

The extent to which the 'New Woman', as represented by the Jazz Age Flappers, such as Clara Bow, reflect the new liberation of the 1920s.

Actress Clara Bow was known world-wide as the “It” girl, due to her sexy looks and feisty attitude as portrayed in Badger's *It* (1927). This persona that Bow developed created the illusion of female freedom and breaking away from the bounds of patriarchal traditions. As her roles often involved her going to nightclubs, drinking, smoking and wearing shorter skirts with even shorter hair, it all spelled freedom (Basinger, 1999). Above all, her character did all she could to chase down her biggest desire – men. This character, developed by Bow as well as Colleen Moore, Joan Crawford and Louis Brooks, is known as 'The Flapper'. The Flapper reflected the 1920s liberation of the 'New Woman', who wore what she wanted and did what she wanted, how she wanted. However, this so-called liberation, portrayed by the Flappers, is problematic due to the restrictions and flaws of its questionable freedom as the Flappers were still confined in the hegemonic value of marriage and love. This is enhanced by the constant theme of rivalry between women for male attention and the ensuing use of sexuality as a weapon. In addition, the focus on style and fashion of the New Woman suggests the films could be seen as a marketing tool in the world of consumerism instead of being a new lease of freedom for women.

The Flappers are often seen as sexually active women who explore the new modern lifestyle, however there are limitations to this freedom. The Flappers don't have several sexual partners, they are always focused on and limited to one man – and usually a rich conventional man. This is further enhanced by the fact the only life goal these Flappers have is to get married to their perfect man – a very patriarchal value. This is predominant in several of Clara Bow's films, such as *Parisian Love* (Gasnier 1925), *Get your Man* (Arzner, 1927), *Wings* (Wellham, 1927) and *It*. In *It*, Bow plays department store

worker Betty Lou who falls in love with her employer Cyrus Waltham. Cyrus is subjected to what Gamman and Marshment call the 'female gaze', where the male becomes an object of desire, a break from the usual conventions of narrative (1988). The film first introduces Betty, at work, as she spots Cyrus; the camera lingers on Cyrus in long shot before cutting to Betty whose eyes bulge suggestively connoting her sexual aggression. The camera cuts back and forth between Betty and Cyrus, and at one point Betty has her hand on her cheek, her dark eyes following Cyrus as she says, "Sweet Santa Claus, give me *him!*". This all suggests her own desire for him, however this female gaze is contradicted by the predominant 'male gaze' (Laura Mulvey, 1975) which lingers on Betty. Betty is a department store worker but, more specifically, sells undergarments which she often has in her hands when talking or speaking at work- by linking her with the underwear, the film has subconsciously made *her* an object of desire. There's a similar introduction to Mary, the female lead in *Wings*, who is introduced in a medium close-up as she lifts her underwear on the washing line above her head. There's also a scene where she wears a revealing dress that exposes much of her breasts as well as her legs. When she is filmed putting it on with the help of an elderly woman, there is great focus on her legs as she slowly rolls up the tights on to them. The camera lingers on her and the shot lasts far longer than most edits in the film. In addition, the scene before was filled with shots of women's legs, buttocks and cleavage throughout we do not see the women's faces, making them a victim of what Mulvey calls 'fragmented bodies' (1975). Regardless of the fact there is the existence of the female gaze within these Flapper films, which is supposedly a key feature in the portrayal of the New Woman, it is heavily undermined by the male gaze. This is linked to the fact that these woman are still bound by their patriarchal society since their only true goal is to wed a man and be beautiful for him.

This is further enhanced by the conclusion of most Flapper films where the women renounce their experiments with the modern life style and settle down with a conventional

man (Ross 2001). These characters quickly give up their exciting lifestyle at the thought of being married to a man, thus enforcing the traditional patriarchal value of marriage which undermines female sexuality and liberation.

The male protagonists are always the burning desire and goal for the Flappers, even to the point of sabotaging another woman or even another marriage. The female rivalry between the Flapper and 'the other woman' is a very anti-feminist trait. This is shown in the multiple love triangles that appear in Flapper films that Bow starred in. In *Parisian Love*, Bow plays Marie a theatre actor as well as a thief, who is in a relationship with a fellow colleague, Armand. Armand ends up being caught during a robbery and befriends the rich victim, Pierre Marcel, who introduces him to a young rich woman who he later marries. In one scene, Marie is disguised as a maid in the rich man's house and she peeps through a crack in a door, spying on the rich woman as she kisses Armand. The camera cuts between the couple and Marie; the first one she is in medium long shot, shrouded in shadows, as she glares angrily connoting that jealousy is a nasty and aggressive trait. In another shot she is completely covered by the darkness of the shadows while breathing heavily, almost suggesting danger. Marie's jealousy-driven behaviour and sexual aggression is portrayed as negative and dangerous much like the vamps of the pre 1920's, played by Theda Bara and Valesak Surrats, who are seen as "soul-and-body-destroying" (Card, 1994: 204).

Jealousy is also a big theme in *Get your man*, where Bow plays Nancy, a young American girl in Paris. She falls in love with Robert, a man who has been betrothed to Simone since birth. Though there isn't a great deal of aggressive jealousy between Nancy and Simone, Nancy uses jealousy as a weapon against Robert by claiming that she has a fiancé back in America. She continues this lie until she decides to marry Simone's father, the Marquis, which she does to make Robert even more jealous. This is shown in a scene

between Nancy and Robert, where she discusses her and the Marquis' sex life. Nancy sits smugly in a chair on the left hand side, and Robert paces back and forth angrily, kicking a chair on the way past on the right. He walks over to her threatening to teach the Marquis to make love to Nancy, and she replies casually, "I can teach him myself better". Nancy uses this jealousy as a way to be wanted by Robert, switching the object of desire from him to Nancy – instead of chasing her man like a Flapper should, she is the one being chased. In the end of the film, Nancy and Robert are finally together... but only through wrecking two marriages, ruining a friendship between two families and breaking a bond between Robert and his father.

A similar situation is present in *Parisian Lovers*. Marie marries Pierre Marcel out of vengeance, to then divorce him and afterwards split Armand and his wife up. She disobeys her family, puts her work colleagues in danger as well as rip apart marriages, all for the sake of one man. In these two films, Nancy and Marie are using their sexuality and sexual behaviour as weapons. This represents female sexual freedom as negative and destructive instead of something to celebrate. As said before, at the end of most Flapper films the female protagonist goes from a free young woman to the typical restrained wife – enforcing that female sexuality is seen as bad and needs to be tamed through the means of a man and marriage. It was a freedom portrayed through sexual desire and liberation though restrained and limited by the ideals of patriarchy.

The fashion of the New Woman and The Flapper was seen as a statement of the new liberation because it was a binary opposite of the typical Victorian restrained look of long hair, long dresses and covered up. However, it could be argued that this new look was simply a marketing tool exploited by the studios through fan magazines. Clara Bow was a working class girl who got into the film business through a competition for fans advertised, of course, through fan magazines. This made Bow the perfect candidate for

female audiences to relate to and also enhances their desire for movie stardom - which fan magazines exploited to the fullest (Orgeron, 2003). So whatever Bow wore the fans wore and whatever Bow had they wanted.

This is enforced by the materialistic and consumer ideals that are portrayed in Bow's films. For example, in *It*, Betty is invited to dinner by Monty, a friend of Cyrus. She insists that he takes her to the Ritz – the most expensive restaurant in town – and she cuts up her work dress in an attempt to look fashionable and wealthy. On top of which, she is in love with Cyrus, a very rich wealthy man who is in charge of the 'world's largest department store'. Betty wants to live the rich life style due to the fact she's a working class girl, which is the target audience for Bow's films. This similarly happens in *Parisian Lover*, where Marie starts off as a poor performer and thief. She manages to work her way into the arms of two rich men. She is lavished with gifts, lives in a giant house and wears expensive clothing. In addition, Flappers often fulfil this materialistic desire through the means of a wealthy man – not through earning it herself, or even winning it through good fortune. This suggests that the only way to obtain the lifestyle she wants is through marriage – back again to patriarchy. Since Bow is easy for a female audience to relate, it is simple to embed the desire for materialistic goods into the spectator. Which is then later re-used by department stores and fan magazines as a marketing tool to sell the goods through the personal desire of the consumer (Orgeron, 2003). This enforces the theory that the bobbed hair and short skirts aren't a reflection of the new liberation, but a way of selling goods to the consumer, and stars to the fan.

In conclusion, the New Woman's liberation represented by Flappers, such as Clara Bow, is very questionable as it is heavily restrained and limited by patriarchy. This is because the hegemonic value of marriage is strongly enforced, which breaks the idea of sexual liberation. Furthermore, female sexuality is often portrayed in a negative and

destructive manner connoting that a single sexually aggressive woman is morally bad and that she must wed a man to be redeemed – which happens in the end of many Flapper films. In addition, Bow's characters are often poor girls looking for a rich and lavish lifestyle which she usually finds through the means of wealthy men, promoting consumerism which is then translated and used by fan magazines and studios. Though there are signs of liberty throughout the Flapper films it is still undermined and confined by patriarchy.

WORD COUNT : 1918

Filmography

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