

Changing Women Social Status and Roles in Silent Film During the 1910s to 1930s

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Abstract: Gender issue emerges in all workspaces. Femininity always identified as weak, small, quiet, dependent and emotional through American history. Regarding filmmaking, we still think it's a masculinity work, and the women are often relegated to feminine jobs as assistants or so. "However, a close examination of the history of American cinema before and during its classical ear reveals that their gendered expectations were not absolute. A few women did become motion picture directors and producers, and there were also women who had successful careers as screenwriters. Of course, female movie stars and actresses were more numerous and better known than those few women working behind the camera" [1] (Benshoff, Griffin, 2009, p. 217). In American silent film, during the 1910s to 1930s, women's roles and social statuses changed, and this transition was represented by films, both in front of camera and behind of camera. Specifically, this paper will analyse three films to show this shifting process, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) and *the Blonda Venus* (1932).

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Films are the reflections of the society and popular ideologies. Plots and characters of the films record the shifts of women's role from housewives to real workers in society.

1. In Front of Camera

In 1910s, "as Michael Rogin notes in perhaps the most insightful essay written on Griffith's film, 'The Sword Become a Flashing Vision,' the same stylistic choices are all found, refined and coherent, in *The Birth of a Nation*" [2] (Bernardi, p. 8). Excepting the race hatred, *The Birth of a Nation* also depicts that female are dependent, weak and men's appendants. "Ways of Seeing^① points out a tradition of representing women, 'in earlier periods, women were considered men's property - often handed over from father to husband-to-be as part of a business transaction'" [3] (Benshoff, Griffin, 2009, p. 239). Even though it sounds ridiculous and offensive, those words were truth in *Birth of a Nation*. We can see from his film that women, first, don't have rights for voting, because no woman shows up in vote station. Second, women are all housewives, since lots of them wear aprons. Even the girls who haven't married, they are primarily responsible for helping the housework. Female can do nothing, but only serving the men in this male-dominant society. Last, unless accompanied by men, women should not go outside of the house and they should obey the orders of the men. In lots of sequences, we can't see any women walking or playing on the streets. A famous sequence where Flora goes alone to the spring, against the bother's warning, is one of the examples. Many people interpret this sequence as a fear of intermarriage back then, but I think the Flora's fear not only comes from the intermarriage but the masculinity power. If the society endows the power for females to say no without any worries of losing virginity and others' comments or any threats come from male, Flora won't die. Griffiths even makes this sequence more disrespectful and discriminated by adding a inter title that "For her who had learned that stern lesson of honor we should not grieve that she found sweeter the opal gates of death" [4] (Griffith, 1915). It's inhumanity and should never be a comment for someone's death, unless it's not a human. Therefore, this film really emphasizes the thought that women are not independent humans, but the properties of men.

① John Berger's work, a survey of visual culture that attempted to map out the ways that Western society literally teaches individuals "how to look" at the world. And, Berger also analyzed the history of female portraiture in Western arts.

Also, Griffith's film also includes the sequence where male holds a gun and points to his wife and daughter's head. In men's view, they consider women's virginity over women's life. Just like when you choose a good, you would consider its utility, but how long it can be used. Those sequences are so aggressive from today's views.

Even though the gender difference was eliminated in 1920s, there is still a long journey for feminism to go. "While Mellencamp^② sets out to typologize film feminisms, her account is admittedly "biased and irregular". Her five leaky categories comprise "intellectual feminism;" which "pays homage to the frog prince of theory" and which Mellencamp explores by way of such diverse films as Buster Keaton's *Sherlock, Jr.*" [5] (White, p. 520). In Keaton's film, the *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), we've seen that the female character doesn't wait for a man to save her, and she responds to Keaton's love with bolder initiatives, such as the sequence of holding the hands. "In the comedy of equality, the heroine eschews the Stereotypic feminine strengths of emotion and support recurrent in Hollywood cinema. Instead, like the hero, the heroine is intelligent, resourceful, knowledgeable, and independent" [6] (Woodward, p. 76). In this film, when the boy is dreaming about how he heroically rescues the girl and proves his innocence, it's the girl who finds the clues and evidence to help the boy in real life. "She has done her own sleuthing. Having asked around at the pawn shop, the girl has discovered that the sheik, and not Keaton, is to blame for stealing her father's watch" [7] (Fusco, p. 640). It's different from *the Birth of a Nation*, where Elsie, the main female character, always depends on her father and she asks a male [Lynch] for help when she thinks her father is in danger. Even though, in *Sherlock Jr.*, women begin to stand out and defend for themselves, people still like the stereotypical romance that men should take the dominant place and be the hero to take care of women, as Galdfelder points out "Keaton depends more on the narrative conventions that require the girl to be saved and the heterosexual couple to be reaffirmed at the conclusion of melodrama and romantic comedy alike" [8] (Galdfelder, p. 133). Another improvement of women status in this film is that there are female workers who works in the store in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924). It's another representation of independent women image. As the *Sherlock Jr.* implies that the masculinity romantics only exist in old films and dreams, the impression of independent women has been accepted by society in real life.

In 1930s, women's status has been improved a lot, due to the social influences. However, the stereotype of women and the inequality of gender still exist. Women are still considering an object, but the intellectual object. In *Blonde Venus* (1923), "Dietrich quite self-consciously uses her body as spectacle, as object for the male gaze, when she is earning money by performing for male spectators; then, when she wants something from one of the men who have money or authority, she knows she can manipulate their desire for her own ends" [9] (Kaplan, 1988, p. 51). Comparing those sequence to *The Birth of a Nation*, where Flora even is blamed for going outside and against her brother's warning, Dietrich, in *Blonde Venus*, begin to manipulate men, which is another way of dominating. Even though she is using her body to perform for male spectators, she is still earning money by herself. Also, "Through fetishizing the female form, man attempts to the female in male attire. Woman qua woman thus disappears, rendered as she now is in likeness to man." [10] (Kaplan, 1988, p. 5). The more independent women image is not only supported by dressing like men, but also by becoming more masculine. Dietrich's masculinization represented by living alone, outside of the family and earning money on her own. But, on another hand, even she is manipulating the male to get what she wants, "her existence continues in the services of men (i.e., to depend on men economically through the selling of the self to them)" [11] (Kaplan, 1988, p. 59). Therefore, even the image of more intellectual, fetishizing and independent women is accepted by public, and women's social status improved, women still are not equal as men do.

2. Behind of Camera

The changing of women's social status is not only presented in front of the screens, it also can be found behind of the camera. Unlike the status of female characters in film, the female filmmakers' position became worse after 1920s.

In the early era of cinema, women rarely had the economic power to bankroll a film company or produce a single film project, not even mention traveling the country or world with a camera and a

② Patricia Mellencamp is Professor of Film and Cultural Theory, Department of Art History, the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. She has published several books, including *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age and Indiscretions: Avant-garde Film, Video, and Feminism*.

projector to set up screening in new cities and towns. It's even impossible for most women to attempt. "As cinema became a massive industry in the 1910s and 1920s, its potential for wealth and power led to a consolidation of male dominance under the classical Hollywood studio system. Yet, because filmmaking was such a new industry, during its first few decades what constituted a 'masculine' job versus a 'feminine' one was not always immediately apparent. Consequently, although it was still plainly a male-dominated environment, the slapdash organization of early filmmaking did afford some opportunities for some women to become filmmakers" [12] (Benshoff, Griffin, 2009, p. 223). Therefore, the 1910s to 1920s is the period when female filmmakers most active in film industry. Even the film like *The Birth of a Nation* came out in the same period. "By 1927, on the eve of the sound era, director Lois Weber advised young women to avoid filmmaking careers. 'Don't try it,' she cautioned. 'You will never get away with it.' Only one female film director, Dorothy Arzner, sustained a successful career in mainstream Hollywood during the so-called golden age of the 1930s and 1940s" [13] (Mahar. p. 4). As film industry become more popular and influential, it's become more masculinity. It's interestingly enough, that in 1910s and 1920s, when the plots are most offensive and disrespectful for women, it's also the period when women filmmakers are closest to the equal of gender in film industry.

It's interesting that when female filmmakers are not welcomed by film industry, the plots and characters are designed for women's preference. Audiences contribute a lot on improving of women status in the films.

"A Photoplay article from 1924 suggests that the American film audience was 75 percent women while a *Moving Picture World* article of 1927 cites women's 83 percent majority at the movies". [14] (Studlar, p. 236). As the number of female audiences increase, even though the environment in film industry is unfriendly to female filmmakers, the plots and characters are designed for attracting and relating to women. In 1920s, Lasky[®] advised the director and his scenarist Jeanie Macpherson to "write something typically American... that would portray a girl in the sort of role that the feminists in the country are now interested in... the kind of girl that dominates...who jumps in and does a man's work." [15] (Sumiko Higashi, 2002, p. 301) Therefore, women's status was improved, because the female audiences' taste on movie influences the filmmaking. "There was an entire change in the taste of the public'" [16] (Sumiko Higashi, 2002, p. 301). Indeed, in this situation, women audience's opinions will not be ignored anymore, and their preference is a big deal for film industry. It's a representation of status improving, but, on other hand, it's still another way of consuming women by earning their money. "Films may have served in the 1930s very much the same function that soap operas serve today." [17] (Kaplan, p. 49). Even nowadays, in the 21 centuries, women are still fight and seek the opportunities of equal social status and rights.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, films, comprising the dialogue, plot, character, lighting, camera angle, camera movement, camera distance, and narrative strategies, appear to speak from or for a specific social position. During the 1910s to 1930s, from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) to *Blonde Venus* (1932), the social status of women was shown by those films. Even though the masculinity is still the popular ideology, women begin to have the power, instead of being controlled and surveilled by men, as we are seeing in *Blonde Venus* (1932). However, the ideas of masculine-dominated and patriarchy haven't changed, and there has no evidence to show the equality of gender, but only the slight improvement. The image of women become more independent and are more respected. However, since the filmmakers probably just use those plots to attract female audiences, in order for earning more profits from those women, it's can be another of consuming females. No matter what, female audiences' preference and opinions were counted during filmmaking, but, the female filmmakers' career, after a short-lived active period in 1910s to 1920s, was limited and decaying in 1930s. In the end, this new-born industry was taken over by males. And feminism in film industry is getting far away. But, as Bordwell once said, "History is process" [18] (Bordwell, 371), the process of feminism was represented and recorded by films, and it will be finished as we are creating the history.

③ *Jesse Louis Lasky* (September 13, 1880 – January 13, 1958) was an American pioneer motion picture producer. He was a key founder of Paramount Pictures with Adolph Zukor, and father of screenwriter Jesse L. Lasky, Jr.

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