



Roles and Representations of Women in Action Movie Posters across Three Eras of Hollywood

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ABSTRACT

This study examines stereotypical representations and roles of women in action movie posters across three eras of Hollywood. Adopting a semiotic approach, the research analyzed 30 movie posters from 1930 to 2012 with the following objectives: i) to examine the visual representation of women in movie posters, ii) to investigate gender bias in titles and taglines of movie posters, and iii) to show the shift in the representations and roles of women in movie posters. Findings showed four major role categories: lover, damsel in distress, sex object, and heroine. Lovers were both centralized and marginalized in posters across three eras. The submissive lovers of the classical period transformed into multifaceted characters in the post-classical posters when they wielded guns or were juxtaposed with outlaws. Damsels in distress were backgrounded through reduced image sizes, gloomy colors, and long shots in the classical and post-classical posters. A shift came about when new Hollywood featured woman and her rescuer in close shots. Women's nudity was obscured through use of unnatural colors, small sizes, and public shots in the post-classical era. In the new era, heroines were given weapons to indicate their physical prowess. Though female characters were given equal space with male heroes, they were still placed at a subordinate classification level. Movie titles and taglines mainly referred to male heroes' missions or actions and women's villainy, besides other themes such as racial conflicts or war.

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Introduction

Poster advertising is a ubiquitous phenomenon in modern society whether they are regarded as art galleries in high streets or eyesores on highways. Posters present one of the most preferred modes of mass advertising and communication because of their high degree of visual impact and visibility (Toe, 2004). To many people, the most striking aspect of a poster is its eye-catching visual elements. The basic essence of a poster is the message that is expressed through "the interplay of both verbal and visual elements" (ibid, p. 189). The integration of words and image in a poster is not just a linkage; it is "a fusion". A poster holds, persuades, and implants "an idea and gives specific information" (Bernstein, 1997, p. 154). The first end can be achieved by the pictorial elements while text is always necessary for the latter.

Posters are used as one of the conventional film marketing materials (Kerrigan, 2010). The role of movie posters as the cheapest and the oldest form of outdoor advertising has increased in the publicity network (Trehan & Trehan, 2010). The purpose of film marketing materials such as posters, trailers, and advertisements is "to position a film in the minds of the target audience and communicate the key benefit which they receive from consuming movie and differentiate it from competitors" (Kerrigan, 2010, p. 129). A movie poster is usually designed as a part of the post-production process. That is why "a poster is to a degree analogous to book cover". It promotes and precedes the movie that was produced at another time but it still relevant to the movie narrative. A poster is "commercially and creatively linked to the movie but is also an art work or text in its own right" (Childs, 2006, p. 33). Gender stereotyping is the most obvious discrimination practiced by the mass media,

particularly in cinema. Historically, movie posters provide the link between cinema and the culture of a society. To Parmelee (2009), movie posters advertise gender stereotypes by employing visual and textual signs.

Literature Review

The amount of studies done on movie posters has not been plentiful. Research in this area has focused on specific topics. In the case of magazine advertisements, Spirek and Glasscock (1998) confirmed that Hollywood horror movie posters depicted male aggression and female victimization over 50 years between 1940 and 1990. Similarly, Berzsenyi's (2001) investigation of horror movie posters of the 1950s and 1960s revealed that female characters were represented as hyper-sexualized vampires and witches. This phenomenon of monstrosity has been read as a backlash against women's movement. By employing content analysis, Gabriel (2010) explored some stereotypical gender roles in ten top-grossing film posters of 2007, 2008 and 2009. Male heroes outnumbered their female counterparts, where male characters were shown to be more independent with a limited range of emotions.

There were few researchers who investigated the female character's roles in both movies and movie posters. In analysis of various genre movies, Bylina (2012) applied Altman's semantic/syntactic approach to explore how the borderline personality disorders (BPD) set forth by the paratexts in the movies. She also analyzed 46 movie posters to find out how female characters' mental disorder has been depicted. In the movie posters, women's violence has been illustrated through presentations of splits, images of weaponry, colors, images of unhealthy relationships and movie titles. Borgarosh (2008) investigated 12 blockbuster films from 1957 to 2007. She found

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some discrimination against female characters. The movie posters mostly excluded female characters from movie posters or depicted them in the roles of sex object or lovers.

Using semiotics and multimodal methods, a few studies analyzed images in the magazine advertisements or posters to explore gender representation (Nugroho, 2009; Almeida, 2009; Toe, 2004; Chen & Gao, 2014; Goodnow, 2010). The new media of multi-semiotic resource represent a range of well-organized images in print. In a multimodal analysis of an Elizabeth Arden campaign, Nugroho (2009) argued that every linguistic and visual item is arranged very well to attract viewers. The advertisement is well pre-thought to suggest the idea of looking younger for not-so-young females who hold major professional positions. In gender representation, the other research investigated the iconic features of toys. Holding an optimistic view, Almeida (2009) claimed that in the world of marketing, the advertisements of Bartz toys put emphasis on women's beauty and physical appearance. These advertisements signify less traditional and romanticized representations of femininity.

As a print advertisement, a poster can reveal various socio-political ideologies. Toe's (2004) study probed into the semiotic construction of the posters used in Singapore's national campaigns to reveal their verbal and visual messages. The posters clearly highlighted the multiracial composition of Singapore. As a patriarchal society, females were under-represented as if they were considered less important than males in force-work. Employing social semiotics analysis, Chen and Gao (2014) proved that representational meaning reflects the internal relationship of the represented participants in the movie posters. Some posters visually and verbally conveyed themes such as sex appeal, youth, and sexually attractive female body.

The visual grammar design is as an appropriate model to dissect the gender bias in political campaigns. Goodnow (2010) made a comparison between Barak Obama's and Hilary Clinton's photographs of the presidential campaigns. The results of the analysis showed that the two candidates were portrayed differently. Clinton's image represented her less intimately. As a whole, the differences may be a reflection of how the public and the media already perceived each candidate.

What was ignored in previous studies is that certain types of genre, such as the action genre, became more favored than others because these genres put a circle around the fixed plot as well as female clichéd identities and representations. Previous research did not explore the shift of the roles and representations of women in action movie posters across three eras of Hollywood. Within visual communication, the blind spots of images can be highlighted by employing semiotics as a critical tool to analyze gender as a central social organizer.

Methodology

Materials and Data Analysis

This study is a textual descriptive research. Three websites were used to make a list of top-grossing movies: www.imdb.com, www.standTV.com and www.worldwideboxoffice.com. Movie posters were collected from www.allposters.com, www.impawards.com and www.movieposter.com. To investigate stereotypes in movie posters, this study followed Monaco's (2010) periodization in terms of classical Hollywood (1927-1948), post-classical Hollywood (1949-1975) and new Hollywood (1976-2012).

This study employed Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) social semiotics to demystify gender stereotypes. A few segments of interactional and compositional metafunctions were considered for the analysis of women's images. In the analysis

of the interactive metafunction, this study used structures such as distance (size of frame) and visual modality (reality value). The size of frame creates different types of relationships between represented participants and viewers. A close-up shot (head and shoulders) suggests an intimate relationship. A medium shot (waist up) represents a friendly atmosphere while the long shot (full figure) indicates an impersonal relationship (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Visual modality considers how the participants in the image seem to be real and natural. "Color variation" is an important method of expressing visual modality; the more the color is reduced, the less the reality is expected (ibid, p. 165).

In the analysis of the compositional metafunction, this study focused on information values that are realized via the placement of the elements of a composition. The elements placed on the left of the image are presented as given or known things and the elements on the right are new. As the most salient part, the top of the image is the ideal or highly valued. The elements placed at the bottom show more oriented information. The centre is the nucleus of information and other elements around it have a subordinate sense (ibid). The titles and taglines of poster movies were analyzed based on explicit or implicit meanings as suggested by Bordwell (1991).

Results

The findings showed four major categories of representation: lover, damsel in distress, sex object and heroine. Table 1 summarizes these representations.

Table 1. The Number of Movie Posters in Which Women Were Depicted in Different Roles (1930-2012)

Eras of Hollywood Types of Representation	Classical Hollywood	Post-classical Hollywood	New Hollywood
Lover	7 (70%)	3 (30%)	3 (30%)
Damsel in distress	2 (20%)	3 (30%)	2 (20%)
Sex object	1(10%)	3 (30%)	---
Heroine	---	---	5 (50%)

The rate of 70% showed that women frequently played as lovers in the classical era, but this rate was reduced to 30% in the last two eras. The depiction of women as damsels in distress showed a small fluctuation from 20% to 30% across the first and the second eras. As sex objects, women earned the highest rate (30%) in the post-classical Hollywood. The role of heroine emerged as being considerably popular (50%) in the new Hollywood movies.

Women as Lovers

In romantic roles, female characters were given equal prominence to the male leads with central and medium shots in the movie posters of *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1937), *Stagecoach* (1948), *Duel in the Sun* (1946), *El Cid* (1961) and *Avatar* (2009). The title *The Prisoner of Zenda* referred to the jailed King. The movie title of *Stagecoach* indicated the occurrence of various adventures. In *Duel in the Sun*, Pearl was placed between the two brothers to show a love triangle. The movie title referred to a duel that led to the tragic death of the brothers. In the movie title of *El Cid*, 'Cid' referred to a knight whose compassion brought him the loyalty of thousands. In *Avatar*, the equality of the participants was read as the emergence of indigenous cosmopolitics (Adamson, 2012) that meant Hollywood became blind to skin color when non-white women were placed in central roles.

The posters of *Red River* (1948) and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) excluded women in terms of small size and dark colors. The movie title of *Butch Cassidy* introduced the male characters as a pair. The tagline highlighted Etta's role in

the men's heterosexuality when they shared a girlfriend. The movie title of *Red River* referred to the cowboys' hazardous journey. Women were depicted on the left of the poster as kind lovers in *Sergeant York* (1941) and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003). The title of *Sergeant York* pointed to the war hero. The movie title of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* suggested elements of the salvation history of Christianity (Drout, 2007, p. 7).

The new identity of female characters was represented in the medium shot placed on the right in the posters of the movies *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *North by Northwest* (1959) and *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006). The two rhyming words *Mutiny* and *Bounty* indicated the ship crews' protest. The movie tagline "Mutiny, Maidens, South Sea Love" implicitly suggested mutiny was possibly inspired by Christian's lust for a Tahitian girl.

The tagline of *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, "The Best-Beloved Bandit of All Time", pointed to Maid Marian's interest in Robin's outlaw activities. In the *North by Northwest* poster, Eve was in Roger's arms while wielding a gun to reinforce her double identity as a spy and a lover. The poster's black and white colors reduced the reality. The title of the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* and Elizabeth's juxtaposition against Jack and Will indicated the unexpected gendering of piracy.

Women as Damsels in Distress

Women were presented in the submissive role of damsel in distress. The term 'damsel' is derived from the French word '*damseile*' which means a young unmarried woman who may be threatened by a villain or a monster (Bowdre, 2006, p. 159). The movie posters that showed women as damsels in distress were: *King Kong* (1933), *Flash Gordon* (1936), *The Professionals* (1966), *Jaws* (1975) and *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011). Women's passivity was shown by means of image size, medium or long shots and unnatural colors. *King Kong* represented Ann as a tiny toy in the claw of a gigantic ape. The title emphasized the superiority of the ape. *The Professionals* showed a kidnapped woman in a torn dress. The movie title advertised the male's expertise in fighting. The title and tagline of *Flash Gordon* emphasized the male character's incredible abilities. The movie title of *Jaws* allegorically spread the terror of war. *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* implied the superiority of robots over humans. The title and tagline of *Planet of the Apes* stressed the superiority of apes over humans. In a shift, *Spider-Man 2* (2004) represented the female's rescuer in a close shot. The movie title indicated that "a web-slinger man battled for justice and the American Way" (Peaslee & Weiner, 2012, p. 38).

Women as Sex Objects

Women as sex objects held central position across the classical and post-classical Hollywood eras. *The Outlaw* (1943) contributed to over-eroticism. Buscombe (1988, p. 42) stated that the female character's oft-unbuttoned, low-cut peasant blouse seemed too shocking for the audience in 1941. The title pointed to the male who participated in illegal actions.

The movie poster of *Blazing Saddles* showed the most demeaning woman: the saloon girl lying down and holding the black sheriff's leg. The title reminded the viewers of the violent actions in the Western movies. In posters such as *Thunderball* and *In Like Flint*, the titles referred to the male's missions. These posters marginalized women using small image size, lack of clear details and unnatural colors. The tagline of *In Like Flint* represented women as villains. *The Silencers* focused on a few

sexy women in the center and top of the poster. The movie title and tagline implied the characters' identities as spies. The tagline, 'not suitable for children', implied the presence of over-sexy and violent scenes.

Women as Heroines

The new Hollywood era represented powerful heroines in *Star Wars* (1977), *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* (2011), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2004) and *The Hunger Games* (2012). The *Star Wars* poster showed Princess Leia's active role in combat operations. The title advertised the fear of nuclear war. *The Matrix Reloaded* juxtaposed Trinity against male heroes, all wearing similar costumes, to show her integral part in the *Matrix* Trilogy. The movie title referred to the computerized revolution. Similarly, women were shown as sidekicks in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* and *The Avengers* (2012). The movie titles introduced the heroes. Katniss' frontal shot in *The Hunger Games* (2012) portrayed an independent woman who carried a bow and arrow. The movie title suggested the poverty of people.

Conclusion

The overall images of female characters in movie posters showed that popular culture constructed a vulnerable femininity for women. Hollywood hegemony spread the massive images of dependent women as lovers, victims, or sex objects. The new Hollywood era represented women in the role of heroines. They were displayed both in long and very close shots. This study showed a shift from dependent to independent woman across the three eras of Hollywood action movies.

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