# 31 CINEMA AND THE MODERN WOMAN

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In American cinema of the 1930s the image of the modern woman and the trajectory of female desire present two different models. Between the end of the 1920s and the early 1930s, American cinema continued to focus on the image of the young, self-assertive, and sexy woman in her multiple facets: Working girls, gold diggers, flappers, show girls, and kept women inundated the talkies and perpetuated the cult of New Womanhood that emerged in the early years of the century. This tendency would wane as the decade progressed. From about the mid--1930s, the dominant narrative of female desire was tuned to the formation of the couple and to marriage while the figure of the emancipated woman became marginal. In this process the representation of class rise and upward mobility were also questioned and the heroine's social aspirations were more often thwarted than supported. One need only compare *Baby Face* (1933) and *Stella Dallas* (1937), both starring Barbara Stanwyck in the leading role, to realize how the convergence between gender and class changed dramatically in just a few years. In the second half of the 1930s, only the upper-class protagonists of screwball comedy enjoyed sexual freedom and independence while working-class women were denied both upward mobility and gender equality.

This shift in the representation of gender identity was matched by a concomitant transformation in film style. In the early 1930s, American cinema extended the use of visual techniques developed during the silent period that we may consider in light of the "cinema of attractions." While such a cinema is overtly narrative, at specific moments (especially, but not only, in the opening episode), the film avoids both narrative articulation and dialogue and communicates merely through visual devices. Around 1934, the classical mode of representation, namely a rational and motivated mode of storytelling based on analytic editing

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and dialogue, became dominant, while visual attractions and techniques all but disappeared. If we look at the convergence between gender identities and film rhetoric in 1930s cinema we can assess the trajectory of the New Woman from her splendor in the "Age of Turbulence" to her demise in the "Age of Order" (Sklar 1994, 175–194).

## Cinema, the New Woman, and Urban Modernity

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, industrial capitalism, urban modernity, and new forms of leisure time produced a watershed in women's lives. The impact of modernity on women's experience cannot be underestimated. While the new possibilities were not available to all, but mainly to unmarried young women working in urban areas, by the 1920s, young women of all classes living in big cities as well as small towns "claimed new sexual and romantic freedoms," and "found themselves with more money and more time to spend on themselves," while enjoying the same leisure culture as men. They also became avid media consumers. By 1929, "more than half of all single women were gainfully employed," and in large cities up to "one third of adult women workers lived alone in private apartments or boarding houses" and in the absence of parental supervision (Zeitz 2006, 29–31; see also Meyerowitz 1993, 43–71). Women left the rural areas in greater numbers than men in pursuit of better economic possibilities and in search of excitement. Overall, women's modern lifestyle was defined by financial independence and a whole new relation to work, leisure, and sex. While women had worked for wages throughout the Victorian Age, the cultural context now had changed. New jobs in department stores, large factories, restaurants, and offices provided alternatives to domestic service and sweatshops. The relationship between work and leisure also changed. In her groundbreaking study of working women and leisure in turn-of-the-century New York, historian Kathy Peiss claims that

> The perception of leisure as a separate sphere of independence, youthful pleasure, and mixed-sex fun, in opposition to the world of obligation and toil, was supported by women's experience in the workplace. (1986, 35)

Work did not inculcate "discipline and a desire for quiet evenings at home," since "earning a living" was both an economic necessity and "a cultural experience organizing and defining [women's] leisure activities" (Peiss 1986, 34–35). In this regard, the modern woman's trajectory may be understood in the broader context of the nation's economic growth and of "the changing attitudes that had focused on saving to focus on spending" (Cott 1987, 146).

The transition from the Victorian ideology of True Womanhood could not be more evident.[1] While married women's lives continued to center on the domestic

sphere, single women forcefully entered the public sphere. Such a process spurred a "trend toward a pleasure-oriented culture" (Peiss 1986, 36–40) that defied the Victorian ethos toward domesticity and sexual purity (Welter 1978). In this process, media consumption, and especially moviegoing, represented a fundamental practice of women's everyday lives. While in the second half of the 1920s movie attendance continued to grow (Steinberg 1980, 46), the new mass consumption, which included a new standard of living in urban households, "portended a new level of standardization and uniformity of life." As Nancy Cott has argued,

> In the 1920s an American mass culture became possible, as the conjunction of mass production and marketing techniques with new technology added the radio and the movies to print media already crossing the nation. (1987, 147)

While mass media fed the tendency toward cultural uniformity and the creation of a specifically American modern way of life, "surveys reported that movie stars had replaced leaders in politics, business, or the arts as those admired by the young" (Cott 1987, 147).

In the transition years from silent film to sound, cinema was still the most effective form for representing modernity and urban life, as well as women's desire to emancipate. Surveys of the period and contemporary investigations in audience studies reveal that, in the 1920s and the early 1930s, women represented the majority of moviegoers. Working in this domain, Melvyn Stokes (1999) has noted that audience research studies at that time were rather impressionistic and that the data available are probably imprecise. Yet while estimates might be individually inaccurate, "collectively they suggest an impressive weight of evidence to buttress the idea of predominantly female audience" (43). Ultimately, whether women really formed a majority of the cinema audience was "less important than the fact that Hollywood itself assumed that, both through their own attendance and their ability to influence men, they were its primary market" (43–44). Such an assumption had a powerful effect on the industry. In the 1920s and the 1930s, Hollywood produced a vast number of films centered on women, often written by women scriptwriters. During the first half of the 1930s the woman's film made up a quarter of all movies on the "best lists," with 1931 as the year recording the highest number (Balio 1993, 237). In a similar way, one can read the greater success of female over male stars in those years as correlative to female moviegoing.

Women, of course, loved to see images of the New Woman, exemplified by such divas as Gloria Swanson, Colleen Moore, Clara Bow, and Joan Crawford. As Mary Ryan (1976) has pointed out, "the new movie woman exuded above all a sense of physical freedom – unrestrained movement … abounding energy – the antithesis of the controlled, quiet, tight-kneed poses of Griffith's heroines." She goes on to describe the "dashing spontaneity" with which "they rushed onto dance floors, leapt into swimming pools, and accepted any dare – to drink, to sport, to strip," and as they moved into social, work, and higher education spheres (1976, 369–370).

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In the 1920s, the flapper represented the most important image of the modern woman. Combining physical and behavioral features, the flapper had bobbed hair and short skirts, drank a lot, enjoyed partying, and followed loosened sexual standards. However, the key to her success was the contradictory status of her image since she was both sweet and wild, youthful and worldly, innocent and sexual (Ross 2000). While the flapper became a pivotal figure in all areas of American culture, from literature to fashion, from the popular press to advertising (Zeitz 2006), in cinema her status was assured by the genre of the flapper film, which developed roughly from 1922 to 1923 – with films such as *The Flapper* (1922) and *Flaming Youth* (1923) – to 1929, when Clara Bow played her last flapper role in Dorothy Arzner's *The Wild Party* (Ross 2000). In the following years female characters maintained the sexual openness and the frank assertiveness of the flapper, but most of them lacked her innocence and her girlish attitude. The new stars of the early 1930s tended to be slightly older[2] and often pushed their roles in a dramatic direction, true of Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck. While a comedienne like Claudette Colbert, especially in the Oscar-winning hit *It Happened One Night* (1934), was a late example of the flapper, other stars such as Mae West and Marlene Dietrich revitalized the image of the strong and sexy woman by adding highly original traits.

The image of the New Woman in her different facets eclipsed the "cult of True Womanhood" by promoting a whole new set of gender attributes. As Barbara Welter has argued, the Victorian ethos prescribed for women a strict moral code based on four traits: domesticity, religiosity, sexual purity, and subordination to the male (1978, 313–333). In the films made for Griffith, Lillian Gish is the apotheosis of the Victorian heroine. Griffith's moral world focuses "upon woman's essential goodness and purity." The Griffith–Gish heroine was the epitome of innocence and Gish's face "expressed the artlessness and modest reserve of a virgin" (Higashi 1978, 3). As in nineteenth-century Victorian melodramas, the narrative tension resulted from the threats posed by the villain to the chastity of the female heroine. Similarly, as one can see in the opposing male characters in *Way Down East* (1920), "the city was the scene where rural values had gone to pot" and the sexual model of the film stands "in contrast to the freedom resulting from the urban, Jazz Age revolution in manners and morals" (Higashi 1978, 13).

The New Woman's trajectory, as Higashi implies, could only occur in the urban spaces of modernity. Indeed, in a vast number of films the heroine leaves her parochial birthplace and arrives in the big city to look for a job, as she does, for example, in *An American Tragedy* (1931), *Night Nurse* (1931), and *Baby Face*, among many others. In a similar fashion, the emergence of cinema itself was made possible by modernity. The "modernity thesis," as Ben Singer has suggested,

> stresses key formal and spectatorial similarities between cinema – as a medium of strong impressions, spatiotemporal fragmentation, abruptness, mobility – and the nature of metropolitan experience. Both are characterized by the prominence of fleeting, forceful visual attractions and contra-contemplative spectatorial distraction. (2001, 102)

Early cinema, as well as some narrative genres of the 1910s, may be seen as a formal expression of the modern subject's hyperstimulated experience in the metropolis. The serial-queen melodrama beautifully developed the theme of female heroism and was thus a paradigmatic example of the image of the New Woman:

> within a sensational action-adventure framework … serials gave narrative pre-eminence to an intrepid young heroine who exhibited a variety of traditionally "masculine" qualities: physical strength and endurance, self-reliance, courage, social authority, and freedom to explore novel experiences outside the domestic sphere. (2001, 221)

For Singer the serial-queen melodrama is an aesthetic version of everyday urban life, dominated by excessive visual sensations, in the sense that cinema duplicates, for the women in the audience, the female subject's urban experience.

One can test the changing institutional status of cinema as a form of entertainment as well as the trajectory of the modern woman by looking at how the representation of the New Woman changed throughout the first decades of the century. The masculine attitude of the silent serial queen was a product of the convergence of the social figure of the suffragette (Stamp 2000, 154–158) and the hero of stage sensational melodramas, while broadly, the serial thriller, best exemplified in the 1910s by the serial queen, is the clearest expression of the popular nature of early cinema. If the transition to the feature film is commonly assumed to be a staple in the transformation of cinema into a bourgeois form of entertainment, the female heroines of the 1920s and early 1930s also indicate a clear change in the social imaginary *vis-à-vis* the New Woman. In this regard we may seize both continuities and differences between the silent and the early sound period. While in the 1920s the flapper film became a production staple in all studios (Ross 2000, 112), as this image waned the figures of the working girl and of the performer (in her different guises as singer, chorus girl, comedian, etc.) became the most popular. If illicit sex was often a fundamental element of plot and character, women were defined, first of all, by their position in the working sphere. Between 1921 and 1930, Hollywood produced 46 films with domestic servants in minor roles, 49 with shop girls, 28 with stenographers, and 114 with secretaries (Ryan 1976, 374–375). What is also interesting was cinema's perspective in relation to class. In many cases, in fact, rich women were represented as uninteresting partners, or worse, as boring. Aristocrats and rich men, engaged or married to women of their class, frequently were shown to fall in love with women of a lower class who were livelier and funnier than their official partners. At times rich and independent women were also fun, as true of Ruth Chatterton's wonderful character in *Female* (1933) or Norma Shearer's Jerry Martin in *The Divorcée* (1930), but such women were definitely a rarity in those years. That dynamic would be reversed in the following years: The upper-class heroines of the screwball comedy would in fact inherit the glamour and the lively energy of the working girls who preceded them.

## New Women and Visual Attractions

The modern metropolis as the site of change and transformation is beautifully exemplified in those films in which young women tried to improve their status through work or sex or both. The heroine's social rise did not simply involve a linear plot in the tradition of classical narratives based on cause and effect, however (Bordwell et al. 1985). Through formal devices drawn from the silent period, in the transition years to sound, American cinema expressed the New Woman's condition through visual spectacles that represented cinematically the ideas of movement and metamorphosis as well as the experience of excessive visual sensations typical of modernity. While the "urban dissolve" represented the most effective and radical case of this formal economy, such a tendency was also exemplified by location shooting in the streets, often with the camera positioned inside a car or a moving vehicle, or with the heroine framed while walking by glamorous shop windows as at the beginning of *Night Nurse* and *Red-Headed Woman* (1932), respectively.

In the early 1930s, cinema's mode of representation relied on a convergence between classical style and visual attractions, that is, between plots of emancipation and spectacular imagery. Tom Gunning (1990) has suggested that when the narrative form won out, the cinema of attractions did not disappear but went "underground, both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films, more evident in some genres (e.g. the musical) than in others" (57). If we accept that the cinema of attractions represented an aesthetic solution to the condition of modernity, we must then historicize that concept and evaluate carefully the changing relation between attraction and narration. The cinema of the early 1930s is a fundamental episode in this trajectory since it calls for a *gendered reading* of the aesthetic concept of attraction. In the woman-centered films of the period, visual attractions rely on the image of the female body while narratives focus on stories of female emancipation. The convergence between form and content around the woman's body is a very peculiar solution that deserves consideration.

The relation between woman and modernity was expressed in particular by two types of visual attractions – the "urban dissolve" and the exhibitionist display of the female body. The urban dissolve is a specific code of silent cinema, a rhetorical strategy developed in particular by the city symphony documentary in such films as Strand and Sheeler's *Manhatta* (1921), Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), and Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), but also used in narrative film, as in F. W. Murnau's American debut, *Sunrise* (1927). The urban dissolve is an extended dissolve, a series of superimpositions of images of urban life which amplifies "cinematically" the city's dynamism while also testing the spectator's perceptive skills. Shot in the most bustling areas of the metropolis, it shows masses of people walking or waiting, fast-moving lines of cars and trolleys, and other

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energized moments of everyday urban life. Far from being "realistic," the image loses its iconic properties via multiple and complex dissolves and constantly transforms itself to the extent that it may become pure movement and energy. While we are often unable to "read" the image, our perceptive experience registers endless movement and change as the main condition of city life. The urban dissolve is clearly antinarrative and contributes enormously to the opposition between narrative and spectacle that shaped American cinema in the early sound years.

Dissolves and visual polyphonies are often gendered, that is, related to the female body. Because they effectively exemplify the idea of metamorphosis, they are and were particularly fit to represent the modern woman's narrative of transformation. While this device was very common, it also could attain an unusual level of formal complexity and rhetorical force, as it did in *Glorifying the American Girl* (Millard Webb, 1929). A second strategy of attraction, female exhibitionist techniques, was also very common. The exhibition of the female body, especially in a performative context, preserved the impulse of early cinema as described by Gunning. As we see, for example, in *Rain* (Lewis Milestone, 1932), the display of the female body is an assault on the viewer, who is "forced" to experience the excessive sexual energy of the woman at the moment in which we see the protagonist introducing herself to the soldiers. I would like to analyze strategies of attraction in relationship to the female body by looking at the opening episode in *Glorifying the American Girl* and *What Price Hollywood?* (George Cukor, 1932), and by considering Joan Crawford's appearance in *Rain*. Antinarrative strategies are most commonly used at the beginning of the film before character and plot take up their role.

*Glorifying the American Girl*, produced by Monta Bell for Paramount, begins with a spectacular four-minute prologue composed of a series of complex superimpositions activating a vertiginous visual experience. The film tells the story of a young woman who wants to be in the Follies; in the meantime she works in a department store sheet-music section, where she sings the latest hits. She will become a successful performer on Broadway, but in the process she will break up with her boyfriend who is unable to cope with her career and who will marry a more "modest" girl. The prologue postpones the beginning of the narrative and visually "demonstrates" the relation between woman and modernity.

The first shot shows a map of the United States with long lines of young women walking on the American soil. Dressed in the same uniform, their movements design a series of serpentines occupying the whole national space. The women have a robot-like shape since they all look alike and the geometry of their movements resembles Busby Berkeley's dancing numbers in *42nd Street* (1933), *The Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), and *Footlight Parade* (1933). Then the shot slowly dissolves into the image of a young woman wearing a formal dress. Soon after, the image dissolves again into the figure of a Ziegfeld girl. On the lower part of the image the serpentines continue to walk on the map. The following shot frames a moving train while the serpentines are still superimposed, thus doubling

**31.1** Millions of young women walk toward the urban areas: the opening dissolve in *Glorifying the American Girl* (1929, producer Monta Bell).

the movement of the train itself. The prologue continues to develop along the same line: Dissolves as well as double or triple superimpositions will build up truly spectacular and dynamic visual effects on the theme of "women and the metropolis."

Neither the film's plot nor the revue format is highly original. One reviewer at the time wrote that the film presented "nothing … that has not been done in the talkies many times before" and another similarly said that "Its plot fairly reeks with familiarity" (quoted in Crafton 1997, 334). Yet the prologue, nevertheless, is quite stunning. While superimpositions and extended dissolves are indeed a typical trope of the period, this instance is certainly radical in relation to the usual use of the device. The visual imagery raises, in a very effective way, the question of female desire and emancipation. On the one hand, through multiple dissolves, the sequence suggests the idea of movement and transformation. On the other hand, such themes are clearly associated with a specific object, "the American girl." While a feminist ahistorical interpretation might take the film as the epitome of the representation of woman as commodity, "so that Gloria's middle-class occupation in the world of display showcases is a stepping-stone to the high-class showcase of the Ziegfeld revue" (Mizejewski 1999, 148), I believe, on the contrary, that

the heroine's career as a Ziegfeld girl should be seen historically, namely, as a successful emancipation from the traps of Victorian America.

Though dominated by visual sensations, the prologue activates not merely a sensual experience but an intellectual process. As Francesco Casetti has pointed out, one of the challenges of modernity was precisely to reconcile the hyperstimulation of the senses – which defies meaning – with the possibility of making sense of everyday urban life. Cinema provides the means for negotiating such a duality (2008, 130–135). In the prologue of *Glorifying the American Girl*, all the human figures are female – better, the prologue alternates collective images with shots of individual subjects. The film seems to evoke in a rather precise fashion the historical condition of the modern American woman in the 1920s. In the same way that the title refers to any "American girl," the robot-like figures are devoid of any individualizing traits and connote a collective experience. The serpentines going toward the urban areas express quite literally the young women moving to the big cities in search of jobs. The robot-like figures walking on the map are, at the same time, anonymous and universal, recalling the thousands of stenographers and telephone operators, washerwomen and nurses, secretaries and sales clerks populating the workplace: According to historical research, these were the most common jobs held by American women in 1930 (Milkman 1979). Overall, the prologue makes a historical comment on the condition of the working woman by exploiting a typical formal device of the period, while the plot concentrates on the trajectory of the protagonist.

Engaged to Buddy, who thinks only of marrying her, Gloria (Mary Eaton) dreams of doing something important before settling down. While the young woman starts a career as a traveling performer and leaves her hometown, she remains in love with Buddy. Later Gloria returns to New York for an audition and gets the role. At this point realizing that she will not give up her career, Buddy begins to date Barbara, who dreams of marrying him. The film ends with Gloria's performance in the show "Glorifying the American Girl," as Buddy and Barbara sit in the audience. Between numbers when Gloria receives a telegram from the couple announcing their marriage, she begins to cry but changes to a new costume and returns to the stage for another number nevertheless: Overnight she becomes a Broadway star. Through the opposition between the two women, the film dramatizes the dialectic between New and True Womanhood, between the autonomy of the modern woman and the passivity of traditional femininity. While "female stardom means personal misery and sacrifice" (Mizejewski 1999, 148), women's newly acquired freedoms are a true conquest.

*What Price Hollywood?* tells a similar story – that of a young girl starting as a waitress and ending up as a Hollywood star. As in *Glorifying the American Girl*, the metamorphic trajectory of the heroine is anticipated in the opening sequence through a very effective use of dissolves and offscreen space. The first shots, all linked through lap dissolves, play around the dialectic between on-screen and offscreen space by hiding the heroine's face. By framing only the woman's torso, the

sequence succeeds in negating her identity. At the same time, the film opens by producing an image of movement and change rather than representing an action. The first shot frames a fan magazine: A pair of hands are flipping through and reveal photos of glamorous divas. The image then dissolves into a pair of sexy legs: A woman's body is framed from the waist down while she puts on a pair of stockings. The relation between the two shots appears purely associative: The elegance of the woman's legs recalls the glamour of the film stars photographed in the magazine. The image dissolves again into the magazine: Offscreen hands continue to flip through. Further on the dissolve returns us to a female body: Now the woman, framed from the knees to the neck, perhaps the same one, is putting on a dress. Another dissolve leads to another frame of the magazine and, finally, to the detail of a woman's lips upon which, from the offscreen space, some invisible hands are putting on some lipstick. At this point a slow tracking shot reveals the woman's face. She continues to put on makeup by peeking at a magazine in order to imitate the style of her favorite stars. When we see a medium shot of the woman's whole body we realize that she is the same woman we saw in the previous shots: The dress is indeed the one we saw on the fragmented body.

At this point the film develops into a classical narrative: The young woman is getting dressed to go to work. She lives in a cheap room and works in a restaurant in Hollywood, hoping to get a chance to start a career in the movies. In the restaurant she will eventually meet a famous actor who will help her to get her first audition. While the episode is less elaborate than the opening sequence of *Glorifying the American Girl*, it relies on a similar rhetoric in suggesting the close association between female desire, change, and modernity. Like the earlier film, it also points to the collective thrust of its message: The woman we see getting dressed lacks any individualizing trait and can thus stand for all the young urban women moving to the big cities at the beginning of the century. While this image may be considered a paradigmatic example of female consumerism, it also shows how the construction of female identity occurs through a conscious and personal reworking of specific models and lifestyles – those of Hollywood's great divas. As an admirer of Greta Garbo, Constance Bennett is clearly a consumer of fan magazines. She does not passively imitate the glamorous stars she loves, but learns to construct her own identity through a process of negotiation between unconscious desires and a conscious understanding of the way the Dream Factory works (Berry 2000, 24–30).

In the same way as *Glorifying the American Girl* and *What Price Hollywood?*, Lewis Milestone's *Rain* begins with an explicitly antinarrative episode – a series of shots of heavy rain, storms, and running water, which clearly imitate Joris Ivens's experimental documentary *Regen/Rain* (1929). While the sequence is indeed a spectacular episode, the most radical visual attractions of the film concern the sexual display of the female body. Through a truly exhibitionist technique that combines acting style, camerawork, and editing, Sadie Thompson (Joan Crawford) purposefully presents her body as an attraction. This performance is not a passive gesture, particularly if it is read in the overall context of the film, which supports Sadie's

amoral behavior. Sadie is a prostitute who arrives on a boat in the Samoan village of Pago Pago, a somewhat "liberal" outpost where natives, American soldiers, and civilians live far away from the burden of civilization and religion. In Pago Pago having fun is the focus, and Sadie spends her time drinking and listening to music in the company of soldiers. Sadie catches the attention of Mr Davidson, a missionary who has arrived on the same boat and who wants to reform her. At some point he seems to succeed: Sadie is enthralled by his preaching and begins a process of redemption. But the spell he has cast over Sadie sinks with Davidson when he mysteriously drowns in the ocean. In the end she goes back to her previous life and the whole island seemingly resumes its usual habits and routines. Throughout the film Sadie's sexual identity is registered on her body. Her sexy outfits give way to modest black dresses during her conversion, but, finally, after the spell wears off, she returns to her excessive wardrobe, heavy makeup, and flashy costume jewelry. The film supports Sadie's free lifestyle, condemns Davidson's excessive morality, and generally draws a clear association between Sadie's sexual freedom and the natives' savage life.

The most interesting visual attraction is related to Sadie's appearance when she is framed by a door and stands in front of the soldiers. Her exhibitionist performances occur twice, at the beginning of the film when she is first introduced, and at the end, when, after Davidson's death, she accepts Sergeant Tim O'Hara's courtship. Crawford's performance is not inscribed within the active male/passive female dichotomy that Laura Mulvey outlines in her seminal essay (1975). On the contrary, Sadie's appearance is quite literally an assault on the viewer and on the male protagonists, who are forced to experience Sadie's excessive sexuality. While the male look is part of the rhetorical construction of each performance scene, the active agency is Sadie's. It is possible, therefore, to interpret her show, the woman's sexual display, not "as a sign of male pathology" but as an indication of "female gratification" (Gaines & Herzog 1990, 5). While the two scenes are structured in the same way – Crawford emerges from an offscreen space to meet the boys' look – what is most striking is the choice to show her body by literally repeating the same five shots. Both episodes start with the male look, then present fragments of Sadie's body: her right hand adorned with jewels, her left hand, then her right foot, followed by the left, and, finally, Sadie's made-up face. If we look carefully at camera position and character's looks, it is clear that only the first of the five shots represents the subjective point of view of the diegetic male character. The scene is clearly shot and edited for the extra-diegetic spectator. Crawford's exhibition actively confronts the viewer rather than the diegetic characters. Through the use of close-ups the film "aggressively subjects the spectator to 'sensual or psychological impact'" (Gunning 1990, 58–59).

The exhibitionist dynamics of Crawford's interpretation in this film are elaborated in the many other films of the period focusing on female performers. Notwithstanding their different personalities and acting styles, Marlene Dietrich and Mae West represent the most radical examples of female exhibition of the

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body. In thinking about their performances, we may indeed apply Gunning's comment on early cinema. Like the cinema of attractions, their bodies "directly solicit spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle" (1990, 58). While Gunning "says very little about the way in which the female body functions as a main 'attraction' in the cinema of attraction" (Petro 2002, 171), it is clear that his ideas fit quite well the status of the female body in the early 1930s.

*Blonde Venus* (1932) is a peculiar case in the representation of female desire. The protagonist's trajectory evolves through a vertiginous and twisted plot where she plays a set of various roles, from affectionate mother and wife to glamorous singer and sexy kept woman, from runaway mother who must prostitute herself to support her child to famous singer performing in Paris. The film concentrates on the same body and the many options of female identity available at the time, but in so doing it undermines the dichotomies it plays out. While Helen Faraday (Marlene Dietrich) never gives up her maternal role, her unorthodox femininity is the result of coexisting antithetical images of female identity. As a sexually active woman, Helen challenges the convention of the sexless mother, a convention well respected by Hollywood cinema. While the film supports and reinforces the mother/child relation, it also undermines the function of the paternal role and of the nuclear family. Dietrich embodies varied images of female identity and desire and, as a result, becomes the very site of gender excess and queerness (Kuzniar 2007). In subverting the convention prescribing women to choose between motherhood and sexuality, she clearly emancipates herself from social norms and rules.

In this scenario, Dietrich's performances as a cabaret singer play a significant role. In the famous "Hot Voodoo" sequence the diva wears a monkey costume and sings to the sound of drums played by a band of "savages." This excessive performance makes an explicit comment on the relation between feminine sexuality, animalism, and primitivism. As Dietrich reveals her identity, stripping out of her excessively sexual costume, both the diegetic and the extra-diegetic audiences are caught by surprise and shocked by her outrageous performance. In relation to the look, it is Dietrich that attracts and elicits the audience's visual experience. Such a strategy is particularly evident in her last show in Paris at the end of the film. Helen appears on stage dressed in a white tuxedo like a Mannish Lesbian (Weiss 1992) and moves toward the audience, while the camera follows her movement in a long take. The camera lingers on her until she reaches her ex-lover, Nick Townsend (Cary Grant), who is watching the show. In an explicit reversal of the traditional paradigm proposed by Laura Mulvey, Marlene's body and performance control both the audience look and the camerawork. Even more explicitly than in the "Hot Voodoo" sequence, the episode is structured around female agency, namely, the performer's ability to reduce to passivity the male look.

In *I'm No Angel* (1933), Mae West's performance is choreographed in a similar fashion. Tira is a sensational attraction as a lion tamer who elicits her audience's curiosity. When she concludes the dangerous number by putting her head inside

**31.2** Marlene in a white tuxedo in *Blonde Venus* (1932, producer Josef von Sternberg).

the lion's mouth, the audience is both greatly entertained and excited. Like Marlene's Helen, West's Tira is the active agent of her own performance and controls the look and the reaction of the paying customers. In a curious reenactment of early cinema's strategy of attractions, the New York socialites who have watched the show thank her because she has given them "a thrill" – enabled them to experience a sensational and strong emotion. In the same way that the dynamic impulse of the (urban) dissolve is tuned to the emancipatory plot of the working girl, the exhibitionist displays of Joan Crawford, Marlene Dietrich, and Mae West are similarly related to female sexual transgression. Both strategies also betray the persistence of preclassical formal ploys.

In *Three on a Match* (1932), the representation of gender and class identity in relation to female upward mobility has a peculiar force since the plot concentrates on the parallel trajectories of three young girls coming from different social backgrounds. Mary, Vivian, and Ruth attend the same public school in a New York City neighborhood. While Vivian and Ruth are quiet and behave properly, Mary is wild, smokes, and prefers the company of boys. As teenagers they follow their own inclinations: Mary (Joan Blondell) ends up in a reform school for women, Vivian (Ann Dvorak), the richest of the three, attends a boarding school for young ladies, and Ruth (Bette Davis) goes to the Metropolitan Business College. But the film's

strength resides in its rhetorical strategies: Shots of the three girls are intertwined with superimpositions and dissolves of newspaper titles, city streets, sports events, and other episodes of urban modernity. The story of the three girls growing up in New York is framed within the context of modernity, from 1919 to 1930, through the use, once again, of the most modern filmic device, the urban dissolve. The newspaper titles announce several news items on the subject of modernity, such as women's suffrage, the advent of radio, the growth in beauty expenses, and so on. But the film also makes a comment on the relation between women, sex, and class in tune with the perspective we have discussed so far.

After losing track of one another, the three women meet again in a beauty parlor. Mary works in show business, Ruth is a white-collar girl, Vivian has married a rich lawyer and has a small boy. But Vivian is unhappy and will ruin her life by choosing drugs and alcohol in the company of a petty gangster. In the end, she will kill herself in order to save her child. On the contrary, Mary, who seemed destined to live a marginal life, will end up marrying Vivian's husband. And Ruth will work for the new family as a babysitter for their son. Mary's trajectory is particularly interesting since she is depicted as the most sexual and wild of the three. As in many other films of the period, frank sexual behavior is not the sign of moral corruption but the clearest symptom of women's force and emancipated status.

## The Age of Order and the Demise of the New Woman

Sometime around 1933–1934 the dominant mode of female representation veers toward the convergence of normative forms of desire and strong narrative structures dominated by action and dialogue. While visual attractions tended to disappear, linearity and causality furthered a rational mode of storytelling which, in turn, supported traditional forms of identity and lifestyle, especially for women. Undoubtedly, in the latter half of the 1930s, antinarrative techniques and visual attractions tended to disappear, especially in relation to editing strategies. Bazin's argument is well known: We witnessed "the almost complete disappearance of optical effects such as superimpositions and even … the close-up" (1967, 32), while analytic editing contributed to a tightening of narrative structure and stronger cause-and-effect construction. In relinquishing the ability to express meaning through its purely visual means, cinema, at that time, communicated primarily through actions and language. Yet, it was the combination of a purely invisible style with a new set of images concerning female and male desire that accounted for the shift in Hollywood's ideological project. What Robert Sklar (1994) has called the "Age of Order" implies a reversal *vis-à-vis* the gender discourse of the previous years. Transgressive sexual attitudes were no longer supported and women's working careers were similarly negated. The only trajectory available for women was marriage. More generally, while in the previous years cinema preferred to focus on working their social rise, now women's experience was framed

within marriage and the home. Emancipatory plots often had a negative outcome, while the formation of the heterosexual couple was the dominant mode of the period. The classical status of cinema, I would argue, does not simply involve formal and narrative techniques, but relies on a specific ideological project. In contrast to the earlier period, as well as to post–World War II cinema, classical cinema generally narrated plots of integration: That is why comedy is the key genre of the period. While it is true that the screwball heroine usually enjoys sexual and social freedom, the narrative nevertheless develops within the precincts of marriage or remarriage (Cavell 1984) in an upper-class scenario (see Pravadelli 2007).

In the same way as some screwball heroines are the heirs of the emancipated flapper of the 1920s, we will later see that this genre expressed Hollywood's only progressive position *vis-à-vis* female desire in the second part of the decade. The scenario had in fact dramatically changed in relation to the earlier years, both in the social and the filmic context. While women had dominated the industry on all levels – on the screen, at the box office, in the audience – now the values of masculinity and family came back with a vengeance. From the mid-1930s, the box office was topped by male stars, along with adolescent and child actors. The appeal of American traditional values is evident if we consider the major trends in moviegoing and public taste. Shirley Temple had a triumphant career and topped the box office for four straight years, from 1935 to 1938. In those same seasons, the virile Clark Gable was the most successful male star and was ranked second behind Temple. The most popular genres were adventure films – a typical male genre – and costume dramas, while another male genre – the biopic – was highly praised by critics and a favorite at the Oscars. Such genres were not only adequate to address the classical thrust for linear structures, but they all focused on male agency and relegated female characters to marginal roles. William Dieterle's biopics starring Paul Muni are particularly interesting in their support of the most traditional humanistic values. Dieterle's films were highly praised, and with *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937) the filmmaker became a hot commodity, especially for critics on the left struck by the antifascist stance of the film (Robé 2009).

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were also key protagonists at the box office in the mid-1930s. The RKO musicals they starred in represented another paradigmatic case for testing the shift in the representation of gender identity. It is easy to see how the hyperbolic elements of Busby Berkeley's films, in relation to both female sexuality and film language, are totally tamed in the Astaire–Rogers films, where both female body and the shooting and editing techniques follow classical precepts. While male genres and stars had a greater impact than their female counterparts, romantic couples and child actors developed the themes of marriage and family in a forceful way. In this scenario, it was not surprising that the trajectory of the independent woman usually had a negative outcome. In 1930s cinema strong women were often nasty, so that they could rightfully be punished. Bette Davis was the prototype of the "Hollywood Bitch." In several films she victimizes a weak man, but her behavior finally backfires on her, as in *Of Human Bondage* (1934),

*Jezebel* (1938), *The Letter* (1940), and *The Little Foxes* (1941). Yet it is *Dark Victory* (1939) that most clearly reveals the dynamics at play during this period.

In that film Bette Davis plays Judith Traherne, a young Long Island socialite who spends her time horse riding and partying with her friends. She is rich and spoiled, but nice, amiable, and generous. Judith suffers from dizziness and headaches but ignores them, until she finds out that she is very seriously ill. Her illness triggers a deep rethinking of her lifestyle. As her very survival is suddenly in danger, Judith begins asking herself what it means to live. When she falls in love with her doctor, she believes she has found the answer to her existential query. The couple are engaged to be married and plan to leave the big city to settle in Vermont, where Frederick will continue his research on brain tumors. But while she packs his office, Judith finds her own file and discovers her illness is fatal. Believing Frederick wants to marry her out of pity, she breaks their engagement and resumes her former life. Later, she will return to him and the two will marry and move to Vermont. Judith will spend some very happy months with her husband, attending the house and the garden, and assisting him in his important work. After making sense of her life as a dutiful and passive wife, Judith will die alone in her bedroom while her husband is away at a conference. One can easily speculate that her early death is the direct effect of her modern lifestyle: Had she spent less time in having fun and paid more attention to her symptoms, Judith would still be alive. The wedding is a sort of redemption for her past "sins," the choice she should have made from the start. The change in lifestyle is complete and involves every aspect of her experience: Judith starts as a single, independent, and urban woman and ends as a married housewife in the countryside.

The shift in the representation of female desire is further evident if we look at Barbara Stanwyck's career throughout the decade. Along with Joan Crawford, in the early 1930s Stanwyck had interpreted key roles as a young woman attempting to raise her social status through hard work and/or sex. Both actresses played working-class women who moved to the big city in search of a job, as well as playing a variety of fallen and/or redeemed women. Crawford also played some of the last significant flapper roles in *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928), *Our Modern Maidens* (1929), and *Our Blushing Brides* (1930). In the first two, Crawford is a society girl, but in the third she plays a working-class shop girl, a transition that prepares for the more dramatic roles she will later play (Ross 2000, 328–329). In *Paid* (1930), she is a shop girl sent to prison by her employer on false charges, and in *Possessed* (1931), she is a factory worker who becomes the mistress of a wealthy lawyer. In these same years, Stanwyck plays similar roles. In *Night Nurse* she is Lora Hart, a determined young woman who arrives in New York to look for a job. Lora begins to train as a nurse in a hospital and becomes close friends with B. Maloney (Joan Blondell), a more experienced nurse who helps get her adjusted to the new situation. The two women, who share a room in the hospital to save money, build a strong friendship and show little interest in men. In *Forbidden* (1932), Stanwyck has a married man's baby,

and in *Shopworn* (1932), she is a hardworking waitress who falls in love with a college student. Her social rise will take place after several dramatic twists.

In *Baby Face*, one of her most famous roles, Stanwyck plays Lily Powers, a strong young woman who tries to cope with her abusive father, a violent man who runs a speakeasy where Lily serves drinks. A famous censorship case in pre-Code Hollywood (Jacobs 1997), the film contains among the most explicit of sexual contents during the period. Lily's father has prostituted his daughter to his customers for a few bucks since she was 14. Lily's life is miserable; her only comforts are Chico, the African-American maid who works for the family, and Mr Cragg, one of her father's customers. Mr Cragg is a cultivated man and is very fond of Lily. He urges her to leave the place and "go to some big city." Indirectly quoting Nietzsche's *Will to Power*, he tells her "to use men, not be used by them, to get things."[3] After her father accidentally dies, Lily and Chico leave Pittsburgh and go to New York. Lily will indeed follow Mr Cragg's suggestion *à la lettre* and use men to climb the social ladder. While the film resorts to a sentimental tone only at the very end, it provides a harsh and cynical representation of sexual relations in urban America. Yet it is far from criticizing Lily's behavior. On the contrary, *Baby Face* shows that sex is the only means a woman has to attract men's attention. Lily, in fact, is very good at her job, but it is only when her bosses realize she is pretty that they consider her for promotion. Similarly, when the new president of the bank she works for sees her in the Paris agency, he is very surprised to hear that her division has improved its business by 40 percent since he can only judge her by her good looks. But Lily is very capable at her job and is also a hard worker. If she needs powerful men to succeed, it is because women can, on their own, at best, be only secretaries.

In the following years Stanwyck continued to play characters whose desire for upward mobility would be repeatedly thwarted. In *The Bride Walks Out* (1936) she is Carolyn, a fashion model forced by her husband (Michael Martin) to quit her job after they get married. As she realizes that her husband's salary is not enough, Carolyn goes back to modeling. She keeps her work a secret to protect Michael's pride. But her decision will seriously jeopardize her marriage. Once her husband finds out about her job, he leaves her. After their divorce, Carolyn dates a rich man and is about to marry him when she learns that Michael has accepted a dangerous job in South America. In a comic ending, Carolyn will prevent her husband from taking the boat but in the process will get herself arrested. From inside the jeep, she promises Michael she will quit her job.

In the more well-known *Stella Dallas*, Barbara Stanwyck plays Stella Martin, an attractive young woman living with her working-class family in a factory town. Stella wishes to improve her social status and meets the rich Stephen Dallas, who manages the factory where Stella's brother works. Stephen, who has been forced to end his engagement, is lonely and appreciates Stella's company and lively manners. He falls in love and asks her to marry him. After their daughter Laurel is born, their marriage begins to crumble. Stephen seems to love Stella, but he cannot tolerate her uneducated manners and crude behavior. When Stephen is

offered a better job in New York, Stella decides to stay in their house with Laurel, knowing that she'll never be a part of her husband's social circle. From then on, the two will lead separate lives. In New York Stephen meets his ex-fiancée, Helen Morrison, who is now a widow with three children. As Stephen and Laurel visit Helen's elegant house and parties, the film's discourse on class becomes clear. While Laurel is extremely attached to her mother and Stella cannot think of anything but pleasing her daughter, the film's heartbreaking narrative unfolds, making their relationship impossible. Stella is a loving mother, but she is also cheap and vulgar, most obviously in her choice of clothes and accessories. On the other hand, like her father and his new fiancée, Laurel is polite and understated in her behavior and mannerisms. The film's ideological project focuses precisely on taste. Stella's bad taste is the visible sign of her working-class status and is evidenced in her clothes, her home, and her raucous company. In the same way, Helen's proper behavior and controlled manners are reflective of her upper-class status, which is similarly evidenced in her clothing, her home, and her polite friends. When Stella realizes that Laurel will be better off in life without her, she sacrifices her love so that her daughter can attain the social status she once wished for herself.

## A Notable Exception: Free Women and Screwball Comedies

While the demise of the New Woman was undeniable, the genre of screwball comedy represented a significant exception. If comedy's main ideological project aims at integrating the couple within the social structure through marriage, several comedies of the period presented radically progressive forms of sexual interaction and female desire. Moreover, in contrast to the sentimental tone of *It Happened One Night*, a rather traditional work in terms of gender relations, despite its promising beginning, films such as *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935), *The Awful Truth* (1937), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *The Women* (1939), *My Favorite Wife* (1940), *His Girl Friday* (1940), and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) expressed a deep understanding of the social nature of heterosexual love and of the unbridgeable gap between the sexual drive and the legal bond of marriage. In comedies of the late 1930s, two adults would generally decide to get married, not in order to form a family, but to satisfy their sexual impulses: Marriage was recognized as the institution that both contained *and* allowed the free expression of sexuality. The genre contributed to the symbolic production that gave voice to a new paradigm of sexual life and behavior that emerged at the beginning of the century. While it may have begun as a medical discourse produced by professionals, the debate around sexuality became part of the broader shift focused on the subject's experience in modernity and became a topic of discussion in various media, whether popular literature and press, women's magazines, or cinema. The change pointed toward acceptance of

a sexual ethic that encouraged expressiveness rather than containment. While by the mid-1910s Freud's work was popularized to a larger audience in America, at that same time the writings of Havelock Ellis had a greater impact. Ellis advocated sexual gratification and claimed a distinctive sexual mode for each gender. Overall,

> the shift from a philosophy of continence to one that encouraged indulgence was but one aspect of a larger reorientation that was investing sexuality with a profoundly new importance. The modern regime of sexology was taking sex beyond a procreative framework … and, more commonly, theorists attributed to sexuality the power of individual self-definition. (D'Emilio & Freedman 1997, 225)

While such a discourse made possible a whole set of social dynamics, from the suffragette movement to the creation of radical and bohemian forms of living, it also explained the progressive and transgressive elements of plots in the screwball comedy. In *The Awful Truth*, for example, the female protagonist Lucy Warriner (Irene Dunne) has three male partners. Her promiscuous behavior, which causes some hilarious moments, especially when the three men are in her apartment, each unaware of the other two, can only be tamed by marriage. The viewer knows that Lucy loves only her ex-husband, Jerry (Cary Grant), and that she uses her lovers to make him jealous. It is also evident that their marriage ended because of their mutual betrayal. At the beginning of the film Jerry makes the point that in marriage each partner needs to trust the other. Marriage, in other words, is not based on fidelity *per se*, but on the lack of suspicions. In *My Favorite Wife* Cary Grant, as Nick Arden, and Irene Dunne, as Ellen Arden, ultimately choose to remarry, thus breaking up their triangular relation with Steve Burkett (Randolph Scott). But one clearly senses that the two are extremely attracted to Steve. Ellen has continued to have a long relationship with him since they were shipwrecked on a desert island. When she returns home, Nick, who believes her dead, is engaged to be married to his new fiancée. He is still in love with his wife but doesn't know how to handle the situation with his current partner. As he meets Steve, he is struck by his beautiful and athletic body and feels both inadequate and attracted to him. Both films solve, in a rational way, the problem of desire and sexuality: Marriage is a necessary institution if one wants to preserve the social order. In other films, sexuality is addressed in a different way. In *Bringing Up Baby*, for instance, Susan Vance (Katharine Hepburn) rescues her partner, David Huxley (played, once again, by Cary Grant), from a married life devoid of fun and sex. A serious paleontologist totally devoted to his work, David prepares to marry his prudish and boring assistant when Susan plunges into his life and drives him away from his plans. Susan is the epitome of the screwball heroine. She is funny, crazy, entertaining, extremely energetic, and contagious. Her desire to marry him is a true blessing for David: Susan will allow him to experience the joys of married life, especially sex.

In the screwball comedy the dynamics between male and female subtends a clear equality of the sexes in line with the model of companionate marriage that emerged in urban areas in the 1920s. In this new model of gender relations, a young man wanted a woman "he could sleep with and talk with too" and he wanted "it to be the same girl" (Trimberger 1983, 136). As in the new marital ideal, which "boosted marriage as more appealing than ever to women," in comedy sex is central: "the sexual adjustment and satisfaction of both partners [are] principal measures of marital harmony" and social order (Cott 1987, 156–157).

The comedy of the second half of the 1930s presented the most advanced and progressive model of gender relations of the period, one that continued the modern thrust toward female emancipation from Victorian passivity and domesticity. The convergence between gender and class identity was strikingly biased in favor of aristocratic and upper-class women. While in 1940 the genre produced some of its best examples, that same year a film like *Kitty Foyle* depicted, in a poignant fashion, the demise of the model of the New Woman for working girls. In that film, subtitled "The Natural History of a Woman," Kitty (Ginger Rogers) must choose between two men, and her choice is articulated along the lines of class difference (Doane 1987, 105). She will eventually choose a poor but idealistic doctor and refuse her aristocratic suitor. But the film begins with a nondiegetic prologue, the function of which is precisely to comment on the trajectory of women in the early decades of the century. The title announces that we are going to see the story of the white-collar girl, a novelty in American society. In the first scene, set in 1900, men in a crowded cable car rise to give their seat to a woman; we then see a courtship scene on a porch and the same man who offered his seat asks the same young woman to marry him. In the following sequence a group of suffragettes protest and ask for equal rights. Then we are presented with its direct consequence: In a crowded cable car, nobody rises to offer his seat to the woman. The last title of the prologue states that men have gotten so accustomed to seeing women during the workday that, in 1940, white-collar women suffer from a new malady: "that five-thirty feeling" of not having a date for the evening, or a man waiting at home. At this point the prologue unfolds into the diegesis: This is the problem afflicting the young women working with Kitty in a luxurious boutique in New York. As the story develops, the relation between the prologue and the diegesis becomes clear: Kitty's problematic choice is the consequence of women's emancipation and working "careers."

The trajectory of the modern woman has thus ended miserably. If in the early 1930s class difference could be overcome and women's upward mobility (and sexual freedom) was one of Hollywood's favorite topics, in the following years working-class women were denied social rise while spoiled aristocrats enjoyed romantic and sexual freedom. As Sam Wood's film sadly shows, at the end of the decade a girl of humble origins could not but marry a poor (and boring) doctor. But the viewer cannot forget that Kitty's only moments of happiness are those spent with Win, the charming Philadelphia aristocrat she could not have.

## Notes

1 The cult of True Womanhood was the prevailing view on women's status and lifestyle in the Victorian era. According to this notion, upper- and middle-class white women had to embody perfect virtue, which they manifested, in particular, within the domestic sphere as nurturing mothers and obedient wives.

2 It is worth recalling one of F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous comments, that the ideal flapper was "lovely and expensive and about nineteen." On Fitzgerald and the flapper, see Higashi 1978 and Zeitz 2006.

3 Along with other scenes and dialogue these sentences would be cut in the theatrical release. For a comparison of the original version and the censored released version, see the DVD *Forbidden Hollywood* (vol. 2) released by TMC Archive.

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