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Depictions of Femininity and Female Sexuality Across Levels of Culture in Contemporary Hollywood

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Depictions of Femininity and Female Sexuality across Levels of Culture
in Contemporary Hollywood

Chinyere E. Aja

Senior Thesis
Professor Valocchi
Spring 2015

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INTRODUCTION

We exist in a media-rich world. People are constantly inundated with images in the media from a variety of sources. The images that are presented in the media, specifically through film are arguably some of the most wide-reaching and pervasive throughout our society. These images, and the media as a whole, work to both reflect existing cultural beliefs and shape new cultural ideologies. In doing this, they demonstrate what is valued throughout culture, and reflect the anxieties of the population. The following analysis of the images portrayed throughout popular film will demonstrate our cultural beliefs and values as perceived and represented by some of the most influential players in the entertainment industry. More specifically, I analyze how femininity and female sexuality are constructed within the films that are widely accepted as 'good' within our culture. Importantly, however, what is seen as 'good' is not objective or uniform throughout society. For this reason, my analysis will work to understand portrayals of femininity within 'good' film across two varying levels of culture. In doing this, I will demonstrate the differences -- if there are any -- between how varying cultures within the larger society understand femininity, as well as gain a more thorough understanding of the thinking of the broader culture as a whole.

I was interested in studying this topic for several different reasons. As an English Literature and Sociology double-major, I have always been particularly intrigued by the way that various cultural artifacts reflect the societies in which they are produced. I have always enjoyed analyzing how various social attributes are represented within the products of a culture. In the past, most of the cultural products that I worked with were novels and other forms of literature. I chose to focus on femininity and female sexuality largely because of the widespread belief, which I considered somewhat erroneous, that the space that women occupy, particularly as it

relates to their gender presentation and ability to express sexual desire has drastically changed as the collective result of the various feminist movements of the past. While it is clear that there have been advances, I did not fully believe that the social position of women has completely been upended. One way to assess the modern conceptions of this particular issue is to complete an analysis of a cultural product that has been produced in this social moment. I chose film, specifically, because of a personal interest in the entertainment industry, and because film is, by nature, something that is intended to reach mass audiences. Thus, for films to be truly successful, they must in some way appeal to a large populace. Within the films that I focus on, this happens in two ways. The films that most successfully appeal to these widespread audiences will likely be the ones that are most reflective of dominant cultural ideologies and conceptions. These films are the ones that will likely demonstrate most accurately the cultural perceptions of femininity and female sexuality. The second way in which these films may achieve success is through demonstrating some sort of artistic value -- they may challenge convention in their techniques or portrayals. In this way, the films that are successful may present images that push against dominant cultural ideologies.

THEORY

In the West, and particularly in the United States, gender is conceived of as an absolute binary. In reality, however, gender is actually a socially constructed institution. While there are, indisputably, anatomical differences between individuals that set apart some from others, the idea of finite 'gender' categories is produced and reproduced through our daily interactions. According to Judith Lorber, "gender is such a familiar part of daily life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay

attention to how it is produced."¹ As Lorber notes, it is easiest to become aware of this finite gender dichotomy in the presence of an individual who may not conform to the cultural expectations of either category -- the inability to distinguish an individual's gender is often a troubling experience for people who have been socialized into traditional understandings of gender. Instead of being something that is inherent to the individual, gender is something that individuals actively engage with and produce on a regular basis.

As a *process*, gender creates the social differences that define 'woman' and 'man.' In social interaction throughout their lives, individuals learn what is expected, see what is expected, act and react in expected ways, and thus simultaneously construct and maintain the gender order: "The very injunction to be given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands at once."²

In this way, gender as a socially constructed process creates the sex binary of male and female, and encourages us to see some anatomical differences as more important than others.

Gender, however, is not used to merely denote objective differences between individuals. Instead, gender is used as a method to justify social stratification. "Gender inequality -- the devaluation of "women" and the social domination of "men" -- has social functions and social history... It is produced and maintained by identifiable social processes and built into the general social structure and individual identities deliberately and purposefully."³ Essentially, gender differences are used to justify the unequal positions that men and women continue to hold within society. By suggesting that those of a particular gender are more apt to behave in particular ways or favor certain things, traditional gender roles confine the behaviors of individuals. "The experience of [women as] oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped

¹ Judith Lorber and Susan A. Farrell, *The Social Construction of Gender*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1991, 100.

² *Ibid.*, 102.

³ *Ibid.*, 104.

by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction."⁴ The boundaries of appropriate masculinity and femininity are rather finite, requiring that individuals stay within these harshly delineated categories.

The purpose of a study of gendered images in popular film, then, is to understand how traditional conceptions of femininity are either reinforced or challenged in contemporary culture. As the media undoubtedly plays a large part in solidifying cultural conceptions, an analysis of the specific images portrayed in one pervasive form of popular media will attempt to demonstrate our societal ideals as represented through these films. By analyzing two distinct sets of films -- both produced within the same society but with different motivations and different intended audiences -- I will attempt to understand, on a holistic level, the contemporary societal ideas about femininity and sexuality. Because of the differing intentions behind the production of these two sets of films, it is likely that the images that are presented across the two sets may differ. Whereas the films that are intended as art may attempt to reflect the ideal desires of the culture in an attempt to actively engage, challenge or conflict with the most popular images and beliefs among the society, the films that are intended, first and foremost, to turn an economic profit may instead play into or reflect traditional, popular conceptions of femininity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

I. CULTURE & FILM AS A CULTURAL PRODUCT

In any given society, there are multiple cultures that exist within the larger, all-encompassing culture. These various cultures may attempt to account for the varying aesthetic

⁴ Anne Minas, "Oppression - Marilyn Frye," *Gender Basics: Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993, 12.

sensibilities that may exist all within one society. Often times, these sensibilities are the result of differences in socioeconomic class background (socioeconomic status as the aggregate of one's income, occupation and education level), and the culture which one subscribes to is generally highly determinable based on this class. One important way in which these different cultures, specifically within the greater American society, can be conceptualized is to break down them down into high culture and low (or popular) culture. Whereas high culture is conceived of as the products that are not commercial and are unique, not made for the purpose of turning a profit, popular culture is, in most ways, the exact opposite of this. Generally, the main goal of popular culture products is to generate revenue --these products are often imposed on the greater public by businessmen who seek to make money, and not to create a unique or artful product.⁵

Most often, high culture is seen as the culture of the 'serious' or more legitimate artists. Importantly, high culture distinguishes itself from other taste cultures "in that it is dominated by creators -- and critics -- and that many of its users accept the standards and perspectives of creators."⁶ Because of this, those who subscribe to this particular taste culture generally fall into two distinct categories -- they are either creators themselves, or individuals who seek to distinguish themselves as somewhat high-minded. For this reason, this taste culture is generally comprised of individuals who are "highly educated people of upper and upper-middle class status, employed in academic and professional occupations."⁷ Education, however, tends to be the most important defining factor, because the appreciation of these high culture products is often contingent on the ability to distinguish their quality from things that are mass produced. Importantly, this taste culture differs from others in that it is made up of both classical and

⁵ Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, New York: Basic, 1999.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

contemporary works. Subscribing to this culture demands that one can appreciate not only works that are being produced in the current moment, but also the historical, canonical works that have been accepted as high culture in the past and that serve as the contextual springboard for contemporary works -- to be able to detect when a contemporary work is in conversation with its predecessors. Because of this, "the culture's standards for substance are [not] variable; they almost always place high value on the careful communication of mood and feeling, on introspection rather than action, and on subtlety, so that much of the culture's content can be perceived and understood on several levels."⁸ The ability to derive multiple levels of meaning from a singular work is an important characteristic of high culture products.

Low culture (or popular culture) differs from high culture in many key ways. Importantly, those who engage in this particular taste culture are either not particularly concerned with culture, or may even wholly reject the idea of culture as "dull" or "snobbish."⁹ Whereas high culture is seen as the culture of critics, those who consume low or popular culture tend to prefer the informal opinions of their personal contacts to the esteemed reviews of professionals. Those of this taste culture who do choose to actively engage in culture do so to the extent that it is directly intended for their particular culture (for example, one may attend an exhibit at a museum about artists who were once popular particularly with the middle/lower-middle class). The culture that they seek is not particularly high-minded, but rather specifically intended to be accessible for the general populace. Popular culture also tends to place importance much more on substance, disregarding form: "the aesthetics of lower-middle culture emphasize substance; form must serve to make substance more intelligible or gratifying."¹⁰ For this particular reason, high culture is

⁸ Ibid., 88.

⁹ Ibid., 95.

¹⁰ Ibid., 95.

rarely adapted or appropriated within popular culture. Consumers of low culture tend to be much less interested in the inner workings of society, and instead prefer that the traditional moral and cultural values of middle/lower-middle class life are represented and reinforced. As a result of this, popular culture often presents images of a sort of morality play -- the characters that sin or stray from the accepted norms and values are presented as evil and punished to bleak ends. This also results in a continued representation of traditional sexual segregation and gender roles.

"Working-class society practices sexual segregation in social life: male and female roles are sharply differentiated, even within the family, although both differentiation and segregation are now declining. These patterns are reflected in low culture, so that there are male and female types of content, rarely shared by both sexes. Sexual segregation and working-class values are well expressed in the Hollywood action film and television program -- and of course in sports programming -- as well as in the adventure magazines written for the male public and the fan and confession magazines written for the female public."¹¹ Interestingly, however, the issue of sex is one that has proven to be divisive for consumers of this particular taste culture. Whereas middle class 'traditionalists' have been shown to prefer the absence of sex from public images, 'progressives' disagree, and encourage the presentation and discussion of issues of sex in both very public and very candid ways.

Interestingly, popular culture does seek to address issues and social problems that are important and topical within society. What it does not do, however, is present these ideas in a "manner that would disturb or upset its public."¹² While this not particularly surprising, what is interesting is that high culture tends to stray from this as well. Whereas high culture is generally thought to be more provocative, that it deviates from upsetting its audience suggests that these

¹¹ Ibid., 99.

¹² Ibid., 96.

cultural products must simultaneously challenge and stimulate thought amongst, but not offend their audiences. Thus, while popular culture products often simply reproduce the images and ideals that are already pervasive in society, high culture seeks to present new images and address new, possibly controversial issues in a way that is not repellent. Yet another thing that the two cultures share is their rate of development -- although for high culture, this development means experimentation with new techniques in a way that is absent in popular culture -- both cultures are rapidly changing with the intent to continue to satisfy their audiences.

A sociological analysis of film provides useful information about the culture in which it was created. Though film is, indisputably, a collective art --requiring the collaboration of large groups of people to produce a final product-- the hierarchy within Hollywood positions the director as the individual most responsible for the film. This is of particular importance when considering the films that I have designated as 'high' culture. For this set, the final film is often conceived of as a work of fine art that is the product of the director's artistic vision. While, during the development of the current Hollywood system, placing the director as the main individual responsible served as a method of quality control -- ensuring that filmic "catastrophes" were a rarity -- today, this system propels those individuals seeking to create artistic works all the more.¹³ Furthermore, in contemporary society, this is one of the largest distinctions between films that are intended as fine art as opposed to films that are created for the masses. While the success of popular culture films often hinges on the stardom of the principle actors in the film, high culture films -- in many ways -- reject the stardom of their actors. This is not to say that high culture films do not employ actors that are known as Hollywood stars. Instead, the actors (regardless of their actual level of stardom) are seen as tools employed by the director to achieve

¹³ I. C. Jarvie, *Movies and Society*, New York: Basic, 1970.

their end goal -- a successful high culture film does not simply occur because it has a star, but more because of the director's successful vision.¹⁴ Popular culture products, conversely, focus much more on the performers than they do the creators or producers. Stardom, in this taste culture, is paramount. In fact, "this public does not distinguish between performers and the characters they play; it likes its stars to play 'themselves,' that is, their public images."¹⁵ In this way, interestingly, not only does the director become somewhat irrelevant to the final product, but so does the actor as an individual. Within the popular taste culture, the actor becomes not a skilled performer, but instead merely an image that is often perpetuated -- often pigeonholing actors into very specific, repetitive roles.

These differences between high and low culture products undoubtedly have implications for the way that femininity and female sexuality is likely to be portrayed within them. The fact that popular culture products tend to represent traditional moral and cultural values, including sexual segregation, suggests that traditional femininity is likely to be reinforced within these artifacts. The idea, also, that sex is a divisive issue among consumers of popular culture also suggests that female sexuality may be represented in very conventional ways as to not alienate audiences. Conversely, the idea that high culture products are generally consumed by more highly educated individuals may suggest that they are catering to a more socially liberal group. Because of this, these products may more actively work to combat traditional conceptions of femininity and female sexuality, and portray women in lights that are more progressive.

II. FEMININITY & FEMALE SEXUALITY

¹⁴ Gans, 88.

¹⁵ Ibid., 100.

The image of femininity that persists in Hollywood is often the hyper-attractive, hyper sexualized and passive female whose motivations revolve for the most part around her romantic interests. An analysis of films released over the course of the years 1990 through 2006 demonstrates that in films rated for children (G- rated) through various levels of adulthood (PG-, PG-13, R- rated), there is little change in the portrayals of females in film.¹⁶ This suggests that, even despite the changing consciousness about images in the media and their effects, there is not much of a change in the images that are actually portrayed in the culture. In these films, the vast majority of speaking characters are male. Within the speaking female characters that are portrayed, there are two prominent representations of the female -- the "traditional" and the "hypersexual".

What this analysis of film challenges is the cultural notion that with the changes of societal conceptions of what encompasses acceptable femininity, the representations of femininity in the media also change. This research suggests that, though the sheer numbers of women in films may be growing, the portrayals of these women as either traditional or hypersexual may undercut this fact in regards to the cultural effect of viewing women in the media. Females, for example, are much more likely to be portrayed as parents or in a committed relationship than males. Females are also five times more likely than males to be shown in clothing that is sexually revealing or as having extremely small waists and unrealistic body shapes. Along with this, the films that are directed most pointedly towards young children (the G- rated films) are most likely to portray females who are, above most other things, valued for their physical appearance. These characters also often adhere to a very definitive set of physical characteristics. This is believed to reinforce the idea of an unattainable standards of female

¹⁶ Stacy L. Smith, "Gender Stereotypes: An Analysis of Popular Films and TV," *Seejane.org*. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2008. Web.

beauty -- an ideal of the female that is both sexy and perfect, and who seeks a hetero-romantic relationship as her ultimate goal. As the study demonstrates, the idea that there are finite definitions of female physical beauty, and these conceptions of female worth are intimately related to a woman's physical appearance reinforces very traditional ideals of womanhood. The constant portrayal of women as seeking romantic heterosexual love as their ultimate end goal also reinforces the idea that women are defined first and foremost by their heterosexual relationships.

Problematically, films that are most directly geared towards children (G- rated films) have often been shown to reinforce the concept of heteronormativity.¹⁷ Heteronormativity is, essentially, the conception that the roles of males and females are natural and strictly prescribed, and that the core component of these roles is heterosexuality. While it is generally assumed that the power of heteronormativity lies in the fact that it is "assumed, mundane, ordinary and expected", an analysis of children's films demonstrates that, while this is the case in many ways, heteronormativity in these films is often made stronger by the portrayal of the heterosexual relationship as exceptional to the point of being almost magical. In many of these films, the hetero-romantic relationships are set up in contrast to other loving relationships that the female protagonist may be in -- with a parent or a friend, for example. Whereas these other relationships may often be portrayed as comical -- a jester figure as a best friend -- or restrictive in the case of the parent, these relationships are set up to serve as a contrast to the romantic relationship. While the other relationships are undoubtedly significant, the hetero-romantic one is more than this, it is magical and transformative. It is profoundly moving and life changing for the protagonist. In this,

¹⁷ K. A. Martin and E. Kazayak, "Hetero-Romantic Love and Heterosexiness in Children's G-Rated Films," *Gender & Society* 23.3:2009.

heteronormativity is reinforced not only through the assumed heterosexuality of the characters, but also in perpetuating the idea that hetero-romantic love is life-changing or transformative.

Relatedly, while many would assume that the films directed specifically towards children would be relatively free of sexualized images or sexual content, this is profoundly untrue. Rather than being free of sexualized images, children's movies instead often portray a highly-sexualized heterosexuality. In many ways, children's films may be integral in the construction of the conception of the woman as the object of the male gaze. In these films, the idea of the woman as receiving the male gaze is perpetuated through the utter normalcy of these occurrences. Women are often, for example, 'caught' naked by men, establishing a nonromantic, heteronormative sexiness in the relations between men and women.

These heteronormative conceptions undoubtedly persist even in films that are animated. In animated films, while male bodies are often portrayed as somewhat comic, female bodies are generally highly sexualized. Even in these animated films, the women are still portrayed as the receivers of the male gaze. These female bodies are often portrayed in ways that reinforce the unattainable cultural standards of beauty -- they show scantily clad women with impossibly thin waists who are hypersexual. These drawings of women also tend to differ according to the intended race of the characters. Female animated characters of color, importantly, are much more likely to be portrayed as fully matured, sexual women as opposed to white female characters who are often portrayed as delicate, young girls.

These animated and live children's films indisputably play a huge role in the construction of heteronormativity and heterosexiness within the culture. Importantly, these films continue to portray females as objects who receive the male gaze -- things to be looked at and admired for

their physical appearance above any other characteristics. In many ways, these films communicate a traditional definition of acceptable femininity and female sexuality, surprisingly unchanged from a "pre-feminist" era. They perpetuate a desire within the female to be the object of the male gaze, and to seek hetero-romantic love as their main driving force. These films also highlight that female sexuality is still very much a racialized topic -- that what is considered typical or acceptable for white female sexuality as opposed to the sexuality of females of color is not one in the same.

Interestingly enough, even displays of female-female sexuality in the media tend to reinforce the tradition of heteronormativity, rather than combatting it. Often, these displays of female homosexuality are not presentations of women who identify as homosexual, but instead of women who are "heteroflexible".¹⁸ This, in essence, is a homosexual display by a female that is intended for one of two purposes -- to reinforce her heterosexuality or to capture male attention. In the case of the former, the homosexual encounter between women is typically presented in such a way that, while it does not necessarily suggest that there is anything wrong with those who are homosexual, it is not the correct choice for the protagonist. In many ways, this reinforces the traditional conceptions of sexuality, instead of presenting a more accurate portrayal of the malleable nature of sexuality. In the case of the other female-female encounters that occur in the media, women are often demonstrated as attempting to capture the attention of a man by engaging in these interactions. This, clearly, strongly reinforces the idea that female sexuality is not for the female, but rather for the male gaze. Importantly, however, these female-female interactions always occur in a way that does not suggest that the female is actually homosexual. These heteroflexible interactions, instead, simply serve as a way for the female to

¹⁸ L. M. Diamond, "'I'm Straight, but I Kissed a Girl': The Trouble with American Media Representations of Female-Female Sexuality," *Feminism & Psychology* 15.1:2005.

achieve her desired end of attracting the male without actually being a threat to her heterosexuality.

Naturally, the portrayal of female homosexual encounters in this way undoubtedly reinforces the concept of heteronormativity. Ironically, these events which would, at first glance, seem to challenge this idea of heteronormativity actually go on to reinforce the idea that there is a sexuality dichotomy. More than this, these portrayals of women in homosexual encounters also reinforce the idea that women do not have their own sexual agency. In these cases, the woman is not acting out of her own genuine sexual desire or interest, but instead because of forces that are external to her as an individual. These portrayals bolster the idea that female sexuality is largely for the male gaze, or for some other external factor, and not for the female herself.

Even when women are placed in classically male roles, the traditional conceptions of what constitutes acceptable femininity and female sexuality still persist. Despite the depiction of women performing successfully in spheres that were typically considered male, it is important to note that these successful performances still happen in a markedly traditionally feminine way. In the genre of cop action cinema, for example, there is a clear increase in representations of women as police officers and detectives.¹⁹ These women, however, are often given the subordinate or non-threatening position of being a rookie -- women were about four times more likely to be portrayed as rookies than men were. Often, these rookies were then sent undercover in an attempt to solve whatever crime was at hand, and then used their sexuality as their method to bring down the criminal. While portraying the female characters as rookies may be an attempt to mimic the realities of various police forces across the United States, it may also be an attempt to reinforce the existing symbolic order. The rookie status of the female may serve as a method

¹⁹ Neal King, "Generic Womanhood: Gendered Depictions in Cop Action Cinema," *Gender & Society* 22.2:2008.

to preserve the traditionally masculine conception of heroism and the hero figure. This may also serve to provide the female definition of heroism as something that is thoroughly separate from its male counterpart.

Along with the employment of traditional images of female sexuality even in professional settings, females who assume the cop position, importantly also tend to remain 'untainted' by the criminals who they are attempting to bring down. Whereas males in the same position may be shown to enter into a physical altercation or exert some sort of force or aggression to achieve their success, women are rarely portrayed as doing this. Instead, masculine aggression or toughness is juxtaposed with female intuition -- women are, for the most part, left out of the scenes of serious combat and instead solve their crimes in a non-violent manner. This analysis demonstrates that, even in traditionally male settings, females are cast in such a way that their sexuality is often heralded as their value. In this specific genre, it is the female's sexuality that allows her to seduce the criminal to the end of justice. Though in a non-traditional way, this presentation of females reinforces the conception of female sexuality as dangerous. While, in this particular case, the females are heralded for employing their dangerous sexuality instead of reprimanded for doing so, the idea that the sexuality of women is threatening is undoubtedly reinforced in this genre. The sexuality of the female brings down the male in the most literal way. Along with this, the genre demonstrates that conceptions of traditional femininity are maintained in even non-traditional settings. Though these women are placed in a role that allows them to demonstrate their agency through their abilities to solve crimes, the crimes that they solve are never solved with brute force, or in traditionally masculine ways. Instead, they employ their sexuality and their women's intuition to achieve their desired end. Importantly, whereas the male criminal is taken down by the female's sexuality, the female's femininity is never marred or

destroyed in these interactions. This portrayal of the female officer ensures that the female remains unscathed by her victim, and is left in the end still being able to claim acceptable femininity.

As is suggested by the portrayals of the female police officer in the genre of cop action cinema, there is a tradition of depicting or conceiving of female sexuality as dangerous or threatening. This is particularly highlighted in the genre of *film noir* -- a stylized Hollywood crime drama genre. The noir genre is, in large part, responsible for the infamous archetype of the *femme fatale*. The *femme fatale* is the a figure who wholly represents the idea of the danger of female sexuality. The conventions of the *film noir* genre inherently suggest that there is deadliness to female sexuality -- the *femme fatale* is the character who repeatedly leads men into treacherous situations, yet they continue to fall victim to her because of her beauty and charm. The renowned *noir* film *The Big Sleep* is undoubtedly one that has played an immense role in the construction of the *noir* genre as a whole and, more importantly, the *femme fatale*. While the age of *noir* film is, for all intents and purposes, over, the character of the *femme fatale* is undoubtedly one who has entered the popular culture, and one who continues to appear in films today in a variety of modern iterations. In *The Big Sleep*, the *femme fatale* character -- Carmen -- is an individual who is representative of all of the menacing aspects of female sexuality. Like the prototypical *femme fatale*, she represents the disruption of the patriarchal order and the corresponding masculine fear of castration. For her dangerous sexuality, Carmen is punished, by the end of the film, by simply being removed (in the uncensored version of the film, her character is actually killed).

This particular film also works to reinforce heteronormativity. As it is structured, the film has two distinct parts. While the first part of the film presents various cases of disturbed

sexuality -- including the *femme fatale* (or female sexuality in general), homosexuality and heterosexual promiscuity -- the second section of the film attempts to amend all of these intimidating sexualities. The film works to balance out these various issues through the formation of the traditional heterosexual couple in the latter half of the film. It is in this second part of the film -- the part in which heteronormativity is reinforced -- that Carmen, the sexually dangerous and threatening *femme fatale* is removed. The female character who is placed in this heterosexual relationship is not the *femme fatale* -- instead, she is the traditional portrait of acceptable femininity. This, very clearly, demonstrates the pervasiveness of heteronormativity. Though intended for a drastically different audience than, for example, the G- rated children's films previously discussed, the heterosexual relationship is nonetheless presented as restorative and as the main resolution of the film and the goal of the female protagonist. The heterosexual relationship is also, in this case, used to resolve the various issues of queer sexuality that are introduced within the beginning portion of the film. Along with this, the *femme fatale* is drastically punished for her sexual presentation. By removing the character of Carmen from the film completely, the film makes clear that her sexuality is wholly unacceptable -- she is made into an example of the perils of female sexuality.

As the existing literature demonstrates, conceptions of femininity and female sexuality in film tend to reinforce traditional conceptions of appropriate gender. Women are either hyper-sexualized or placed within the same traditional roles that are generally expected of women. Even when women are placed in roles that are not traditional, they are still portrayed in ways that reinforce conventional femininity. The heterosexual relationship is continually placed as the most important thing in the female's life, and women are rarely portrayed as having sexual

identities outside of heterosexuality. In a variety of ways, female sexuality is portrayed as dangerous or threatening.

METHODS

In order to complete this analysis of high and popular culture, I focused on two sets of films. The first set of films are the five films that won the Academy Award for Best Picture from 2010 through 2014. In chronological order, these films are *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2009), *The King's Speech* (Emile Sherman, 2010), *The Artist* (Thomas Langmann, 2011), *Argo* (Grant Heslov, 2012) and *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013)²⁰. The second set of films comprise of the films that were the highest grossing over the same years. These films are *Toy Story 3* (Lee Unkrich, 2010), *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part Two* (David Yates, 2011), *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (Francis Lawrence, 2013), and *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014).²¹²²

The rationale behind analyzing these two sets of films is to attempt to gain an understanding of the portrayals of femininity and female sexuality across different levels of culture. Because of the differing motivations behind the production of the films in each of these sets, it stands to reason that their portrayals of femininity may also differ. While my particular analysis focuses solely on the films that received the Academy Award and the films that grossed the highest overall, it is important to note that, over this set of years (from 2010 - 2014), there is very little overlap between the films that were nominated for *Best Picture* and the top grossing films. This provides reason to believe that the images in these two sets of films are starkly different, and that their portrayals of women and female sexuality may be starkly different as

²⁰ See page 65 for summary of films

²¹ "Movie Index," *The Numbers*, N.p., n.d. <<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/tab/year>>.

²² See page 66 for summary of films

well. This analysis of two sets of films -- the Academy Award winning films as the high culture set and the Highest Grossing films as representative of low or popular culture -- provides insight into the films that have been heralded as good within the culture. Though in two very different ways, both of these sets of films have been deemed valuable in some significant way by producers of culture. Whereas the *Best Picture* films are ones considered fine art by The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the Highest Grossing films are the ones that made the most money, that, arguably, were the most successful and the most pervasive within society.

Currently, there are approximately 6,000 members of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. In order to become a member of the Academy, one must either be sponsored by two current members of the branch which the individual seeks to be a part of or be nominated for an Award. Once a year, the Academy's Board of Governors reviews all the sponsored individuals and decides who will gain admission into the Academy.²³ The Oscars (colloquially known as The Academy Awards) occur early in the calendar year, acknowledging the films that were released in the previous year. The nominations are announced in January (after all of the films for the given year are released) and voting extends through the month until the beginning of February, when the Award show occurs and the winners are announced. While in the case of the majority of awards presented, only those who work in the same field are eligible to nominate films for the award (e.g. only cinematographers can nominate films for *Best Cinematography*), *Best Picture* is one of two awards presented which allows the entire Academy to choose nominees. Each voting member of the Academy is allowed to rank their top five selections for the award. From this initial round of voting, the final nominees that are selected (no fewer than

²³"Academy Membership." *Oscars.org*. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 18 July 2014. Web. 06 May 2015. <<http://www.oscars.org/about/join-academy>>.

five but no more than ten) are the films that receive the highest number of ranked nominations, but no fewer than five percent of the overall votes that have been cast. At the awards ceremony, the physical Oscar Awards are presented to the producers of the film (no more than three).²⁴ The producer of a film is generally the person responsible for obtaining financing for the film, as well as overseeing the production schedule, distribution and marketing of the work. Thus, the *Best Picture* Award is presented to the individual (or individuals) responsible for the film not in a creative sense, but rather in an economic sense. This, however, is likely because Best Director is a separate category within the awards in and of itself.

This logic of selecting films for the *Best Picture* award demonstrates the idea that the films that receive both the nomination and the actual award are films that are of high quality and deserve to be recognized as such. In order to even gain voting power in The Academy, each individual must be reviewed by several people and deemed of high enough quality or stature themselves before they are granted membership. Theoretically, this ensures that those who are voting for all Oscar nominees are themselves knowledgeable enough about the world of film and have the capacity to judge what is quality, and what deserves the honor of winning an Academy Award. This rigorous process is undoubtedly an attempt to ensure that the films that will receive the awards across all categories are actually up to the standards of what an Academy Award winning picture should be. It may, however, simultaneously ensure cultural homogeneity to the definition of quality instituted by the Academy.

While the process of becoming the highest grossing film of a year may seem much less calculated and simpler than being nominated for and winning the *Best Picture* Award, this is

²⁴ "Voting," *Oscars.org*, The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 17 July 2014. <<http://www.oscars.org/oscars/voting>>.

both true and false in different ways. While the highest grossing films are merely the films that made the most money at the domestic Box Office while in theaters, it is important to note that these films are, more often than not, films that have been produced and financed by one of the major Hollywood film studios. Whereas in the past, most if not all of the films that were released in traditional theaters were films that were produced by a major studio, in the recent past (within the last decade) this has begun to drastically change. Now, some studios release half of the films that they used to in a year and many other films released are supported by an independent financial backer. As businesses and corporations, contemporary film studios have begun to tend towards primarily producing films that have built-in, specifically delineated audiences -- such as children's and family pictures or sequels to already successful films -- that are a more guaranteed economic success. Thus, whereas the process of becoming the *Best Picture* of the year is completely dependent on a film's artistic value, the highest grossing films are economic endeavors from their conception.²⁵

In order to discern whether there is a difference in the portrayals across the two sets of films, there are several important questions that must be asked of each of the films individually. First and foremost, are there women present in the films -- if so, what kinds of women are they (what is their race and class status)? Are these women gender normative or gender non-normative and are they chastised for their gender performance? Following these first questions, each film was analyzed to see if the female characters are given agency of any kind -- are they demonstrated as active or passive? In either case, how do the films present their agency or lack thereof -- as a positive or negative thing? These initial questions create the foundation for constructing the representations of femininity in each film.

²⁵Kim Masters, "Why Studios Don't Pay to Make Movies Anymore (Analysis)," *The Hollywood Reporter*. 21 Dec. 2012.

After constructing this foundation, the focus shifts more specifically to how female sexuality is constructed. Are the female characters portrayed as sexual objects or receivers of the male gaze? Are they given any sort of sexual agency or efficacy? If so, is this agency applauded or treated with disdain? Is female sexuality constructed as normal or dangerous? If the female character is not given sexual agency, is there another character in the film who is given more control of their sexuality or who attempts to take this agency from them, and how is this treated? Do the films define the women through their sexual or romantic relationships or foreground the heterosexual relationship or the formation of the heterosexual couple? All of these questions are also considered in comparing the differences in portrayals of women of different ages, races, sexualities and social classes.

Each of these films was viewed within the context of these questions in an attempt to gain understanding of the portrayals of women in the individual films. I took detailed notes during the screening of each film that related to the specific issues addressed in the questions. From the notes in these viewings, I developed a set of codes as an attempt to concisely summarize the recurring themes across these films. Each code was assigned a numerical value. After the notes from both sets of films were coded, they were analyzed cursorily for frequency -- at a surface level, are there any glaring differences between the frequencies of any codes. After this cursory analysis, the codes were compared on a more in-depth level in an attempt to draw conclusions about the films as a complete set, as well as the similarities and differences between the two sets of films.

FINDINGS

I. Overarching Themes Across the Sample

Across the entire sample of all ten films, there were distinct trends. After viewing each of the films, a set of codes was developed to help capture the various themes and ideas present. When the films were analyzed as a complete set, the most common recurring themes were undoubtedly 'traditional representations of femininity', 'the heterosexual relationship as more important than anything else' and 'female agency'. Interestingly, it appears that, while all of the films attempt to portray images that combat traditional conceptions of appropriate femininity, there are also many ways in which they reinforce these same conceptions.

Traditional conceptions of femininity were present in most all of the films viewed. This was presented in ways that were both extremely obvious and very subtle. Very often, female characters were constructed such that there was a balance between their normative femininity and their other characteristics. For example, across all of the films, there was only a single character whose physical appearance did not completely conform to typical female appearances. The character Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o) in *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013) is the only speaking female character whose physical appearance slightly differs in that she has a shaved head. Aside from this, however, her femininity is rather conventional. Interestingly, all of the other female characters in this particular film -- whether they are white or black, slaves, freewomen or housemistresses -- are clearly traditionally female in some way. There are, however, different interpretations of this conventionality -- it is not necessarily always attractive or sexy. In the presentations of the slaves, for example, there are several 'mammy' characters -- the archetype of the black woman who often serves as a surrogate caretaker to the master's children. Though this archetype is one that is wholly stripped of her sexuality and devalued by the dominant culture, it is also a normative femininity in terms of black women.

This conventional portrayal of female appearance holds true for even the characters who occupy roles that may not be considered traditionally feminine. In *Toy Story 3* (Lee Unkrich, 2010), for example, the character Jessie (Joan Cusack) is a cowgirl, and while her costuming and appearance is rather similar to cowboy Woody's (Tim Allen), she is a distinctly feminized version -- her waist is higher and accentuated by her belt, her pants flare and are embellished, and her hair (though tied up in a braid and covered with a cowboy hat) is visible and reaches down to her back. In this particular film, even the characters that are inanimate objects are very clearly gendered. This is exemplified most through the character of Mrs. Potato Head (Estelle Harris). Though her body is, as her name suggests, a potato, everything else about her works to demonstrate that she is a woman. Her lips are a bright red as though she is wearing lipstick, her eyelids are purple to emphasize the fact that she is wearing makeup, and she wears a hat with a large flower on it and carries a small purple purse. Thus, though she is an inanimate object, she is still portrayed in such a way that leaves no questions about her gender. The physical appearances of all of these female characters is one crucial way that traditional femininity appears and is upheld throughout all of these films.

In somewhat more subtle ways, the actions of these characters is yet another way in which traditional femininity is reinforced. Many of these female characters are often portrayed as emotional, particularly when juxtaposed with their male counterparts. While this emotionality is not necessarily shown in such a way that hinders the character or detracts from their ability to act, it is something that is undoubtedly present and impossible to ignore. The film *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011), for example, shows Doris Valentin (Penelope Ann Miller) as thoroughly disenchanted with her husband and her marriage. While she does tell him that she is unhappy and eventually leave him, his response to her declaration is that everyone is unhappy. While she

demonstrates that she believes that her emotions are an issue that needs to be addressed, his retort implies that they are not unique, that he is feeling the same way but has merely chosen to swallow these feelings. This particular scene is coupled with a montage of their marriage -- while George Valentin (Jean Dujardin) merely goes about his life, Doris is shown repeatedly drawing moles, mustaches and beards on various pictures of her husband in newspapers and magazines. Even the note that she writes for him informing him that she is leaving is placed on the back of one of his headshots that she has drawn on. While here her emotionality clearly does not stop her from taking action, she is still portrayed as hyper-emotional, even to the point of being childish. She appears somewhat ridiculous as she sits across from him in the house, mocking him in a way that he is completely unaware of. Though it is clear that this facet of Doris' character is added for comedic effect, it undoubtedly hinges on gendered stereotypes.

Yet another example of this is the character of Taya Kyle (Sienna Miller) in the film *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014). Each time her husband returns home from war, she begs him to open up to her about what he has experienced during his tours in Iraq. He, however, maintains that talking about what he has experienced is completely unnecessary. Multiple times, Taya is shown breaking down, begging her husband either to not return to the war or to talk to her about what has happened. She repeatedly expresses that he has become a shell of the man that she originally married, and that he is not appropriately filling his role as a father or husband. While Taya's reaction to the changes in her husband and the deep frustration that she experiences are justified, they are also very clearly gendered. Throughout the film, her pleas are met by Chris Kyle's (Bradley Cooper) stoic responses that talking about what has gone on in the war zone would not be productive, and he continually chooses to suffer in silence. Together, both characters distinctly fill their expected gender roles. Despite the fact that Taya is portrayed as

very emotional, she is never shown as weak. Throughout the film, regardless of the circumstances in her relationship with her husband, she always successfully fulfills her roles as a mother and wife. Thus, in many of these films, while the female as 'weak' trope is decidedly absent, the female as emotional is a conception that persists.

The second theme that was most present across all of the films was the portrayal of the heterosexual relationship as more important than anything else. Within the sample, many of the films portray situations that are rather tumultuous and often life threatening. While even the films (only two of the ten) that do not portray deadly situations do still reinforce the importance of the heterosexual relationship and the formation of the heterosexual couple, this foregrounding of the heterosexual relationship becomes extremely visible under the lethal circumstances portrayed in the films. The heterosexual couple is often portrayed as salvation -- under dangerous circumstances, the couple acts as steady ground, and often a source of power for the individual. This is the case, for example, in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* (David Yates, 2011), when all of the students prepare for the Death Eaters to descend on Hogwarts. Neville Longbottom (Matthew Lewis), a character who goes on to play a large role in saving everyone at the end of the film, insists that, if he is going to die, he must first tell Luna Lovegood (Evanna Lynch) that he is in love with her. The couples in the series that are already established -- Harry (Daniel Radcliffe) and Ginny (Bonnie Wright), as well as Ron (Rupert Grint) and Hermione (Emma Watson) -- make sure to kiss their partners and profess their love for (possibly) the last time. This reinforces that the heterosexual relationship is the most important one in their lives -- none of the characters make as drastic an effort to ensure that they get the chance to say goodbye to their friends or other loved ones. Their romantic relationships are portrayed as the most important ones in their lives. This is also the case when the three main

characters first return to the castle from their excursion from the previous film. When Harry's love interest, who is also Ron's sister, enters the room and sees Harry for the first time, she is clearly captivated and ecstatic -- the two lock eyes very intimately and stare at each other. Here, Ron makes a comment about the fact that Ginny hasn't seen him in as long as she hasn't seen Harry, yet she does not even acknowledge the fact that Ron has also returned safely. Though Ron's offhand comment is intended to be humorous, it demonstrates that the heterosexual relationship is given importance over all others.

The King's Speech (Tom Hooper, 2010) is another film in which the relationship is foregrounded. Throughout the film, George's (Colin Firth) source of strength is presented as his relationship with Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter). Despite his struggles to overcome his speech impediment, his relationship is what he continually returns to as his place of comfort when he falters. In fact, as his father passes and he is tasked with assuming the crown and making more and more public appearances, Elizabeth is always with him. While in these public scenes the depth of their relationship is only reaffirmed, it is truly established in the scenes in which they are alone. Interestingly, Elizabeth is portrayed as the steady, rational one while George is more impulsive and hotheaded. What the film does, however, is to set these two characters up as complementary to one another. Though George assumes the more traditionally feminine characteristic of being emotional, Elizabeth demonstrates another stereotype of women -- she is nurturing. Though they are partners, there is something distinctly maternal about Elizabeth's treatment of George. Despite this, the heterosexual relationship seems to be, in many ways, the center of the film. It is what the film returns to at each turn, which is reinforced by the ending of the film -- the king is finally able to deliver a speech in public without a stutter, yet the final shot is of him in the arms of his wife. Through this, the film demonstrates the powerful

qualities of the heterosexual relationship -- it is a source of power and strength, even for an individual as powerful as the King of England.

Importantly, not one of the films in the sample present any examples of sexuality that are outside of heterosexuality. Each and every film, however, does depict at least one relationship. At times, it even appears that some of the films go out of their way to ensure that there is a representation of a heterosexual couple, despite the fact that it may not make sense in the narrative structure. Throughout the film *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), for example, there is not a single speaking female character until the final five minutes of the over two-hour long film. Though protagonist Sergeant James (Jeremy Renner) references his estranged relationship with his wife and child in one of the serious conversations he has with Sergeant Sanborn (Anthony Mackie), there is no real suggestion that he and his wife are going to reunite. The film ends, however, with the bomb squad leaving Iraq and returning home, and Sergeant James reuniting with his wife. This reunification seems almost out of place, yet it is how the director chooses to end a film that in virtually no other way speaks to the formation of the heterosexual couple. This ending seems particularly strange given the fact that the important relationships established throughout the majority of the film are same-sex, homo-social relationships. These relationships, however, are eclipsed with the inclusion of the heterosexual relationship as the resolution to the film. This suggests that there may be external pressures to include traditional romance in a film -- the inclusion of the formation of the heterosexual couple (the narrative resolution of many Hollywood films) may make an otherwise emotionally disturbing film more palatable.

While many of the themes present across the sample of films reinforce classic conceptions about both femininity and female sexuality, the films as a whole still do make a

concerted attempt to contradict some other ideas about femininity. Many of these female characters, importantly, demonstrated a great deal of agency. These characters are portrayed as very active, intelligent and assertive. They do not let things happen to them, instead they go out of their way to make things happen. Elizabeth from *The King's Speech* is one character who truly exemplifies this trend. While it is made clear from the beginning of the film that George's speech impediment is something that they have been working to overcome for a long time, when it becomes a more pressing issue because George is preparing to assume the throne, Elizabeth is the one who seeks out Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush) and persuades him to help her husband. She is the one who brings George to his first session, and refuses to let him quit when she realizes that Logue's methods are actually helping. Throughout the film, as addressed earlier, she (as the partner in the heterosexual relationship) is the unwavering source of strength that George always reverts to.

The character of Natasha Romanoff or the Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) in *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012) is yet another character who demonstrates tremendous agency. When she is introduced in the film, the viewer sees her tied to a chair in a black cocktail dress with three men standing in front of her. Throughout the scene, the men mock her -- as though she is not living up to her dangerous reputation. When she, however, receives a call that informs her that she is needed elsewhere, she is easily able to escape her ties and single-handedly incapacitate all three men. She then goes on to complete her assignment of convincing Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo) to return, and join the rest of The Avengers. In her introductory scene, it becomes clear that she is merely toying with the men who believe that they have captured her, and that she is truly much more powerful than all of them combined. Her strength, however, is reinforced as not only physical in the scene that immediately follows her opening, in which she

persuades Bruce Banner to return to New York mostly through witty banter. This juxtaposition of scenes demonstrates both her physical and mental strength (in both cases as opposed with men), a portrayal that works to combat traditional images of women. Importantly, however, the Black Widow is a prototypical *femme fatale* -- an archetype who is known for entrapping men by employing her obvious sexuality. Thus, while she is undoubtedly a character who demonstrates her agency, she is concurrently a character who demonstrates and reinforces the idea that there is a danger that lies within female sexuality.

The prevalence of each of these themes across the entire sample, and both levels of culture, suggests that, in general, contemporary Hollywood films are simultaneously challenging and reinforcing traditional conceptions of femininity and female sexuality. While there are concerted attempts to demonstrate the strength and agency of female characters, these characters are never allowed to truly stray outside of the realm of acceptable femininity. Their appearances are all classically gendered, and while they are given less feminine characteristics, they are always paired with traits that reinforce appropriate gender. Importantly, most of these characters are either stripped of their sexuality or lack sexual agency. While the women are portrayed as romantically appealing (most of the females did have a male partner), they were rarely portrayed as actively having sexual desire or any wish to act upon said desire. For those characters that were the most sexualized, this sexuality was almost always portrayed as dangerous. The one notable exception to this is the character of Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) in *The Avengers*. In one scene with her love interest Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.), the two's intimate evening is interrupted by his business. While Stark insists that he will not return to work until their evening is over, Pepper contradicts him, urging him to attend to his business, and whispers something that the audience is not privy to in his ear (Stark's reaction, however, makes it clear that what she

has said is undoubtedly sexual). In this scene, while Pepper is demonstrated as having sexual desire, she is also shown as having the ability to reign in or control this desire (especially when juxtaposed with Stark), a trait that is perpetually associated with femininity. Thus, even the characters that are given some sexual agency are done so in ways that are still consistent with femininity. On the whole, this demonstrates that traditional femininity is largely reinforced, but is done so with occasional attempts to step outside of or contradict these conceptions.

Representations of non-white and non-middle class individuals or situations largely absent from the sample of films as a whole. Of all of the films, only one (*12 Years a Slave*) presents speaking female characters that are not white. Of the entire sample, only two (*12 Years a Slave* and *The King's Speech*) address issues of class in any way. In not presenting issues of non-white and non-middle class females, the sample reinforces the idea that being white and middle class are both normative and appropriate definitions of femininity, upholding the common cultural conception of females outside of both of these realms as 'other'.

II. A Comparison of Two Distinct Sets

A cursory analysis of these films within their two distinct sets -- Best Picture winners or high culture films and Highest Grossing or popular culture films -- demonstrates that there are key differences between the sets of films as units. Firstly, all five of the films that won the Academy Award have male protagonists, and each protagonist is given a female love interest. Of the five, there is only one (*12 Years a Slave*) in which the main female character in the film is not the woman who is romantically linked to the protagonist. The Highest Grossing films, however, have slightly more varying compositions -- one has a male protagonist (*American Sniper*), three have ensemble casts (*Toy Story 3*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Avengers*), and one has a female

protagonist (*The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*). In all of the films with an ensemble cast, each cast is composed of decidedly more male characters than female ones. While none of the films that won Best Picture were the Highest Grossing in their year, two of the Highest Grossing films were nominated for Best Picture (*Toy Story 3* and *American Sniper*), though neither film actually won the award. Interestingly, the only Highest Grossing film that was structured in the same way as all of the Best Picture films -- a male protagonist with the main female character being his love interest -- was *American Sniper*, one of the two films that was also nominated for the award.

All of the Academy Award films are either biographical of some historical figure or set in a historical time period. This does not necessarily mean that all of the films were set in the distant past -- one of the Best Picture winners was placed as contemporarily as the Iraq War -- but they are all either based on a real historical figure, set in a distinct historical time period, or both. The only film that does not focus on a real historical character (*The Artist*) is set in the late-1920s/early 1930s -- a time period that is iconized in contemporary culture as the epitome of cultural experimentation and artistic expression. Of the five Highest Grossing films, however, only one (yet again *American Sniper*, one of the films that was also nominated for Best Picture) maintains the same structure as the Academy Award winning films. None of the remaining four are placed in a world that can be described as completely realistic. Whether the film is set in a futuristic dystopian world or a parallel universe in which toys come to life or wizards exist, they are all in some way removed from realism. This is particularly interesting when considering the intended audiences of both sets of films. While the Best Picture films, as art, are generally intended for those of higher socio-economic status, the Highest Grossing films are much more intended for mass consumption. This distinction between the two -- based in reality or removed from realism -- demonstrates that there is a decided difference between the motivations of the

audiences for consumption. By looking only at this distinction, it appears that the films intended for mass consumption are intended for more of an escape from reality, whereas the high culture films as a whole do not seek to provide this.

Importantly, what this also means, is that the Best Picture films are often portraying reality, whereas most of the Highest Grossing films are not. This is particularly true of the four Best Picture films that were based on real historical figures. The level of realism that these films are attempting to achieve may, in some way, dictate what they actually portray. An example of this is apparent in the film *American Sniper* (though it is technically categorized as belonging to the Highest Grossing set, it is in form and structure much more like the Best Picture films). In the film, Chris Kyle is shown undergoing training to become a Navy S.E.A.L. Though all of the people being trained with Kyle are men, the training officer, in an attempt to degrade them, refers to them as "girls" and insists that they "take it" because it "only hurts the first time." Here, the training officer is reinforcing many traditional conceptions of femininity while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that it is humiliating for a man to be without his masculinity and making an uncomfortable sexual joke. While this very clearly reinforces traditional conceptions of gender, the creators of the film intentionally include it as a way to demonstrate that what they are portraying is close to the reality of what may actually happen or be said in a situation like that in real life. Thus, the desire for realism within the Best Picture films almost ensures that traditional conceptions of femininity will be presented, because they are the reality of both the world of the present and the historical worlds which these films seek to portray. Interestingly, the fact that the Highest Grossing films are removed from reality in some way provides them with a space in which it may be more culturally acceptable to present images in non-normative femininity. In these unrealistic worlds, the films are presented with the

opportunity to stray outside the bounds of traditional gender in a way that is not threatening to cultural norms -- because of the fact that these films are not taking place in the world that we exist in, to present non-traditional images of femininity does not have any dire consequences in the real world. Despite this fact, the Highest Grossing films do not seem to capitalize on this opportunity as much as they could -- though they do, in some ways, stray outside of the bounds of acceptable femininity, there are still many ways in which they revert to traditional conceptions.

What is interesting about the Best Picture films as a set is that, though all of the female characters that appear are cursory characters that build the story through the eyes of the male protagonist, each and every one of these characters is portrayed as strong and agentic. Though their levels of screen time, contribution to the plot and involvement in the narrative structure varied greatly, there seems to be a concerted attempt to ensure that these characters are not portrayed as completely traditionally feminine. While there are many ways in which these characters are traditionally gendered (physical appearance being one of the most apparent ones), none of the films present a main female character who completely falls into any of the traditional archetypes of femininity. The women that are portrayed are not "damsels-in-distress" or *femme fatales* or any other prototypical females. Instead, they are all constructed and portrayed as three-dimensional characters who conform to traditional femininity in some ways, yet break from it in others. The Highest Grossing set, however, does not depict femininity in the same way. While it is undeniable that there are attempts within these films to break from these traditional feminine portrayals as well, these archetypal female characters do appear within this set. While not all of the female characters apparent in this set are merely instantiations of prototypes, these prototypical characters are much more likely to appear within the Highest Grossing films.

Contrary to the quest for realism in the Best Picture films, the Highest Grossing films strongly break from portraying this realistic world. In doing this, when juxtaposed with the Academy Award films, it appears as though the portrayals of non-normative femininity are inserted in a rather calculated way. While the Best Picture films seem to portray untraditional femininity within the realistic bounds that their genre has prescribed, the Highest Grossing films seem to step out of their way to ensure that these portrayals are present. This is most clear when some of the primary female characters within the Highest Grossing set are compared with the cursory female characters within their diegesis. While the main female characters, who were generally the most developed, were much less likely to fall into these female stereotypes, the supporting characters were often very prototypical images of femininity. This shows the attempt to contradict normative femininity within the popular culture set as somewhat incomplete. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*, for example, the female characters who recur throughout the series of films, and thus are fully fledged out to the film's audiences, are mostly characters who diverge from traditional femininity in some way. Hermione Granger, one of the most prominent females in the series, is repeatedly portrayed as more intelligent and more adept than her male counterparts, particularly Ron, who is her love interest. In this particular film, however, Harry seeks assistance from the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw (Kelly Macdonald), a character who only appears in this film. She is portrayed as weepy and hostile towards Harry because the last man that she trusted turned out not to be telling the truth. Though the major female characters in the film do not necessarily fall precisely within the bounds of expected femininity, the cursory female character are much more likely to. Because of this, it appears as though the departure from conventional femininity in the main characters is deliberate, a concerted attempt to portray females in non-normative ways.

Within the Best Picture set, however, the unconventional portrayals of women happen in a way that appears somewhat more seamless. Though conventional femininity is in no way absent from these films, their creators seem to more thoroughly ensure that even the cursory characters do not completely meet the expectations of women. *The King's Speech*, for example, places Queen Elizabeth as the film's primary female character. Myrtle Logue (Jennifer Ehle), the wife of George's speech therapist, is one of the less central female characters within the film. Though the two women occupy vastly different social positions, the film sets them up as characters who almost parallel one another. Myrtle runs her household in much the same way that Elizabeth runs hers, and she demonstrates the same sort of control over her husband and sons that Elizabeth does over George. Though Myrtle does not play a large role in the film as a whole, she is not portrayed as a one-dimensional, prototypical female. In this way, the Best Picture films seem to more thoroughly portray alternate conceptions of femininity throughout the various layers of the films.

Yet another difference between the two sets of films is the way in which they generally address issues of sex and sexuality. The Blockbuster films decidedly have a running sexual undercurrent that seems to be absent in the Best Picture films. Within the Highest Grossing films, there is much more overt sexual innuendo and sexual commentary. Sex and sexuality are simply mentioned or brought up more in these films, particularly in situations in which they are not expected or do not seem necessary. In the film *Toy Story 3*, for example, Buzz Lightyear (Tim Allen) is wiped of his memory by the evil toys at the day care, and placed as the watch for his friends, who are kept behind bars. While all of the toys plead with Buzz to let them out, Jessie calls him over to her cell to attempt to get him to remember everything that he has forgotten. He claims, however, that he will not let them out, and that he, specifically, will not fall victim

Jessie's feminine wiles. Here, it is almost confusing that Buzz brings up Jessie's sexuality, particularly because she is never portrayed as sexy throughout the film, and because she was not attempting to seduce Buzz at all. This, however, is only an example of the almost constant undercurrent of sex that exists in these popular culture films. The lighthearted sexual innuendo that occurs within this set is completely absent from the high culture films.

The two sets of films do, of course, share some similarities. Importantly, despite the sexual innuendo within the popular culture set, romantic love is foregrounded in both sets. While lust is not absent from either set of films, the heterosexual romantic relationship is portrayed as the favorable alternative across both sets. This is most succinctly demonstrated in one of the opening scenes of *12 Years a Slave*. The viewer first sees a large group of slaves lying in the dark in a large room. The shot focuses on the film's protagonist who is lying awake. As he rolls over because of his discomfort, he is met by the wide eyes of the woman lying next to him. She reaches over and grabs his hand and forces it on her body. After several minutes, she rolls over and begins to sob. Immediately following this scene, there is another shot of the same man and a different woman lying face to face in the same position. Here, they are both fully clothed in clean white clothing and lying on a completely white bed, and the room is lit by candlelight. In this shot, the man and the woman simply stare into each other's eyes intimately, both slightly smiling. Through this sequence, the film portrays the second shot as beautiful, romantic and idyllic -- emphasized by the fact that everything around the couple is white -- while the first shot is uncomfortable and dirty. While this specific film sets up a stark contrast between romantic love and lust, all of the films emphasize the superiority of romantic love, demonstrated by the fact that each singular film shows the hetero-romantic couple in some way.

Along with this emphasis on romantic love, both sets of films do work to reinforce traditional conceptions of femininity. Regardless of the fact that the Best Picture films are attempting to portray historical realities, they importantly still do not allow any of their characters to fall completely outside of the bounds of accepted femininity. A justification for this may be found within Herbert Gans' analysis of different levels of culture. What Gans points out is that, while popular culture seeks to address relevant social issues for its public, it must always do so in a way that does not "disturb or upset" its audiences. He continues, however, that, much in the same way, high culture too seeks not to trouble its audiences. Thus, while the content of the films that exist within each of these sets drastically differs, the main objective of the films do not. Whether the films are intended to simply generate revenue or to be interpreted and analyzed as art, both objectives require that the films be palatable to their intended audiences. Thus, by working to challenge traditional conceptions of femininity in some ways, yet reproduce what is expected in others, the films achieve their success by remaining consumable. By completely upending what is expected of femininity within these films, the producers of these films would run the risk of alienating their audiences. In only challenging certain aspects of what is expected, these works remain appealing to their public.

III. Individual Comparisons of Films Across Layers of Culture

In the section that follows, I will focus in depth on two specific films -- one from each layer of culture. In doing this, I hope to demonstrate how portrayals of femininity are similar and different in the two distinct sets. These in depth comparisons will also work to ground the ideas discussed in the two preceding chapters, demonstrating how traditional femininity is both challenged and reinforced in both layers of culture.

i. *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* - A Case Study of a Popular Culture Film

The Hunger Games: Catching Fire is the second film in the *Hunger Games* quadrilogy. The series is set in a futuristic, post-apocalyptic dystopian nation known as Panem, which is divided into twelve districts and a capitol. As is established in the first film in the series, the outer districts attempted a rebellion against the Capitol many years in the past, but the rebellion was eventually squashed. In order to prevent another rebellion and to reinforce the power of the Capitol, each year one male and one female from every district (twenty-four total) are selected to serve as the district's tributes in the 'Hunger Games', which are televised for the entire nation to see. These tributes must fight to the death until only one remains, and the individual who survives is then crowned victor. The series centers around the story of Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence), the female tribute from District 12, who, at the end of the first film, outsmarts the game-maker and ensures that both she and the male tribute from her district, Peeta Mellark (Josh Hutcherson) are crowned victors.

Where *Catching Fire* begins, Katniss is shown as having to face the repercussions of her actions in the first film. President Snow (Donald Sutherland), the ruler of Panem, informs Katniss that her actions in the previous Hunger Games have been construed by many people in the outer districts as acts of defiance against the Capitol. While a large part of the reason Katniss was able to save both herself and Peeta was because of the romance that she faked for the cameras, President Snow informs her that he is aware that her love for Peeta was not genuine. He tasks her, then, with ensuring that the people of the districts believe their love as they embark on the 'Victor's Tour' in the hopes of quelling the talks of revolution. When this attempt fails, however, President Snow announces that the tributes for the next Hunger Games will be reaped from the group of surviving victors. This ensures that Katniss will yet again have to take part in

the Games, and will possibly -- as Snow hopes -- meet her death, thus putting an end to her status as a symbol of the growing revolution.

As a character, Katniss Everdeen is one who clearly works to combat many of the traditional conceptions of femininity. One way in which this is accomplished throughout the film is by her repeated portrayal as somewhat abrasive. Though this aspect of her personality is decidedly absent from her public persona, her personal interactions with various other characters reinforce the idea that she is not particularly personable. Early in the film, Katniss is shown entering the Victor's Village where all the District 12 citizens who have survived their Games and their families are allowed to live lives of relative luxury. Here, she is shown finding her mentor, Haymitch Abernathy (Woody Harrelson) passed out on the kitchen table. After calling his name out several times and shaking him, she picks up a jug of water and dumps it over his head to wake him. Haymitch wakes up screaming, and Katniss tells him that "if [he] wanted to be babied..." he shouldn't have asked her to wake him. Once Haymitch has calmed down, he expresses what a "strangely dislikeable" person Katniss is. This scene re-establishes that Katniss is a character whose personality is somewhat caustic, and thus not traditionally feminine.

The fact that Katniss' personality falls outside of traditional femininity is reinforced when she begins to interact with the other tributes during training. Before she even meets these other characters, Haymitch emphasizes the importance of making allies among the other victor-tributes in ensuring her and Peeta's survival of the Games. Here again, he highlights that the ability to make friends is something that does not come naturally to Katniss, and that she must step outside of her usual unpleasant personality in order to survive. Katniss' unconventional femininity is all the more present when juxtaposed with the character of Peeta. Peeta, too, falls outside of the bounds of traditional masculinity -- he is portrayed as the gentle, sensitive and caring one to

Katniss' ferocity. As the film is constructed, it appears as though Katniss and Peeta have actually switched their gender roles -- Katniss occupies the more masculine space whereas Peeta fulfills the more feminine. Katniss' special skill, for example, what has allowed her to survive under the conditions in District 12 as well as what has made her such a strong competitor in the Games, is that she is a superb hunter. Hunting is undoubtedly an activity that is gendered as masculine -- in hunter-gatherer communities, for example, it was always the men who were left responsible for the hunting. Katniss, however, excels at this, it seems, more than anyone else in the film's diegesis. This particular skill as Katniss' forte is undoubtedly intended to present Katniss in a way that removes her from the constraints of traditional femininity.

Interestingly, however, Katniss' unconventional personality almost disappears when she begins the actual Games. Whereas the first part of the film shows her as not emotional, as someone who is a rational thinker even in the face of the fear she is experiencing, this distinctly changes in the Game arena. Katniss enters the Game still apprehensive and distrustful of the other tributes whom Haymitch has arranged as allies for her and Peeta. While she still maintains some of her animosity towards these characters -- her main ally Finnick (San Claflin) particularly -- it seems as though it is now more out of fear of being double-crossed. With Peeta, however, her original persona completely drops. Several times throughout the Games, Peeta comes very close to dying. Each time, though he always survives, Katniss breaks down in tears, and kisses him passionately once he wakes up. It becomes clear that, while she may not have loved him in the beginning of the film, she has grown to do so. Before the Games begin, she even makes an arrangement with Haymitch to attempt to ensure that Peeta survives in the end, not her. As the film progresses, she slowly begins to assume more and more traditionally feminine characteristics, particularly as she is placed under greater stress.

While it is indisputable that many aspects of Katniss work against gender norms, there are still many ways in which she also reinforces these norms. Katniss' physical appearance, for example, is undoubtedly classically gendered throughout the film. What is particularly interesting about this is that her gendered physical appearance persists regardless of the situation she is in. When she, for example, must dress for the cameras, she is placed in elegant gowns and full makeup. Granted, in these particular instances, traditional femininity is often imposed on her by an external source. Her stylist, Cinna (Lenny Kravitz), for example, is the one that designs all of her looks, largely (as is established in the first film) to make her more appealing to the audiences in the Capitol who can provide support for her during the Games. Both Cinna and Haymitch repeatedly inform Katniss that she must embrace her femininity in order to gain the favor of the donors in the Capitol. President Snow is another character who imposes this gendered image onto Katniss. In an attempt to try and fulfill President Snow's wishes, Peeta and Katniss announce to the nation that they are engaged to be married. Their wedding, however, is canceled once the Quarter Quell Hunger Games are announced. At the tributes' final television appearance the night before the Games begin, President Snow forces Katniss to appear in a wedding dress to please the masses. Through Katniss' reaction to her costume, it is clear that she is deeply upset that she is forced to wear this.

While Katniss is shown to resent these hyper-feminine constructions of herself, the clothing that she presumably chooses herself, or the other clothing that she appears most comfortable in, is gendered in much the same way. The clothing that she wears is always tight and form-fitting. This is true of both her lay-clothing and the suit that she wears during the Games (which is about half of the entire film). While the skin-tight suit that she wears for the Games is explained as having the properties to help her survive the Game arena, it is impossible

to ignore the fact that the suit simultaneously accentuates her figure. The suit sexualizes and feminizes her in its clear emphasis of her figure -- it alludes to the traditional costuming of many female superheroes who are also highly sexualized.

Another way in which traditional femininity is displayed throughout the film is through the foregrounding of the heterosexual relationship as an ultimate goal for the female protagonist. When the film begins, Katniss is portrayed as not genuinely being interested in a relationship with Peeta. The two, however, are forced to pretend that they are in love by President Snow for the rest of the nation. In the eyes of Panem, Katniss and Peeta are "the greatest love story of [their] time", referred to as 'star-crossed lovers', and thus likened to Romeo and Juliet. In this sense, Snow, an external power, is the one who forces her into the heterosexual couple and yet again imposes traditional femininity on Katniss. However, even though Katniss does not love Peeta and is placed into the heterosexual relationship by forces external to herself, the film compensates for the fact that she does not love Peeta by providing Katniss with another love interest. At the beginning of the film, Katniss is shown interacting with her best friend Gale (Liam Hemsworth), who expresses his disdain and jealousy for Katniss' public relationship with Peeta. She attempts to explain to him, however, that the relationship that she built with Peeta was necessary to ensure that they both survived, and it is made clear that Katniss reciprocates Gale's feelings. What the film does, in this, is to provide an explanation for why Katniss does not initially love Peeta. It does not suffice that she just does not feel for him in the way that he does for her, instead it is necessary to provide a reason to justify her disinterest.

The justification, that she is in love with someone else, demonstrates the importance that is placed upon the formation of the heterosexual couple. Though Katniss, by the end of the film, has actually fallen in love with Peeta, the film ensures that before this happens she still

demonstrates romantic interest. While this may be an attempt to satisfy the desires of the audience, it also works to reinforce both heteronormativity and the importance of the heterosexual relationship to the female. Katniss' romantic interest is yet another way in which she is feminized. In the initial scenes with Gale, as well as the scenes that follow later in the film once the Games have begun and she has fallen for Peeta, Katniss' softer, more traditionally feminine side is shown. The somewhat abrasive aspects of her character fall away in these moments, and she assumes a much more nurturing position. When Gale, for example, is brutally beaten by the ironically-named peacekeeper in the town square and is brought to Katniss' home to recuperate, Katniss sits by his side throughout the night. She is shown running her hands gently through his hair and kissing him as he sleeps. Despite the clear attempts to portray her in ways that contradict traditional femininity, when she is placed in the context of a heterosexual relationship she assumes the exact role that she, as a woman, would be expected to. This is true in both her relationship with Gale --the more hyper-masculine character -- as well as, interestingly enough, her relationship with the less-masculine Peeta. As the Games come to an end, for example, Peeta reveals to Katniss that he too has made an arrangement with Haymitch to ensure Katniss' survival. He claims that, while Katniss has her family waiting for her at home, were he to survive and she die, he would have nothing, and that there is no one who is waiting for him to come home. Katniss, however, insists that she needs him, and then kisses him passionately. Here, Katniss suggests that her relationship with Peeta is not only something that she wants, but something that is actually necessary for her survival. Peeta, essentially, stoically offers to sacrifice himself for Katniss, and Katniss reciprocates by showing him her emotional side. In this, the film works to reinforce the traditional spaces that men and women occupy within the heterosexual relationship -- Peeta is heroic and masculine while Katniss demonstrates

her emotionality and dependence on him. Thus, while there are clear attempts to construct Katniss' persona as oppositional to classical gender roles, in many ways her character does still work to reinforce these same conceptions.

Another interesting way in which traditional femininity is reinforced throughout *Catching Fire* is through the various females who occur as cursory characters in the story. As more one-dimensional, somewhat less developed figures, these characters seem to be much more representative of different aspects of their expected gender roles. While this is not to say that any singular one of these characters fulfills each facet culturally expected of a female, or that none of them demonstrate characteristics atypical of a woman, it seems as though they may embody different traditional female archetypes. One example of this is the character of Effie Trinket (Elizabeth Banks), the escort of the District 12 tributes. As a resident of the Capitol, one of the only areas in Panem that is prosperous, Effie's costuming and makeup are much more elaborate than most of the other speaking characters in the film, save for a few other Capitol residents. As excess is the norm in the Capitol, Effie's appearance is excessively feminine. She is always shown in large dresses that are frilly and layered, wearing high heels and with intricately styled hair -- her physical appearance is traditional femininity to the extreme. This is reinforced by her personality -- she is the one who often chastises Katniss' crude behavior and stresses the importance of being lady-like.

Joanna (Jena Malone), another one of the victor-tributes who competes in the Games, is another female character who is placed in a very traditionally feminine role. Unlike Effie, however, Joanna serves as more representative of a *femme fatale*-like character. In the scene in which she is introduced to the film, Joanna enters the elevator that Katniss, Peeta and Haymitch are riding in. As she steps in, she immediately begins taking off her accessories, then asks Peeta

to unzip her dress. She then strips naked as Peeta and Haymitch stare at her (and Katniss averts her eyes uncomfortably) and then walks off of the elevator. This surprising introduction foreshadows the role that she plays throughout the rest of the film -- she is assertive, and somewhat aggressive. Though the viewer is not aware of it for the majority of the film, she also plays a huge role in the revolution that is being built against the Capitol that intends to save Katniss from the Games in order to position her as the 'Mockingjay', the symbol of the revolution. As Katniss too is unaware of this, there seems to be a rivalry and some distrust between the two characters throughout the film. Joanna's sexuality is threatening to Katniss, embodying yet another trope of classical femininity.

What is clear through considering the film *Catching Fire* as a whole is that there is an indisputable attempt to present new portrayals of women. Importantly, Katniss Everdeen is the only singular female protagonist across the entire sample. There are many aspects of her persona that work to contradict the ideas of traditional femininity. She is not necessarily nice or delicate, but instead somewhat abrasive and unlikeable. That being said, however, there are also many ways in which Katniss and the film as a whole also work to reinforce traditional femininity. In the case of Katniss, it is imperative that she still be placed within the heterosexual couple, and her emotionality develops throughout the film to what is expected. Like all of the other female characters, she is also physically extremely conventionally feminine. The cursory female characters within the film all fall into very normative definitions of femininity. Thus, despite the film's concerted attempts, traditional femininity is still reproduced and reinforced.

ii. *12 Years a Slave* - A Case Study of a High Culture Film

The film *12 Years a Slave* tells the story of Solomon Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor), a free African-American violinist who lives in upstate New York with his family in 1841. Northup is drugged by two men who pretend to be his friends and sold into slavery in Washington D.C. From here, he is shipped to New Orleans and sold under the name of Platt to a plantation owner named William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch). At Ford's plantation, though he distinguishes himself as intelligent and skilled, Northup makes enemies with the carpenter on the plantation, forcing Ford to sell him to Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender) to protect Solomon's life. Epps is a much more violent and brutal man than Ford, who repeatedly beats his slaves. His favorite slave, however, is a woman named Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o), who is the most adept cotton-picker on the plantation. Epps is clearly attracted to her and begins to repeatedly rape her, which causes Mistress Epps (Sarah Paulson) to develop a great deal of animosity towards her. Patsey and Northup develop a strong relationship throughout his time on the plantation. Years after he has arrived, after several failed attempts to make contact with anyone from his former life, Northup meets Bass (Brad Pitt), a Canadian worker who does not believe in slavery. Through Bass, Northup is finally able to send a letter to his wife, and is soon thereafter retrieved from the plantation by one of his good friends. The film ends with Northup reuniting with his wife and fully grown children back in their home in Saratoga Springs.

Throughout the film, Patsey is the most prominent female character. As her introduction to the film makes clear, Patsey is the most productive cotton-picker on Epps' plantation. For this reason, she gains his attention -- he refers to her as 'Queen of the Fields' and shames the male slaves for the fact that she out-picks them on a daily basis. Epps makes it clear that he favors Patsey sexually as he touches her while he congratulates her on her ability to pick cotton. Though Patsey, interestingly, is undoubtedly sexualized by Master Epps, it is done in such a way

that she is not necessarily sexualized to the viewer of the film. Her introductory scene, for example, is immediately followed by a scene of her sitting out in a field making dolls out of corn husks and humming a song. What this scene serves to do is to allow the viewer to see her as young and innocent, and to prevent the viewer from seeing her in the sexual way that Epps undoubtedly views her in, pushing against traditionally sexualized black female archetype of the Jezebel.

Patsey, as a character, is extremely complex. Though she is, in most possible ways, a character who is stripped of her agency -- both sexual and otherwise -- the film still works to portray her as someone who is strong. As a character who is in a situation in which she has virtually no control over any aspects of her life, Patsey is still portrayed as someone who attempts to take control in whatever ways she is able to. One way in which this is shown is through Patsey's visits to Mistress Shaw (Alfre Woodard) on the Sabbath. Though Epps is enraged and frantic every time that she leaves the plantation to have tea with Mistress Shaw, it is clear that these visits for Patsey are somewhat cathartic, thus she chooses to accept Epps' rage rather than stop her visits. This is particularly the case in one of the final visits to Mistress Shaw that is portrayed. Because of Epps' sexual involvement with Patsey, Mistress Epps denies Patsey soap to bathe with. Patsey, however, goes to Mistress Shaw to get soap, because she is disgusted by the fact that she has not been able to bathe. When Epps realizes that she is missing, he is enraged, and accosts several of the other slaves asking where Patsey has gone. When she returns, she does not hide or apologize for going missing. Instead, she confronts Epps, showing him the bar of soap that she has gotten, and explains clearly and forcefully the reason that she went to Mistress Shaw. Because of this, Epps insists that Patsey must be beaten, all the while being egged on by his wife. Because Epps initially does not want to be the one to beat her, he calls

Solomon over and insists that he be the one to give Patsey her lashes. Patsey, accepting the fact that she will not be able to escape being beaten, tells Solomon to do as he is told, because she would rather he beat her than Epps. This scene demonstrates Patsey's strength as a character. Although she is undoubtedly in an extremely submissive position, she does not accept this status for herself, and constantly works challenge those who have authority over her.

The viewer truly gets to know and understand Patsey most through her interactions with Northup and the platonic friendship that the two build. Throughout the entirety of the film, Solomon demonstrates a protectiveness over Patsey. He attempts to, to the best of his ability, protect her from Epps' beatings and advances. The scene in which she asks Solomon to beat her is only one of the instances throughout the film that this bond is demonstrated. There is a moment, for example, where Patsey comes to Solomon and asks him to kill her. She gives him a token that she has stolen from Mistress Epps and pleads that he show her mercy by ending her life. Though rather morbid, this scene demonstrates Patsey yet again attempting to exhibit her agency in a situation where she is completely without any human agency. Because of the religious undertones throughout the scene, it is clear that Patsey feels as though she cannot commit suicide without being condemned to eternal damnation (in fact, she tells Solomon that he will escape damnation because his act would be one of mercy, and that God would recognize that). Because of this, while the film does attempt to show Patsey seeking her agency where she can, it also show's her as somewhat impotent (she asks Solomon to do the thing that she is not "strong enough" to do). This scene demonstrates that, while Patsey is someone who longs for the ability to act, the position that she is in inhibits her from doing so. By having Patsey come to Solomon for this act of mercy, the film sets up a contrast between the two, and the way that they react to their situations. While Patsey arguably suffers more in her life on the plantation than

Solomon does, he is still repeatedly placed in conflict and abused by Epps. He, however, never reaches the same breaking point that Patsey does. Despite the differences in life situations of the two characters, Solomon, the male character, is shown as someone who suffers through his trials steadily, whereas Patsey, the female, breaks down and searches for the 'easy' way out. While Solomon does attempt to form bonds with white men whom he believes he can trust in order to make contact with someone from his former life, Patsey instead seeks the route that is often widely considered cowardly, placing them both in traditionally gendered spaces.

Epps' sexualization of Patsey is problematic for her in many ways, one of the most apparent (aside from his repeated sexual assaults) being the way that Mistress Epps reacts to her husband's desire for Patsey. In one particular instance, Epps wakes all of the slaves in the middle of the night to dance for him. As they dance and Epps watches, the shot shows Mistress Epps watching her husband from behind as he admires Patsey. Because of this, Mistress Epps takes a bottle of liquor from the rolling bar and throws it at Patsey's head, demanding that he sell her. Epps refuses, insisting that his wife is even more interchangeable than she believes Patsey to be. He states that he would, essentially, divorce Mistress Epps before he sold Patsey. From here on, Mistress Epps develops a great deal of animosity towards Patsey because of her husband -- she deprives her of food, refuses to provide her with soap, and repeatedly insists that she be beaten. Though the sexual encounters between Patsey and Epps are not consensual, the film sets up a rivalry between Patsey and Mistress Epps. Because, however, Patsey is not willingly in this relationship, and is repeatedly being raped by Epps, Mistress Epps appears cruel and petty for punishing Patsey for her husband's actions. Though she does, at particular instances, hurl insults at her husband for his behavior, the brunt of her anger is borne by Patsey. The space that Mistress Epps occupies is one in which, though she is demonstrably a strong individual, her

emotionality makes this strength present in an almost haphazard way -- though she demonstrates an ability to act, it is in a way that seems irrational because her judgment has been clouded by her feelings. Through the character of Mistress Epps, the film reinforces the conception that women are highly emotional, and that this emotionality may impede judgment. Though logically, it is clearly not Patsey's fault that Epps is raping her, Mistress Epps fails to see this and punishes Patsey for her husband's actions.

The fact that this is a film intended to portray historical truths plays a large role in the way femininity and female sexuality are constructed. In portraying this story, which occurred before slavery was abolished in the United States, the film inherently takes the stance that much of what is going on in the film is immoral. This historical setting is also crucial in understanding the portrayals of race as it relates to femininity throughout the film. The juxtaposition of Mistress Epps and Patsey, thus, is not only a comparison of slave to freewoman, but also of black to white. In the scene where Mistress Epps first assaults Patsey, for example, the film actually suggests that the racial differences between the two women may be less important than their subordinate status as women overall. In Epps' comment that his wife is just as interchangeable as Patsey, if not more so, the film highlights the fact that, because of the historical time period, Mistress Epps is also, in a sense, Edwin Epps' property. Though Mistress Epps clearly does not see herself as such, her husband's word is considered the final word, no matter how ludicrous. In this instance, the film clearly works to demonstrate the historical truths of the time period in a way that is still palatable to modern audiences. Though, historically, Mistress Epps would have likely truly been powerless against the word of her husband, she is still portrayed as strong and assertive, and not as someone who merely acquiesces to her husband's desires.

Mistress Shaw is another particularly interesting character in this film because, though she is a black character, she occupies the position reserved in the film for the white female characters. Though, as will be discussed later, Anne Northup (Kelsey Scott) in some ways also occupies the white female space, Mistress Shaw is a completely different instantiation of this because of the social mobility that she has experienced. Whereas Anne Northup was born as a free woman, and thus is simply performing her own class, Mistress Shaw must work to obtain the class of her white counterparts. This is shown in the way that she speaks -- though she speaks slowly and deliberately in an attempt to mimic the speech patterns of the other plantation mistresses, there are still remnants of her lower class origins in her diction. The way she speaks is clearly a combination of the broken English of the slaves and the more polished version that the white characters use. Her attempts to transcend class are also demonstrated as she is shown having tea with Patsey. A particular scene shows Patsey lift her tea cup, and deliberately raise her pinky from the glass as she sips. In this, Mistress Shaw is attempting to coach Patsey in the mannerisms of the higher class, the same mannerisms that she had to assume in order to fulfill her position as mistress of Shaw's plantation. In this same scene, Mistress Shaw expresses, mainly to Solomon, that she is aware that her husband is in no way faithful to her. She, however, accepts this because it, as she expresses her "keeps [her] from cotton-picking niggers." Essentially, Mistress Shaw accepts and is aware of the façade that is her new class standing, but accepts it because she no longer must live as a slave.

In this, Mistress Shaw serves as an intriguing representative of femininity and female sexual agency. Though she initially began as a slave who Shaw slept with, she recounts to Patsey how she was able to become the mistress of the plantation. As she explains, Mistress Shaw uses her sexuality to escape her slave condition. This demonstrates both a power that Mistress Shaw

derives from her sexuality, but also suggests that sexuality is a tool that women may employ to manipulate men. The trouble with this particular character, however, is that her relationship with her now husband likely began with him raping her, thus it is uncomfortable to champion her agency. In the span of time that the film demonstrates, however, Mistress Shaw expresses that she is both happy and proud of her current standing. She does not mind that her husband is not faithful to her, because she would rather her current situation than return to the life of a slave. Thus, Mistress Shaw has succeeded in obtaining what she desires, and has achieved social mobility through employing her sexuality. Importantly, it is her femininity that has allowed her to escape her slave condition. While she demonstrates that she has been able to find and use the power within her femininity, it is still in a way that is undoubtedly troubling to the viewer.

Throughout the film, all of the female characters that are sexualized are black female characters. Like the sexualization of Patsey, however, this never occurs through making the character traditionally sexy for the spectators outside of the film's diegesis. Instead, it is shown through the actions of the characters within the film. This is yet another way in which the film works to simultaneously convey historical truths in a way that is still acceptable for their contemporary audiences. While the film does not shy away from the reality that female slaves were habitually raped by white men, it also does not sexualize these female characters to the audience. This is one way in which the film demonstrates the sheer immorality of the men's actions. Because the characters are not sexualized for the audience, their sexual exploitation is not justified. The white female characters in the film, however, are never sexualized in this same way. They are portrayed as mothers, or as mistresses of the households, but not as sexual objects to the men within their diegesis. The fact, however, that none of the white female characters are sexualized reproduces the stereotype of black women as hyper-sexual beings. Though the film

does not work to portray the black female characters as traditionally sexy for the viewer, these females are still sexualized. The choice, then, to not sexualize the white female characters in this same way works to highlight the sexuality of the black female characters while ignoring that of the white ones, reinforcing that the black females are more sexual.

This is not to say, however, that the black female characters in the film exist in this one-dimensional space of being sexualized. Another way in which the black female characters are portrayed is as wives and mothers. One of the other slaves who is sold with Northup initially is Eliza (Adepero Oduye) a mother with her two children. Though she is raped by one of the men on the ship, the film foregrounds her identity as mother instead of her sexual identity. While she and her children are initially kept together, the man selling the slaves in New Orleans refuses to sell the mother with her daughter and son, and insists that the family be broken up. As the mother is initially on Ford's plantation with Northup, the viewer sees that she mourns for her children constantly. In a conversation that she has with Solomon, she explains that, though she once occupied the position of being her master's favorite, once he died, his daughter sold her and her children, largely because Eliza's daughter was also the child of the plantation owner. Eliza expresses to Solomon that she has done immoral things (it is implied that these things are sexual) for her children, and thus she deserves the right to be able to mourn them. Through the character of Eliza, the film demonstrates that, though she has a sexual identity, it is less important than her identity as a mother, and that she would be willing to do anything, regardless of how immoral it was, for the sake of her children. This shows a very classical portrayal of motherhood, Eliza is the woman whose identity is, first and foremost, that of a mother.

For the entire time that Northup is on the Ford plantation, Eliza spends all of her nights crying over the loss of her children. She does this so much so, that Mistress Ford insists that her

husband sell her because she does not want such a depressing woman around her. Instead of being sold, however, Eliza is beaten as punishment for her mourning. This is yet another interesting juxtaposition of black and white femininity. Mistress Ford is also a mother, and at first she is somewhat sympathetic to Eliza's loss, but then soon tires of hearing her constantly crying. In a conversation with Solomon, however, when he asks her why she will not stop mourning for her children, she insists that he is the one who is actually in the wrong for not mourning his own. While the white mother, in this instance, is shown as callous for not understanding the black mother's loss, the black mother is portrayed as the prototypical mother figure who will do anything for her children. This is, of course, complicated by the historical truth that Eliza is a slave, and thus her status as a person equal to Mistress Ford is questionable. Whereas the viewer is not truly shown Mistress Ford in her role as a mother, it is possible that her callous reaction to Eliza's mourning stems from her inability to see Eliza as a real mother, and not from her own ineptitude as a mother. The film does, however, portray Mistress Ford in this instance, as somewhat insensitive.

The other main maternal figure throughout the film is Anne Northup, Solomon's wife. Though the viewer only really sees her at both ends of the film, it is clear through these short sections that she is very adept in both her roles as wife and mother. As a free black woman, her social status is much closer to the white female characters in the film than it is to the other black female characters. Interestingly, she seems to serve as a combination of the maternal figure that is associated within the film with blackness, as well as the authority linked with the white female characters. The ending of the film shows Solomon and Anne reunited after his time in slavery, and Anne is shown to have remained the devoted wife and mother throughout the entire time that

he was gone. Though she is not truly developed much as a character, she appropriately fulfills the archetype of maternal womanhood in all of the instances she appears.

While the film clearly works to define appropriate motherhood and provide varying examples of this, something that it also does is work to define parent/child relationships. This is particularly the case because of the way the film portrays Northup's relationship with his daughter Margaret (Quvenzhané Wallis). Though Northup has both a daughter and a son, it seems as though his relationship with his daughter is somewhat stronger and more intimate than his relationship with his son. Towards the beginning of the film, this is shown as Northup puts his two children to bed, as well as when he sees his family off. In both of these instances, Northup asks for a hug and a kiss from his daughter, while he does neither of these things with his son. This is reinforced at the end of the film, when Solomon is reunited with his family. As he enters the house where all of his family is gathered, his family stands in stunned silence. When he first greets them, his daughter is the first one who he addresses. She is also the first one to step up and hug him, immediately followed by her husband who is holding her child. She then tells him that she has named her son Solomon after him. In this scene, the closeness of the bond between Margaret and Solomon is reinforced. The way this particular relationship is portrayed, it does not suggest that there is any particular reason for the closeness between Margaret and Solomon, aside from the fact that they are father and daughter.

Throughout *12 Years a Slave*, there are clear concerted attempts to combat traditional conceptions of femininity. In this particular film, the film seems to focus on upending the specific conception that femininity and womanhood are associated with weakness. This is repeated in several characters -- Patsey, Mistress Epps, Mistress Shaw and Anne Northup primarily. All of these characters work against the idea of the feeble woman through their words

and actions. For Patsey, Mistress Shaw and Anne Northup, however, this is complicated by their racial status. In portraying these female black characters as outspoken, the film works against the traditional conception of the slave as merely submissive to their master. Thus, while the film works against traditional conceptions of femininity, it also works to upend traditional conceptions of race, uplifting these characters who were otherwise considered subordinate. Despite the fact that the film works to challenge traditional femininity, however, there are clearly ways in which the film also reinforces the definition of conventional femininity. This seems to be the case, however, largely because the film is based in historical truth. Thus, the film works to contradict classical femininity in a way that is still believable and historically accurate. The portrayal of race in this film, for example, is largely based in historical truth. Thus the film works to demonstrate alternate portrayals of femininity where it feels appropriate, while still maintaining the larger historical reality. The effect that this leaves overall is the reinforcement of traditional conceptions of femininity, although the attempts to combat these conceptions are visible.

iii. Summary

These two individual case studies are intended to demonstrate, on a more intricate level, just how femininity and female sexuality are presented across these two levels of culture. *Catching Fire*, specifically, was chosen as the case study for the Highest Grossing set of films largely because of the fact that the film does have a female protagonist. The film's female protagonist makes extremely apparent the ways in which the film departs from traditional conceptions. It also, however, makes particularly clear the ways in which the film fails to break from convention. The film is also representative of its set in that it is set in a world that is apart from reality. *Catching Fire*, as a representative of its larger set, demonstrates the concerted effort

that the Highest Grossing films make to challenge traditional notions of femininity. In many ways, the film's protagonist is actually the antithesis to normative femininity. Despite this, however, Katniss as an individual character does still work to reinforce cultural expectations. Larger than this, while Katniss may challenge her expected gender roles, the film as a whole does not upend these roles. The cursory female characters within the film still fall into many different archetypes of traditional femininity. Katniss as a character must also be defined in terms of her heterosexual romantic relationship. In all of these ways, *Catching Fire* still works to reinforce traditional femininity.

Conversely, *12 Years a Slave* was chosen as the case study because it too upholds the general structure of the majority of the films within the Best Picture set -- it is set in a historical time period, based on the life of a real historical figure, and has a male protagonist. Much like the other films of its set, this particular film also deals with a topic that is rather controversial, forcing its audience to engage on a deeper, intellectual level. It was also chosen, largely, because it was the film in its set with the most female characters. This particular film is also the only one that deals with issues of race, and one of the only film's that deals with issues of class. As a representative of its larger set *12 Years a Slave* clearly demonstrates the ways in which women are typically portrayed within the Best Picture films. Despite their circumstances, there is always an attempt to show them as strong and to give them as much agency as possible. The film also demonstrates, however, how the constraints of historical accuracy may lead to the reproduction of traditionally gendered images. Both of these individual films, however, demonstrate how the reproduction of conventional femininity occurs across different levels of culture.

CONCLUSION

As is shown through the analysis of the Highest Grossing and Academy Award Best Picture winning films from the years 2010 through 2014, traditional conceptions of femininity and female sexuality are still reproduced in contemporary film. Along with this, however, there is a concerted attempt at presenting images that contradict many of these same conceptions. While the films may largely reject many of the stereotypical characteristics of women, they do also work to reinforce many others. It seems that the films work within certain bounds to contradict traditional femininity, yet hesitate to do so in other ways. All of the films, for example, presented women who were physically very classically feminine. None of the films provided a speaking character who was gender non-normative in her physical appearance. This suggests that, while there are ways in which film producers are comfortable providing or audiences are comfortable accepting non-normative femininity, physical appearance is not one of them. The most common break from traditional gender occurred with the portrayal of women as physical or emotionally strong in ways that may not be traditionally expected. This suggests that these same producers and audiences favor presentations of female characters that deviate from the norm in this somewhat more subtle way.

Though the differences across the two distinct sets were not as large as I initially expected, there were still differences. By presenting main female characters that diverged from the norms but reinforcing tradition within the cursory characters, the producers of the Highest Grossing films seem to have been making a much more concerted effort at pushing against stereotypes for these main characters while either ignoring or purposefully reinforcing tradition within the cursory ones. The Best Picture films, however, presented characters that, regardless of their level of involvement within the overall narrative structure of the film, all contradicted expectations to the same extent. That being said, however, in sheer amount, there were more

female characters within the popular culture set of films. This may suggest an external pressure on the part of the producers of the popular culture films that does not exist within the high culture films to ensure that women are present and highly visible. The similarities between the two sets, generally, were the reinforcement of traditional femininity and the importance of the heterosexual romantic relationship.

What was demonstrated throughout the sample clearly aligned with the existing literature. The hyper-sexualization of female characters, though present, was completely limited to the Highest Grossing set of films, and absent in the Academy Award films. Instead, the Best Picture films presented female characters who subscribed more to the role of the traditional woman. Across both sets of films, heteronormativity was undoubtedly present and reinforced. The heterosexual relationship was undoubtedly portrayed as magical and life-changing in many of these films, which strengthens the concept of heteronormativity. However, maybe more importantly than this, not a single film across the sample demonstrated an example of sexuality that was outside of the heterosexual in any context. This clearly speaks to the pervasiveness of heteronormativity within society. As is suggested in the literature, many of the female characters within this sample of films who exist in spaces that are not traditionally considered feminine do so in very traditionally feminine ways, and see their success by employing aspects of their gender. Interestingly, Katniss from *The Hunger Games* is the character that seems to contradict this idea -- her success in the Games, at least initially, is largely because of her masculine physical skill. Her ultimate success, however, does come from using her intellect and not physical force, which still works to reinforce traditional conceptions of femininity. Importantly, many prototypically female characters were still portrayed, though most of them occurred within the Highest Grossing set. The *femme fatale*, specifically, is a character who recurred through

many of the films. Though every instantiation of this character was not the exact figure from *noir* convention, many of the films portrayed updated, modernized visions of the same trope.

As is demonstrated through these films, the ideas posited in gender theory are clearly tangible. The fact that not a single female character across the set of films was presented such that she broke from the conceptions of traditional femininity physically demonstrates just how pervasive and constraining the binary conception of gender truly is. The fact, also, that the ways in which traditional femininity was challenged was so similar across all of these films suggests that there are even prescribed ways in which it is acceptable not to be conventionally feminine. All of the films, in their handling of gender, stay within very particular boundaries of what is acceptable, reinforcing the believed ideas of the gender dichotomy.

While this research does demonstrate the reproduction of traditional femininity and female sexuality within contemporary Hollywood, there is still room for further research to be done. Firstly, a project that used a more expansive sample of films may add on to or change the results that were found within this sample. Even following the same logic of my analysis -- one of high culture and popular culture -- there may be other representations across these levels that were missed by my method of sampling. For example, even a cursory analysis of the films across the same time period that were nominated for Best Picture (not just the films that actually won the award) and the top ten Highest Grossing films (not just the single one) shows that there may be films that address some of the issues of representation present within my sample. Films such as *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009), *The Kids are All Right* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2010), *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011) and *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012) are all films that appear on these expanded lists that address some of the issues that were not portrayed within my sample. Though this is not to say that any of these films concretely upend traditional conceptions of

femininity and female sexuality (because I have not analyzed them, I do not know), all of these films garnered some popular attention for the non-normative characters that they portray, thus an analysis of this wider sample could contribute to the research.

That being said, there is still some value in the fact that the films that I selected were the champions of their particular set. Both of these films are, arguably, the two best films of the year as defined by The Academy or by the ticket-buying populace. Thus, both of these films should, in any given year, to some extent reflect the cultural climate in which they were produced. Because of this, another interesting way to go about creating a study that was more inclusive or comprehensive would be to still focus on the two best films of the year, but to extend the time period over which this was considered. This would allow the researcher to consider whether or not there have been any significant changes over time to the way that women are portrayed in film. Considering that the Academy Awards first began in 1929, this would allow for an extremely comprehensive overview of portrayals of women throughout film history, particularly as it may coincide with cultural movements like the various waves of feminism. Whereas my analysis, a snapshot of portrayals of femininity in contemporary film, is loosely based on the premise that these portrayals should have changed as a result of the most recent third wave of feminism, an analysis that focuses on the changes of these portrayals throughout history would provide interesting context to my analysis.

Another interesting way to expand my particular study would be to complete the same analysis for masculinity within the same sets of films. While watching these films with a particular focus on femininity, it was impossible to ignore some of the portrayals of masculinity. While, to the best of my memory, many of the films also reproduced traditional conceptions of masculinity, there were undeniable occasions where these conceptions were challenged. The

theories of gender and heteronormativity are true as they apply to both masculinity and femininity, thus it would be interesting to see if a study of the opposite yielded similar or different results. A study like this would show whether it is more or less common to challenge acceptable masculinity than it is with femininity. Because male sexuality is conceived of as more intimately intertwined with successful masculinity, an analysis of whether portrayals of masculinity continue to reflect this idea would be very intriguing. These are a few of the ways in which further research could be done exploring this particular subject.

APPENDIX

Academy Award Films²⁶

The Hurt Locker (2008) - 2010 Academy Awards Best Picture Winner

Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, Starring Jeremy Renner, Anthony Mackie & Brian Geraghty

Summary: During the Iraq War, a Sergeant recently assigned to an army bomb squad is put at odds with his squad mates due to his maverick way of handling his work.

The King's Speech (2010) - 2011 Academy Awards Best Picture Winner

Directed by Tom Hooper, Starring Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush & Helena Bonham Carter

Summary: The story of King George VI of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, his impromptu ascension to the throne and the speech therapist who helped the unsure monarch become worthy of it.

The Artist (2011) - 2012 Academy Awards Best Picture Winner

Directed by Michel Hazanavicius, Starring Jean Dujardin, Berenice Bejo & John Goodman

Summary: A silent movie star meets a young dancer, but the arrival of talking pictures sends their careers in opposite directions.

Argo (2012) - 2013 Academy Awards Best Picture Winner

Directed by Ben Affleck, Starring Ben Affleck, Bryan Cranston & John Goodman

Summary: Acting under the cover of a Hollywood producer scouting a location for a science fiction film, a CIA agent launches a dangerous operation to rescue six Americans in Tehran during the US hostage crisis in Iran in 1980.

²⁶ All summaries from IMDb

12 Years a Slave (2013) - 2014 Academy Awards Best Picture Winner

Directed by Steve McQueen, Starring Chiwetel Ejiofor, Michael Kenneth Williams, Michael Fassbender

Summary: In the antebellum United States, Solomon Northup, a free black man from upstate New York, is abducted and sold into slavery.

Highest Grossing Films²⁷

Toy Story 3 (2010) - 2010 Highest Grossing Film

Directed by Lee Unkrich, Starring Tom Hanks, Tim Allen and & Joan Cusack

Summary: The Toys are mistakenly delivered to a day-care center instead of the attic right before Andy leaves for college, and it's up to Woody to convince the other toys that they weren't abandoned and to return home.

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2 (2011) - 2011 Highest Grossing Film

Directed by David Yates, Starring Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson & Rupert Grint

Summary: Harry, Ron and Hermione search for Voldemort's remaining Horcruxes in their effort to destroy the Dark Lord as the final battle rages on at Hogwarts.

The Avengers (2012) – 2012 Highest Grossing Film

Directed by Joss Whedon, Starring Robert Downey Jr, Chris Evans, & Scarlett Johansson

Summary: Earth's mightiest heroes must come together and learn to fight as a team if they are to stop the mischievous Loki and his alien army from enslaving humanity.

The Hunger Games: Catching Fire (2013) - 2013 Highest Grossing Film

Directed by Francis Lawrence, Starring Jennifer Lawrence, Josh Hutcherson & Liam Hemsworth

Summary: Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark become targets of the Capitol after their victory in the 74th Hunger Games sparks rebellion in the Districts of Panem.

American Sniper (2014) - 2014 Highest Grossing Film

Directed by Clint Eastwood, Starring Bradley Cooper, Sienna Miller & Kyle Gallner

Summary: Navy SEAL sniper Chris Kyle's pinpoint accuracy saves countless lives on the battlefield and turns him into a legend. Back home to his wife and kids after four tours of duty, however, Chris finds that it is the war that he can't leave behind.

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