

Building a Better 'Chick Flick':
Representations of Women in Film and Women in the Film Industry

Nicole Toivonen
AK/SOSC 2410 9. 0A
Tutorial #2
204465647
July 29, 2002

The 'women's film' is an interesting film genre; though many women actively reject the idea of the 'chick flick', these films continue to be popular among their target demographic. If they were not, the genre would not survive. Though the films in the genre are made for women, they often have depictions of women that closely reflect the dominant patriarchal ideology. The conceptions of women onscreen are shaped by and shape the conceptions of women working behind the scenes in Hollywood, perpetuating both the representation of women onscreen and the male domination of the industry. However, I believe that women's involvement in key film industry positions, particularly screenwriting, can change the portrayal of women in film. The films that involve women in integral roles in the production often provide conceptions of women that oppose the dominant representations. Due to the limited scope women writers are often given, these oppositional representations can be found in films that are aimed at women. Teen films have been a particularly successful genre for women writers, directors and producers in the recent past, with films like Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* and Jessica Bendinger's *Bring It On* hailed as witty and intelligent portrayals of young women. Bearing this in mind, I chose to examine *Legally Blonde*, which is based on a novel by Amanda Brown, screenplay by Karen McCullah Lutz and Kirsten Smith.

The teen film was born in the 1950's due to a decline in families attending films. The studio began making films aimed at 'teenagers' to boost flagging ticket sales. The image projected in these films is one of homogeneity; the characters are almost all white, middle class, heterosexual, and conventionally beautiful. The 'romance' sub-genre is most often aimed at young women, where the focus is on the forming of a heterosexual couple. (Pycock 1992) In recent years, there has been a modification to some films aimed at girls, where the romance is still a plot, but not the only one.

In examining questions of female representation in film, Graydon's five dominant characteristics of the representation of women in films and television are important. Graydon (1991) states that women in film and television are:

- Underrepresented - though women make up over half of the population, there are considerably fewer women onscreen;
- Shown primarily in traditional roles – women tend to be portrayed in roles such as wife and mother and also as sexual objects, which perpetuates dominant stereotypes;

- Depicted as emotionally unstable – women are depicted as emotional beings who lose control of themselves rather than rational beings (male);
- As domestic and domesticated beings – women are shown to work in the home, or have a tendency towards that work;
- As disabled and dysfunctional – women are represented as dysfunctional simply because they have the characteristics associated with ‘femininity’, inferring that women are incapable of competence.

If women are portrayed this way onscreen, is there any correlation between these filmic representations and those within the film industry? If so, how do these representations manifest in the off-screen world? Bielby and Bielby believe it reasonable to assume that the often explicit devaluation of female talent on screen carries over to a devaluation of women’s contributions to film off screen. (1996) When looking at women employed in the film industry through Grayson’s characteristics, this assumption is lent some weight.

Women comprise approximately 25 to 36 percent of all characters in film – as women comprise about 51 percent of the U.S. population, they are underrepresented in film. Women are also underrepresented behind the scenes; as of 1997, women comprised only 15 percent of all executive producers, producers, co producers, directors, writers, cinematographers and editors working on the top 100 films. (Lauzen & Dozier 1999) From 1982 to 1992, women accounted for about 18 percent of employed screenwriters. (Bielby and Bielby 1996) About half of those classified as author under the U.S. census are women, but the screenwriting profession is over 80 percent male. (Bielby and Bielby 1996) The underrepresentation of women in screenwriting and other key industry roles causes difficulties in the representation of women onscreen; dominant ideas about women are perpetuated due to lack of creative input from women themselves.

Though the role of screenwriter is not necessarily a traditional female role, there are ways in which ‘traditional’ roles were established for women in the studios. In the era of the studio system, women writers were often assigned to administrative or support roles, such as reader or script supervisor. Studio heads believed women were especially well suited for writing for women’s films, writing women’s

dialogue, and for infusing a 'women's angle' into films. The reality is somewhat different; women have written for all genres and many 'women's films' were written by men. However, the idea that women's talents are best directed towards narrow genres and specialties also legitimates the idea of screenwriting as men's work. Currently, women are likely to break into the industry writing material that is fashionable, or considered appropriate for a woman writer, but as her career progresses her opportunities are limited to a narrow range of genres. Risk-adverse production executives might be more likely to imitate previous successes and rely on rules of thumb that typecast women writers. (Bielby and Bielby 1996) In relying on the conception of screenwriting as men's work, it negates the woman's place in the profession, relegating a woman writer to 'appropriate' areas. There is a notion that women should not write about violence, that producing and directing make a woman 'manly'. (Tasker 1998) The idea that involvement in a male field makes a woman less-than-female serves to maintain the boundaries of gender-appropriate behaviour in the industry.

The conception of women as emotionally unstable appears in the film industry as the ghettoization of women writers into specific genre types. As stated above, it is believed that women should not write about violence, that there are specific appropriate genres that women should write for. There is an assumption that women will work best with emotionally led material, rather than action led material. (Tasker 1998) This assumption relegates women to the task of writing the 'woman's film' or similar genres. The very idea of women and women's writing suggests that women cannot write anything that is logical or focused. Women should leave action to the men, while they concentrate on love stories and relationships.

The domesticization of women in the film industry is less obvious, but indicated in the studio era typecasting that was discussed earlier; women were conceptualized as only good at story adjustment, scene polishes and dialogue rewrites. (Bielby and Bielby 1996) This also related women's work in the studio to that of women in the home; as women at home cleaned their kitchens, the women in the studio cleaned dialogue for male writers.

The idea of women as dysfunctional beings is illustrated in the ghettoization mentioned earlier; women could not possibly be able to write (or produce or direct) anything beyond the prescribed genres, so

they are rarely given the opportunity. By being female, they render themselves incapable of reasonable action.

Grayson's characteristics apply to women in the industry; it stands to reason that they would only be duplicated onscreen, which reinforces the conceptions off-screen. The two shape each other, maintaining the ideology of the male-dominated film industry.

If women were more involved in the development of films, would representations of women change? A growing body of research indicates that women working behind the scenes in film (and television) affect the on-screen portrayals of female characters. Strong relationships between female producers, writers, directors and their creative works have been documented, as has the quantitative relationship between the gender of film directors and the amount of screen time female characters get. (Lauzen & Dozier 1999) Though screen time is important, it is not the only change; when women direct films, female characters speak more often. Women behind the scenes increased the percentage of powerful language (first word, last word and interruptions) used by females, as examined by Lauzen & Dozier in the 1995-1996 television season. (1999) Though there is power in female authorship, there is the difficulty of the writer having very little control over the finished product as it is in the hands of the director. The suggestion of an opposition between screenwriter and director raises questions of multiple and contested authorship – if the writer and director have disparate views on the message of the film, the writer's initial idea may be modified, as in the case of Ridley Scott's direction of Callie Khouri's script for *Thelma and Louise*. (Tasker 1998) However, production companies headed by women have begun to offer new opportunities for women screenwriters in providing emotionally driven stories often with female protagonists that offer central roles for female actors. (Tasker 1998) These production companies may be able to offer a less-modified version of the writer's intent; however, there is not research to substantiate such a claim.

Women have not only written 'women's roles', but also in other genres, such as action, western and gangster films. Kathryn Bigelow directs action films almost exclusively – complex genre-hybrids that regularly gain acclaim for male directors. (Tasker 1998) However, as discussed earlier, women writers and

directors are often left to develop their ideas in the specific genres considered ‘appropriate’. One of these is the romantic comedy. Comedy provides a place in which taboos can be addressed, made visible, and also contained and negotiated. (Tasker 1998) This provides an interesting opportunity for women in the genre, as shifts in commonly-held perceptions are expected in comedy.

Paradigmatically, *Legally Blonde* is a film that appears to be a romantic comedy at first. It shares similar characteristics in plot to romantic comedies; Girl loses boy and sets off to get boy back from his bitchy new fiancé – by attending Harvard Law School. However, the film does have a bit of a twist; the girl finds out that she has a legal mind, she can become successful in school and that she no longer needs the man she set out to win back. I chose this film because I enjoy it, but also because it seemed to have a ‘girl power’ idea that I wanted to examine more closely. It is written by two women, which will allow me to evaluate it for the presence of Greydon’s five characteristics, and the presence of oppositional representations.

Rubinfeld’s descriptions of the main plots in conventional Hollywood romantic comedy (2001) apply to this film – specifically, there are two conventional plots: The brokenhearted redemption plot and the bitch foil plot. The brokenhearted redemption plot revolves around the obstacle of not being able to hold on to a lover, an obstacle which is introduced in the first half-hour of the film when the main character, Elle, is dumped by her boyfriend, who she expected to propose to her. The resolution of this plot is usually that the protagonist either reconciles with their partner, or finds the perfect mate. This plot tends to support the traditional gender role of the female while downplaying or challenging the role of the dominant male, as well as patriarchal ideology while allowing for some readings of resistance in the ‘softer’ male character. The bitch foil plot involves female being pitted against female in the effort to ‘win’ a male partner. In this plot, the ‘bitch’ is usually punished, while the heroine prevails and wins the man. The plot in the film seems fairly well laid out; Elle must win her ex-boyfriend, Warner back from his new fiancé, Vivian. The change in the paradigm of the genre is that neither of these plots become the main plot, but exist as side plots after the first half hour to forty five minutes of the film. I will examine the resolution of these two plots later.

As for the presence of Greydon’s characteristics, there is the presence of some, but other characteristics are completely absent from the production. Women are not underrepresented in this

particular film; out of the fifteen first-billed cast-members, ten are women. Women have the greatest amount of screen time in the film. Women are not shown domestic and domesticated beings – there are no scenes or women cleaning, cooking, or working in the home. Women are also not shown in exclusively in traditional roles. Women in this film are law students, a law professor, a judge, and a district attorney. There are few wives and mothers – Elle’s mother is not the standard depiction of a mother, but rather a tanned, attractive woman poolside who asks, “You were runner up in the Miss Hawaiian Tropic pageant and you want to just throw that all away?” However, despite these professional depictions, there is a tendency to show women as nurturers; Elle and her friend Paulette, the manicurist dote on their dogs, calling them their babies and dressing them up. At one point, Elle offers Vivian her dog to hold, which is likely intended to show that Vivian is not entirely a bad person – unfortunately it also perpetuates the idea that all women are nurturing, given the opportunity.

Women are, however, depicted as emotionally unstable. Elle is extremely emotional in several scenes; when Warner breaks up with her, she makes a scene in the restaurant, afterward, she is shown lying around in bed and throwing a box of chocolates at the TV. When in emotional distress, she makes a sudden and dangerous u-turn to get to a manicurist. A murder suspect loses control of her emotions while telling Elle her alibi. A witness on the stand being questioned by Elle loses control and blurts out that she killed her father by accident. However, when Elle decides to quit law school while she is upset and defeated after being harassed, it is a strong woman in her female law professor who tells her that if she “is going to let one prick ruin your life, you’re not the girl I thought you were.” This causes Elle to decide that she is not leaving school and will fight the harasser.

The conception of women as disabled and dysfunctional in this film is a bit more difficult – Paulette the manicurist is ‘spastic’ around the UPS guy, whom she is interested in, but that does not seem connected to conceptions of femininity. Both Elle and Vivian are attractive women and are capable. However, Professor Stromwell, Elle’s professor and eventual mentor, is a strong woman who is depicted as being bitchy, as if she has had to temper her femininity with masculinity in order to be accepted. While on a denotative level, Stromwell is a strong and successful woman, by attributing ‘male’ characteristics to female characters the filmmakers have inserted a connotative meaning that women have to act like men to gain acceptance in male-dominated professions.

Though Greydon's characteristics are not entirely present in the film, some are still quite obvious. I will now look at the more general depictions of women in the film through two of the important signifiers in the film: character and the engagement ring.

I will examine character through the main character, Elle. Elle is meant to stand for the everygirl, despite the fact that she is thin, blonde, rich and beautiful. The main reason we are able to relate to Elle is the casting of Reese Witherspoon, a talented actress who is known to choose her parts carefully. Not only does Witherspoon's charm help us accept Elle, but also the mythology around Witherspoon as an actress allows us to accept her character as not just another dumb blonde. The stereotypes that define 'dumb blonde' are actually used to set up expectations which Elle neatly knocks down at several points, offering a connotative reading of women as both attractive and smart, fun-loving and intelligent. This reading is subverted through several plot points, one being Elle's initial difficulty at Harvard and her naïve ignorance of what is involved in law school. This infantilization of the main character devalues her as a serious student and someone who can attain success. The change she experiences later does not entirely erase the idea that she could be completely unprepared for law school, which seems a bit ridiculous even at a denotative level. The clothing choices for Elle also reflect another level of meaning: Clothing is used as metaphor for the separation between the conceptions of femininity and intellect. Elle begins the movie dressed primarily in pink and looking 'sexy'. As she becomes serious about law school, her wardrobe changes to cover more skin and look more like the other women in the film who remain mostly covered and in darker shades. When, in the climax of the film, she returns to her former mode of dress, she is able to bridge the mind-body split, winning the murder case and saving the suspect from being convicted from a crime she did not commit. However, even in that victory, the preferred reading is subverted by the way that Elle wins the case; by employing 'female' knowledge of perm maintenance. There also are several instances of Elle relying on intuition rather than fact in the film, which seems important in a lawyer but is still part of the dominant conception of women.

The engagement ring is a reminder of the wedding plot; both Elle's thwarted dream of marrying Warner and Vivian's current 'claim' on him. There is a rather clever moment in the film where Vivian puts her hand on Warner's shoulder specifically to draw Elle's attention to the ring, and Elle sees a computer-generated sparkle with a 'ting' sound effect. The engagement ring is symbol of winning and competition,

as well as symbol of women's traditional happiness through marriage and family. Early in the film, the ring plays a large part, flashed around by Vivian in front of Elle, and spurring Elle to further competition. As Elle abandons her idea of marrying Warner and Vivian becomes dissatisfied with her relationship, the ring disappears completely from the picture. In taking idealistic conceptions of marriage out of the picture, both Elle and Vivian are able to concentrate on other things, and forge a friendship. This is interesting, as it gives a connotative meaning that, if women are not hung up on conceptions of how their lives are defined according to male involvement, they can succeed and get along, despite differences.

Returning to the plots, they are both resolved in the final scene of the courtroom plot, and the final scene of the film. At the courthouse, Warner attempts to get Elle back and Elle rejects him outright. This is what Rubinfield (2001) describes as 'self-actualization through un-coupling', where the protagonist decides that they must be alone for whatever reason; in Elle's case, because she no longer needs the connection with her ex-boyfriend – she has found her calling. The ending, where Elle gives the convocation speech, confirms this by indicating her intelligence and popularity among the graduating class, while the job announced (she is joining one of New England's most prestigious law firms) indicates her professional progression. However, the titles at the end indicating her new boyfriend's intention to propose to her offer a more conventional ending. This would subvert any reading of the film as an affirmation of women as intelligent and accomplished if it were not for the fact that, beyond interested looks and occasional flirting, the romance is not shown onscreen at all. It is a side plot, but it does offer the idea of women's 'wholeness' connected to marriage. Other titles at the end indicate that Vivian has rejected Warner as well, and is now Elle's best friend. The Bitch foil plot seems to be resolved unconventionally, though it does raise the question: Is Vivian's single state punishment for her earlier bitchy behaviour?

Because 'women's films' often have a greater number of women working behind the scenes, due to the conceptions of women in the film industry, there is an opportunity to use the narrow focus to change the conceptions of women on screen. Though research shows that women receive more powerful language and greater screen time in when women work in key positions behind the scenes, it seems that many of the conceptions of women in film remain at a connotative level. In the example of *Legally Blonde*, the conceptions of women have changed at a denotative level, though some of the dominant conceptions

remain beyond that. I do feel that continued influence by women in film could change the dominant conventions over time, and that the film is an example of a slow progression towards that. In changing conventions onscreen, conventions will be shifted off-screen, allowing for a film industry with greater equality in both worlds.

Bibliography

Bielby, D.D. & Bielby, W.T. (1996). Women and Men in Film: Gender Inequality among Writers in a Culture Industry. Gender and Society, 10:3, 248-270.

Currie, D.H. (1997). Decoding Femininity: Advertisements and Their Teenage Readers. Gender and Society, 11: 4, 453-477.

Graydon, S. (1991). The Portrayal of Women in Media: The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful. In B.D. Singer (Ed.), Communications in Canadian Society (pp.143-171). Hartford: Capital Press.

Lauzen, M.M. & Dozier, D.M. (1999). The Role of Women on Screen and behind the Scenes in the Television and Film Industries: Review of a Program of Research. Journal of Communication Inquiry, 23:4, 355-373.

Markson, E.W. & Taylor, C.A. (2000). The mirror has two faces. Ageing and Society, 20, 137-160.

Moffat, S. (1998). Learning to Re-imagine: uncovering affective investments in female film characters. Gender and Education, 10:1, 93-99.

Pycock, E. (1992). Memory and Anger: Teen Films and the Female Body. Unpublished master's thesis, Concordia University, Montreal.

Rubinfeld, M.D. (2001). Bound to Bond: Gender, genre and the Hollywood romantic comedy. Westport: Praeger.

Tasker, Y. (1998). Working Girls: Gender and sexuality in popular cinema. London: Routledge.