly established (Hansen 180). This dominant model of spectatorship, which privileged the masculine viewing position, proved caustic to female filmgoers who were forced to adopt the same spectatorial positioning. In her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey lays out the basic tenets of feminist film theory arguing that spectators are coded as male and processes of voyeurism and fetishism operate unconsciously on them. On-screen women interrupt the narrative of classical Hollywood films and serve as erotic displays for a spectator's male gaze, inciting what Mulvey calls "to-be-looked-at-ness" (27). Mulvey argues:

The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (27)

To Mulvey, the male look is one of omnipotence. Through identification with their on-screen surrogates, male spectators gain mastery of the narrative as well as pleasure in the objectification of women.

An example of the inherent voyeurism discussed in Mulvey's position can be found in *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924) which stars Douglas Fairbanks as a petty middle-eastern criminal vying for the hand of a princess. Fairbanks was the perfect surrogate for the male spectator. Through complicated psychoanalytic processes which utilize the mirror-stage of identification, male filmgoers project themselves onto the active protagonist of a particular film. Fairbank's normative masculinity, ideal figure, and confident charm return to male spectators the image of a better version of themselves. Shortly into the film, Fairbanks' character sneaks into the palace and quietly spies on the sleeping princess. The camera lingers on her passive face and catches Fairbanks leering voyeuristically from behind a curtain. The point-of-view for the film's spectator is clearly through Fairbanks' eyes. This single sequence demonstrates active masculinity and passive femininity as described by Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure." But these psychological operations were not without their dangers.

According to Mulvey, female characters threaten male spectators with castration anxiety. An on-screen woman "connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure" (29). For Mulvey, cinema works to resolve the possibility of this *unpleasure* for men through visual fetishism. Fetishism is, as E. Ann Kaplan writes, the attempt of a

male spectator “to deny the existence of the sinister female genital...and to find the penis in women” (30). Fetishism is predicated on three forms of the male gaze: the gaze of the camera, the gaze of a male character onto that of a female character, and the gaze of the male-positioned spectator in the audience all of which are used in objectifying women for the purposes of fetishism. Male spectators fetishize diegetic women to disavow any implied threat of castration and reassert phallic power. Mulvey indicates that the reason women are presented as fetishes is to allow male spectators “complete disavowal of castration by...turning [objectified women] into a fetish so [they] become reassuring rather than dangerous” (29).

The processes of objectification and fetishism can be found in many of classical Hollywood’s offerings. Clara Bow’s *It* (1927) spotlights the adventures of a shop-girl with plenty of sex appeal and there is a moment in the film where Bow’s character changes into a glitzy dress. The first shot of this sequence frames her naked shoulders which are lightly dusted with talcum powder. The next shot reveals Bow’s stocking-clad legs as she steps into a slip. The third shot in this sequence frames Bow’s head and chest as she adjusts the slip over her shoulders and breasts. Finally pulling back, the camera observes her whole body as she excitedly slinks into her dress. This extravagant sequence runs several minutes long and halts the film’s narrative development in order to present an attractive female movie star changing her clothing. The sequence epitomizes the very nature of issues facing films produced under the dominant patriarchal system. The multi-shot montage does not exist to clarify a viewer’s

understanding of the action on screen, which could have been accomplished in a single shot. Instead, by objectifying Bow, male spectators are no longer threatened by the whole of her character (and what she represents as a woman). Instead, male spectators enjoy the pieces of her figure and reassert their dominance.

In addition to the visual fetishism of the male gaze, Mulvey adds a second option for the male spectator to resolve castration anxiety: narrative containment and/or punishment of female characters. “The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object” (Mulvey 29). The peril of independent women in D.W. Griffith’s films consistently works as a prime example of narrative punishment. In chapter two I used *The Girl and her Trust* as a filmic illustration of how narrative, the continuity system, and spectatorship emerged together in the post-primitive years. It is also an example of the containment of women on the level of narrative. During the tense climax of this film, a standoff between the telegraph operator, Grace, and the tramps reaches its dizzying peak. Shots of Grace, in peril, are crosscut with those of a male hero dashing back to the station to save her. They are reunited at the end of the picture, the narrative linking safety with the imagery of a woman in a man’s arms. Griffith’s conclusion presupposes that *none of this* would have happened if the man had remained in the station. Conventions of patriarchy still require the presence – and reassurance – of a heroic, American male to close the story. Mulvey’s position, that narrative patterns reinforce male dominance, is found in *The Girl*

*and Her Trust* and thus began to emerge even before the codes of classical Hollywood cinema locked into place.

### **THEORIES OF FEMALE SPECTATORSHIP**

While much of Mulvey's argument concerns the role of on-screen women being consumed for male pleasure, it also addresses how this system works for female filmgoers arguing that female viewers are forced to adopt the very same masculine viewing position that male spectators watch from, thereby masochistically objectifying their own gender. From Mulvey's groundbreaking work at the forefront of the feminist film theory movement, many feminist theorists, some supportive, others oppositional, either critiqued or supplemented Mulvey's original thesis, including Mulvey herself. In "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*," (1981) Mulvey revisited spectatorship. Although she continued to assert that female viewers adopt a masculine position in classical Hollywood cinema, she widened her analysis to specifically consider the genre of melodrama. She indicates that certain Hollywood films with female protagonists may be more complicated in their coding and that many female protagonists actually wrestle with their gender identity oscillating between "the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity" (183). Once again drawing upon Freud she posits that women will find pleasure in the oscillation between masculine and feminine positions. Female spectators can align themselves with the image of an objectified woman or they can



undergo a form of transvestitism by adopting the male spectatorial position thereby being complicit in their own objectification. To Mulvey, this oscillation may be a pleasurable viewing experience for female spectators because taking on the male spectatorial position is empowering and moving into female identification, however temporary, appears to be a direct mode of address.

In addition to Mulvey, other feminist theorists have presented their own models of female spectatorship. One such theorist is Mary Ann Doane who suggests that female spectatorship is a masquerade that allows the female spectator simultaneous distance and proximity to the fetishized on-screen woman. Since *woman* functions as a sign to signify otherness, classical Hollywood cinema forges an inherent distance between the male spectator and the image of woman. Women cannot participate as active characters without suffering from consequences of patriarchy. This, of course, promotes gender inequality in cinema and female filmgoers are forced to adopt the male gaze which means that in turn they will objectify and fetishize their own gender. As Doane explains, there is “masochism [in the] over-identification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one’s own object of desire, in assuming the image in the most radical way” (240). However, women may be spectators if they employ “the masquerade” by unconsciously shedding or emphasizing their womanliness via diegetic female characters. “Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade’s resistance to positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the

production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as precisely, imagistic” (235).

Doane contends that femininity can be worn in ironic understanding while viewing films which display women erotically. Like Judith Butler, who writes, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results,” (25). Doane argues that female spectatorship functions independently from the self. It is to be employed knowingly. This line of thought complicates Mulvey’s assumption that females simply adopt male subject-positions by positing that women over-identify with the presentation of on-screen females. Ultimately, the model of female spectatorship theorized by Doane requires a certain distance between female spectators and films as well as a knowledge of the processes of patriarchy and patterns of looking. While I certainly do not take issue with Doane’s theory of “the masquerade,” or gender performativity within classical Hollywood sound cinema, I am more interested in focusing on the extra-diegetic factors that link female spectators with the derivation of pleasure.

The final theory of female spectatorship that I wish to discuss is the only one modeled directly on the silent era. Part three of Miriam Hansen’s Babel and Babylon attempts to analyze female spectatorship within Valentino films. Hansen argues that Valentino became “a battleground for conflicts between the forces of consumerism and ideologically entrenched discourses of ethnicity and sexuality – forces that were actually

in the process of incorporating each other” (267). Valentino films promote his exotic masculinity which simultaneously threatened American normative masculinity. Hansen continues to note that in a classical Hollywood film a woman’s scopic drive is not linked to ego instincts: classical Hollywood spectatorship does not permit female viewers to share either the power of the gaze or narcissistic identification with active characters. However, female viewers are in a unique position with the films of Valentino because a female spectator can secure primary identification with an active female protagonist and thereby objectify the male form. This inversion permits women to utilize the gaze for fetishism while skirting any psychological repression that male spectators would undergo. “The feminine connotation of Valentino’s ‘to-be-looked-at-ness ‘ destabilizes his own glance in its very origin, makes him vulnerable to temptations that jeopardize the sovereignty of the male subject” (279). There is no female equivalent to castration anxiety complicating female spectatorship, as it does male spectatorship, within these films. Hansen’s theory becomes very crucial to my own work as Valentino is a large element of my own model of female spectatorship. However, Hansen’s theory does not open up beyond Valentino and does not take into consideration the role of extra-diegetic forces such as exhibition, genre, and fandom in constructing female spectatorship.

During the 1920s, the last decade of silent cinema, certain films do seem to promote female spectatorship in ways different from what Mulvey or Doane witness in sound cinema. Something special happens during this decade, an aberration of the

traditional Hollywood model, which temporarily dismantles the omnipotence of the male gaze and allows women to share in the power of the look.

### **WOMEN IN THE 1920's**

As the 1920s descended upon the United States, women's reforms were reaching unprecedented heights. World War I had a profound effect on women's roles within public space. Historian Nathan Miller has documented:

Women [had become] full partners in the struggle to make the world safe for democracy. They had taken over jobs in the industrial plants and shipyards, served with the Red Cross, performed noncombat duty in the army and navy, and eleven thousand nurses had volunteered. (47)

Since 1846 women had crusaded for universal suffrage and post-war that goal became a reality. In 1920 President Woodrow Wilson ratified congressional legislation signing the Nineteenth Amendment into law and securing women the right to vote.

With this newly acquired political freedom, women continued to campaign for additional opportunities such as sexual, reproductive, and economic rights. The quest for redefinition of the female gender was a consequence. "The construction of a new gender order was therefore," writes Birgette Sjøland, "not only the product of elite discourses and male-made policies, but also the outcome of a highly contested process of social change" (7). With the Great War arguably serving as a driving force of much of

this social change by virtually removing young men entirely from the country, and universal suffrage a reality, female gender itself was redefined.

Working women expected active social lives filled with outings of leisure and entertainment. This preoccupation with entertainment produced a schism between the public sphere and the private sphere for a modern woman. Sjøland indicates that “In addition to fashion and the body, young women also tied female modernity to a particular lifestyle...modern girls were independent. They did not sit at home...they went out to play” (16). Feminist theorist Ellen Wiley Todd notes:

Those who attached *feminism* to "new womanhood" in a positive sense glossed the latter term as a reinvigorated demand for economic independence, equal rights, and, above all, sexual liberation. As feminists had abandoned moral superiority in the name of equality, they asserted parallel male and female erotic drives. A woman would make her equal claim to passionate sexual fulfillment. (4)

New Women balanced lives of education, work, and motherhood. Motion pictures, which more and more began targeting women as ideal spectators during the 1920s, promoted and disseminated the image of the New Woman throughout the world.

During this era, many young women began to explore new avenues for the derivation of pleasure in entertainment. Throughout the 1920s, women found their leisure within the public sphere in dance halls, nightclubs, and of course, cinemas. Their aggressive claims for independence struck blows against male superiority. Studlar makes particularly interesting use of dancing by noting that

American women's challenge to traditional sexual roles and male domestic authority...was exemplified by the popularity of nightclub dancing and tango teas...women were perceived as departing from long-standing gendered norms in courtship behaviors, in the dynamics of marriage and motherhood, in their expression of economic independence, and in their search for public pleasure.

(159)

The allure and eroticism of popular dance actually aids in fostering female identification with male movie stars. The link between dance and film is found, most notably, in Rudolph Valentino. Valentino's films often included scenes of his character dancing with women.

The Jazz Age transformed a generation of New Women into flappers. The term flapper was coined to refer to young women who wore cosmetics, donned short skirts, bobbed their hair, and rebelled against the stuffy Victorian morals of the nineteenth century. Writing about flapper culture, Joshua Zeitz notes that "young women growing up right before the Jazz Age were equal partners in pioneering a new set of customs governing romance and sexuality" (36). Zeitz's book traces the role of the flapper in 1920s America and details the sexual confidence they exuded. Flappers were promoted through popular entertainment in films such as Frances Marion's *The Flapper* (1920) and were personified in movie-stars like Clara Bow and Louise Brooks. In the age of the flapper a public discourse on women, freedom, sexuality, and pleasure was no longer

taboo. This, in effect, would set the stage during the 1920s for a crop of films to emerge which promoted female spectatorship.

### **THE PERFECT STORM**

The 1920s is an extraordinary moment in cinema. Throughout its brief history, motion pictures had evolved alongside women's changing roles within the public sphere. During this decade the two finally met and synthesized a symbiotic relationship. The Jazz Age was an era known for the pursuit of pleasure and what better time to offer female spectatorship to women? The New Woman of the twentieth century, independent and increasingly sexually confident, would, during the 1920s, become a spectator. Four key components comprise this female spectatorship: the spectacle of the movie theater; a new genre of motion pictures which functioned as a hyperbolic version of the Woman's film; the ever-increasing cult of fandom; and finally the invasion of exotic male stars who served as objectified figures for an active female gaze. These elements are so interwoven within one another that it will not be entirely possible to distill the components into separate entities. Female spectatorship is a tapestry of these interwoven threads.

The very first component of female spectatorship can be found outside of films themselves, in the dream palaces of the 1920s. As cinema grew in status as mainstream art and entertainment, movie theaters evolved into elaborate auditoriums, known as dream palaces, which housed thousands of patrons for a single showing. The dream

palace emerged in the 1920s as silent cinema reached its apex. These palaces, such as the Million Dollar Theatre (1918) in Los Angeles, the Chicago (1921) in Chicago, and the Paramount (1926), the Capitol Theater (1919) and the Roxy (1927) in New York, were designed to promote upper-class leisure for lower and middle class patrons. Douglas Gomery writes: "Leading architects of the movie palace [established] a style and look fundamental to the industry. Their opulent designs dazzled patrons with images from Spain, Italy, or France" (48). Many of these theaters were designed to mimic foreign cultures and locales which highlighted exoticism. These theaters included The Oriental (1926) in Chicago as well as Grauman's Egyptian Theater (1922) and Grauman's Chinese Theater (1927) in Los Angeles. The effect of this heightened attention to exhibition links theaters to spectacle, transfixing the attention of the female filmgoers whose pleasure is stimulated by elements of spectacle and exoticism.

The second component of female spectatorship is a new sub-genre of the Woman's film aimed at female filmgoers. While the teen years offered female audiences the Woman's film, a genre seemingly targeted to women, the ideological undercurrent of these films render them somewhat problematic as pleasurable viewing for women. According to feminist theorist E. Ann Kaplan, melodrama punishes female spectators with domestic victimization. She writes:

The repeated, masochistic scenarios effectively immobilize the female viewer. She is refused pleasure in that imaginary identification which, as Mulvey has shown, repeats for men the experience of the mirror phase. The idealized male



screen heroes give back to the male spectator his more perfect mirror self, together with a sense of mastery and control. In contrast, the female is given only powerless, victimized figures who, far from perfect, reinforce the basic sense of worthlessness that already exists. (28)

The sexual dynamics of male dominance and female submission keep patriarchy in power. However, Kaplan does argue that women have come to derive pleasure from this very system which objectifies and fetishizes them, stating: "Our position as "to-be-looked-at," as object of the male gaze, has come to be sexually pleasurable" (26). The value of Kaplan's work is to question whether inverting the classical model of spectatorship to place women in a position of sexualized power would actually construct female spectatorship. Female spectatorship is not necessarily to be found in the flipping of a proverbial binary switch. In order to locate female spectatorship we must find examples that do not require the punishment of women while still acknowledging that sexual pleasure may in fact be derived from positions of submission and powerlessness. This is exactly what the subgenre of Woman's film at this time is offering to female spectators.

However, during the 1920s, a new sub-genre of films emerges featuring exotic male stars and utilizing key elements of the Woman's film. This genre is essentially a subset of melodrama but obliterates the narrative containment or punishment of active female characters characteristic of melodrama. These films combined the woman-centered narratives of the Woman's film with the action-adventure of serials to create a

hybrid genre of exotic adventure and romance that explored female pleasure. These are the films of Rudolph Valentino, Ramon Navarro, and Sessue Hayakawa, all foreign born actors marketed for their exotic, sensual appeal. In their films they portrayed uncivilized men who beckoned the female spectator to tame them. The films were often set overseas, in foreign lands, and utilized the exotic male star as an alternative to normative American masculinity. Ultimately these men are tamed by active female characters by the narrative's conclusion.

An example of the objectified exotic male star positioned for the female gaze can be found in Fred Niblo's 1927 film version of *Ben Hur* which featured Mexican-American actor Ramon Navarro in the title role as an Israelite struggling for his freedom during the days of Jesus Christ. The narrative aligns Ben Hur with familial loyalty, as melodrama would, by focusing immense portions of the plot on the relationship between the protagonist and his loving mother and sister. Conversely, the villainous Romans figures are characterized as vile chauvinists who espouse sarcastic lines of dialogue such as "Will women always paint their faces?" as they exact physical violence on female characters.

But it isn't only the narrative aspects of *Ben Hur* that promote female identification. My model of spectatorship depends equally on the filmic devices which construct subject positions. In *Ben Hur* the camera frames Navarro just as classical Hollywood films would a woman: as erotic spectacle. For example, one potent scene in the film has Ben Hur laying across a rock outside of the city walls. His passive body and

feminine positioning do not connote the traditional power and masculinity of active male protagonists. Navarro's uniform is cut higher above the knee than any other male soldier, his stance is generally feminized, and he is clearly painted in make-up. Contrarily, the brute Romans exude a blatant homoerotic camaraderie; their uniformed figures are characters sans personality, vessels of muscular finesse that stand proudly before the camera. The film consistently shows images of feminized men, predominantly Navarro, nearly nude as they're whipped and beaten in sadistic joy by the Roman men. These scenes of physical punishment work exactly as Mulvey indicated female characters were displayed in patriarchal systems. When Ben Hur is beaten the scene transpires for far longer than necessary to drive plot machinations forward. In essence, the narrative has been halted to objectify Navarro's tortured body as he's locked in chains and punished. In *Ben Hur*, strong female characters like Iras (Carmel Myers), an Egyptian vamp, command the gaze when in conversation with Ben Hur. She looks him up and down several times in the film, while attempting to seduce him, the female spectator aligned with her look. The film appears to be an inversion of classical Hollywood cinema.

The exotic stars at the center of this new genre are the fourth component of female spectatorship. Male stars such as Ramon Navarro, or as is more commonly discussed, Valentino, work so well to foster female spectatorship because, as Gaylyn Studlar writes they were "the greatest evidentiary support of women's challenge to traditional sexual relations and American ideals of masculinity" (151). These men exist

in the diegetic world of their films to stand in opposition to Western normative masculinity. Their presence of power allows them to easily conquer female characters sexually.

Female spectators are often aligned with either a feminized male protagonist (such as Ben Hur) in films such as these. When Iras objectifies Ben Hur, female spectators, by proxy, experience the eroticism of foreign sexuality themselves from the safe distance of a movie screen. Often these male characters were exotic men whose cultural origins (and therefore treatment of women) were highly suspect in the eyes of Western males. The discourse of classical Hollywood cinema has a long history of portraying villains in this way. In 1915's *The Cheat*, Sessue Hayakawa plays an intriguing ivory trader whose foreign-ness is only intensified when he viciously brands a female character as his own property. Playing upon female filmgoer's expectations of foreign, male actors allowed for the subtle coding of danger and other-ness which this new genre of Woman's film molded into a subversive sexuality. Valentino, whether playing a tango dancer, Spanish bullfighter, or Arab Sheik was routinely presented as an erotic being and ultimate seducer of women which played on an American male's fear of "the other." Studlar indicates that a

broad range of popular discourse revealed American xenophobia and the project of sexual and racial anxieties onto women...By the mid 1920s, American's susceptibility to such a foreign invasion through sexual penetration seemed to many to be confirmed on numerous fronts: by tango teas, by [interracial] movie-

star marriages...and by Valentino's popularity as American women's ideal fantasy lover. (182)

Although Valentino is often seen as the poster-boy for this exotic transgression to normative American masculinity, the same can, and should, be argued for Narvarro and to a lesser extent Sessue Hayakawa (often relegated exclusively to villain due to the United States bout with Yellow Peril) who were all used to connote forbidden sexuality. These figures incited fear in male spectators (allusions to xenophobia) that eroticized foreign forces could invade and seduce American women thereby threatening the omnipotence of the phallic powers of control.

Since spectatorial coding aligns the filmgoer with the active protagonist, this subgenre of Woman's film would have placed male spectators in an interesting position: they would have to identify with active female protagonists (or passive feminized male characters) while sexually objectifying male characters through the female gaze. While female viewers of classical Hollywood films were expected to adopt the male spectatorial position, male viewers were openly discomfited by having to identify with active female characters and objectify eroticized men. As Studlar writes, "Men's fascination with the racial or ethnic Other (a la Theda Bara) continued to be tolerated even in a climate of intolerance, but the perceived freedom and sensuality of the New Woman did not allow that tolerance to be extended to the 'weaker' sex" (164). This contradiction surely fueled the New Woman's desire to garner pleasure from an

outsourced masculinity since traditional American masculinity was asserting its dominance over the female gender.

The epitome of the exotic male star is found in Rudolph Valentino. *The Sheik* (1921) and its sequel *The Son of the Sheik* (1926) are two primary examples of films offering female spectatorship. These films offer both active female characters, who serve as surrogates for female spectators, as well as eroticized male characters, objectified for these female spectators. The narrative of *The Sheik* involves the adventure of an independent Englishwoman (Agnes Ayers) who explores the Saharan desert where she is pursued by a sensual and corporeal Arab Sheik (Valentino). Valentino's role as Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan promoted the exoticism and sensuality of Arabia and constructed him as simultaneously powerful and feminine. Often, throughout these films, Valentino wears very revealing costumes designed to provoke an erotic charge. In *The Son of the Sheik*, Valentino performs dual roles as an aged version of his Sheik character from the first film and his nubile son who once again pursues an Englishwoman. As Hansen notes, "Women were to find in *The Sheik* a symbol of the omnipotent male who could dominate them as the men in their own lives could not" (Hansen 643). There is a quintessential scene in *The Son of the Sheik* in which the young Valentino believes his paramour has betrayed him and he stalks after her in a blind rage, cornering her in the bedroom of their tented palace, presumably to rape her. However, as Studlar notes, the scene is performed by Valentino with such stylization that it takes on a balletic quality (which referenced Valentino's formal training as a

dancer) and thereby even at Valentino's most threatening, he is feminized and his violence against the woman is choreographed and relegated to a safe dance routine.

I wish to turn to Linda Williams' consideration of the female look in monster films. In her essay, "When the Woman Looks" (1984), Williams illustrates the very importance of the act of looking by pointing out that the look is usually controlled by active male characters. Williams ascribes the female look as casting a filial connection with similarly contained subjects and when a female character gains control of the look, films structure this reversal as a dangerous transgression. Williams indicates that the act of looking forms a pattern of identification for women in the audience. Her essay is focused primarily on the horror film and the ways in which these patterns of identification link female filmgoers with female characters who look. Ultimately Williams finds that women who look within horror films usually wind up victims. In these films, women compete with monsters for spectacle and one must trump the other. Monsters, just like women, are considered "others," and a kinship develops between both figures due to the horrific fear-of-lack that they elicit. Williams writes that there is an "affinity between monster and woman, the sense in which her look at the monster recognizes their similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing" (85).

Williams argues that female spectators relate to on-screen representations of marginalized *others*, in her case monsters, since women themselves are so often marginalized through classical Hollywood cinema. I would argue that the substitution of an exotic male star such as Valentino or Navarro would promote a similar kinship for

female spectators due to their respective threatening to normative ideology. These men functioned as subversive characters who were known to have subverted traditional modes of masculinity. Just as Williams argues that monsters inspire kinship through their other-ness thereby fostering identification for female spectators, so too do foreign, eroticized actors. Essentially female spectators have two avenues of identification in these films: through the surrogate of an empowered, active female or through a kinship with a feminized and objectified foreign male star.

Exploring where female pleasure is located within the threat and simultaneous attraction to foreign male stars is quite interesting. In *The Son of the Sheik*, Valentino rapes the woman who would come to love him by narrative's closure. So often these foreign men are characterized as dangerous, uncivilized, and much of their films' suspense is sustained by a general worry, not *if* these men will seduce the women but *when*. Janice Radway suggests that the idea of exotic seduction actually fulfills female fantasies and thus in and of itself produces pleasure. Melodrama's project entails the domestication of masculinity. As interpreted by Studlar,

[t]he male object of desire must undergo 'the imaginative transformation of masculinity to conform to female standards.' Initially possessed of a 'terrorizing effect,' he must be revealed to be other than he originally seems since the narrative must prove that male behavior (and, therefore, heterosexual romance 'need not be seen as contradictory to female fulfillment. (172)



These foreign male stars, be it Valentino, Navarro, or Hayakawa were as feminized as they were threatening. This aspect of these men was entirely necessary for promoting female spectatorship. As Hansen writes:

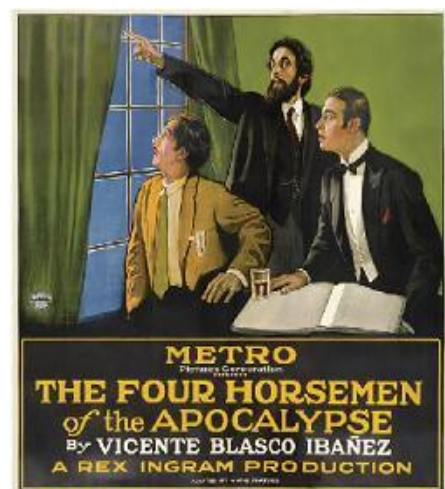
Transsexual identification, instead of being confined to simple cross-dressing, relies as much on the feminine qualities of the male protagonist as on residual ambiguity in the female spectator...Female identification...could be constructed to entail the full range of transformations proposed by Freud. (287)

The feminization of these male stars, much like the domesticating of animals, tames wildness for safe consumption and women desired the illusion of taming a Valentino themselves.

The popularity of these exotic male stars returns us to our third component of female spectatorship: fandom. Motion picture magazines devoted numerous articles to the private lives and relationships of these male stars. Studlar writes that, "in fan magazines...Valentino's concern for women's pleasure as well as his ethnicity were emphasized" (179). The role of the female fan in the rise of these male stars was something that had never before been witnessed. Maitland McDonagh contends: "Besotted fans sent Valentino letters, underwear, and nude photographs" (151). This hyperbolic form of fandom drove hordes of women to hysteria at the sight of these male stars and movie studios eventually realized how important it was in the marketing of these films to female filmgoers.

Fandom is one of many extra-diegetic devices employed by cinema in order to promote pleasure outside of the film viewing experience. The film poster is a traditional form of advertisement that promotes films primarily through the recognition of star power.

Valentino emerged as a film sensation with his role in *The 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921). In this film there is a memorable (infamous) scene in which his character performs the tango. This one scene added fuel to the American dance craze and



**figure 3.1**

ignited a female obsession with Valentino. The marketing of the film (see figure 3.1), prior to its release and subsequent success, does not portray the sexuality of Valentino, nor appeal specifically to a female spectator. As one can see from the poster, Valentino is positioned no differently from the other men and is portrayed non-exotically. In fact, in the poster Valentino lacks an overall sexuality. It is only after this point in his career (post Tango) that studios would decide to market Valentino according to his sexuality and exotic appeal. In a clear demarcation, all subsequent silent film posters will feature Valentino as if he was the female lead in the film.

Beginning post-*Horsemen*, Valentino's films position his characters as highly sexual, uncivilized, and unable to contain their desires for women. The poster for *The Son of the Sheik* (see figure 3.2) is probably the most overt in utilizing aspects of Valentino's sexuality. This advertisement presents him as both domineering yet

feminine. Valentino stands over the female character; his piercing dark eyes signify his impure thoughts and motives. “The ads highlight the dazzling color and adventure connected to the desert East” (158) writes Valentino biographer Emily Leder. She adds that Valentino “emerges as a mixture of Western European and Eastern traits...to Americans he was the ultimate tall, dark, and handsome stranger...it was this combination, the fusion of both aspects, that proved so hard to resist” (Leider 159). The female character, fully clothed, is importantly enough, *not-presented*; her face is turned slightly away from the readers’ perspective. Valentino, in a grand display, is ripping his shirt open to show off his chest to both the female character and the poster’s viewer. Valentino biographer, Irving Shulman concludes that, the poster “was bound to please all women, from the youngest to those who had long passed through their climacteric” (309).



**figure 3.2**

In classical Hollywood films, woman are punished for seeking pleasure outside of sanctified patriarchal institutions (home, church, marriage), whereas the films of these exotic stars are cloaked in adventure, spectacle, intrigue, sexuality, and eroticism that promote an autonomous and sexually confident female spectator. The cult of fandom surrounding Valentino and his brethren could not be ignored and surely ignited further xenophobia in the population of male spectators.

Female spectatorship within the 1920s is a historical phenomenon that arises as a result of the fusion of a number of socio-cultural components into a perfect storm which passes almost as quickly as it arrives. Ultimately female spectatorship withers away with the coming of sound cinema. By this point, circa 1927, Valentino is already dead and flapper culture is waning. Future portrayals of exotic male sexuality, post silent film, will be met with swift vilification and narrative punishment as classical Hollywood cinema, much like the male spectators' prerogative, reasserts its dominance over female pleasure.

## Conclusion

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Female spectatorship during the 1920s is an aberrant moment in film history predicated on the chance meeting of several elements. As illustrated in the introduction of my thesis, *A Painted Lady* is an example of a film constructed during the ephemeral period of cinema's reformation between primitive film and classically Hollywood cinema when the rules and grammar of the latter's complex model were not yet locked into place. Throughout the film, D.W. Griffith utilized specific filmic devices of the continuity system, such as point-of-view shots, in order to tell the story from a woman's perspective. However, the film still ultimately fails to construct of an autonomous, independent female character.

The issue with *A Painted Lady* is not in its filmic construction: we are offered a clear point-of-view shot from the perspective of a female character who is not objectified by the camera. Rather, the film becomes patriarchal through the second prong of male disavowal: narrative containment and punishment. Griffith's films have been regarded as suffering from rigid reinforcement of masculine and feminine roles more akin to the Victorian ideals of separate spheres than the promotion of an autonomous and independent woman. In the narrative of *A Painted Lady*, a young woman, forbidden by her father to wear make-up, develops a relationship with a con-man, suffers through various plot complications, and finally, dies at the shock of seeing her own *painted* face. On a narrative level the film punishes the New Woman for

participating in a culture that promotes outer beauty and exhibition. While the editing devices of *A Painted Lady* would seem to condone female spectatorship by allowing a subject-position to be constructed from a diegetic female's point-of-view, there is an inherent contradiction with the other requisite for spectatorship - narrative content – and the protagonist is punished for her ability to look.

In the primitive era, cinema was not relegated to any formal patterning, vocabularies, or modes of address. Primitive film was a medium of exhibitionism, spectacle, and awe. In the primitive era there were not yet spectators, merely viewers. As western culture adopted this medium as its primary form of entertainment, cinema had to reinvent itself as a narrative medium to expand its reach. With the rise of narrative and the continuity system, film construction developed a relationship between film and viewer. This relationship is spectatorship. However, as art is coded in the ideology of its makers, so too film was constructed through the patriarchy of western civilization. With the rise of classical Hollywood cinema, films began to promote a gendered hierarchy which catered to the pleasures of male viewers while denying that of its female viewers.

Feminist film theory has argued against the inequitable slant of classical Hollywood cinema since the 1970s. Laura Mulvey's pioneering work set the stage for film analysis to uncover the subtleties of filmic coding and how it systematically positions diegetic women erotically for male spectators. The search for a female spectatorship, offering women a comparable rewarding viewing relationship has only

yielded complicated masquerades, gender performativity, or transvestitism. However, these feminist theorists have overlooked silent cinema as a potential site of female spectatorship that existed momentarily during the tail-end of the 1920s.

As classical Hollywood cinema was evolving, women were stepping into the public sphere for the first time and found motion pictures to be an ideal form of affordable entertainment. Through the rise of consumer culture and cinema women were finally able to step out of the Victorian age and demand pleasure through their own gaze. Cinema and women together evolved throughout the teen years as motion pictures solidified with the language of spectatorship.

In the 1920s, a perfect storm of social, cultural, and economic forces leads the New Woman and cinema into a convergence of entertainment and the right to look for consumption. Through the meeting of improved theater design, new customized genres of the woman's film, fandom, and the introduction of a subversive foreign male sexuality, key films of the final decade of silent cinema were produced specifically for a female spectator. This mode of female spectatorship would vanish with the introduction of sound cinema in roughly 1927 but the legacy of the flapper, Valentino, tango dancing, and stylized seduction will remain as the fading celluloid gives way to DVDs and future digital media. These films will linger and always offer their reminder that female spectatorship is possible within mainstream cinema.

The dominant model of male spectatorship, predicated upon male pleasure, does not have to be all that is on offer. It is interesting to consider an alternative film

history where the pleasure of both genders was rewarded through filmic construction.

However, since film is mass-entertainment it will be constructed in the codes that reflect the dominant ideology. For as long as western culture remains geared to servicing patriarchy, so too, will the majority of mainstream films.



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