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WORKING WOMEN ON FILM: A REALISTIC REPRESENTATION?

By

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For all of us struggling to read our lives as part of larger histories...
- Linda Mizejewski

Abstract

The film industry specifically creates and markets films towards the female demographic. Many of these films represent women in the workplace but the question is whether or not these accurately reflect the roles and experience of working women. The objective of my research is threefold. First, explore the history of women in the workplace over the last one hundred years. Second, review the role women play on film by discussing the political and cultural ideas of representation. And third, review three films that embody the definition of “chick flick” and discuss in relation to the history of working women and theories of representation.

Based on my analysis, contemporary films aimed at women reflect the role of women in the workplace. The films reproduce current gender discourses but they also include elements of resistance. The films are still steeped in the dominant cinema and created through the lens of the male gaze but the characters can be considered “unruly” and their desire to develop a career outside of the home begins to resist the current gender discourse that indicates women are better suited to the private sphere of domestic life.

Introduction

How do contemporary films, aimed at women, represent women in the workplace?

The film industry specifically creates and markets films towards the female demographic. Many of these films represent women in the workplace but the question is whether or not these accurately reflect the roles and experience of working women. Drawing on feminist film criticism; the organizational behaviour definition of emotional labour; Stuart Hall's theory of representation; Jurgen Habermas' idea of public vs. private spheres and Michel Foucault's theory of knowledge/power; who and what is represented in "chick flick" films will be analyzed and discussed.

The objective of my research is threefold. First, I explore the history of women in the workplace over the last one hundred years. Second, I review the role women play on film by discussing the political and cultural ideas of representation. And third, I review three films that embody the definition of "chick flick" and discuss in relation to the history of working women and theories of representation.

My study is, then, limited to tracing paradigms in white, North American (Canada and USA), middle-class, heterosexual culture. (Kaplan, 9) The films chosen are all based in the dominant cinema (Hollywood Realism), shot in English and focused on North American culture. Although my study is North American in focus I will also draw on UK and Australian research to illustrate my findings.

Working Women

A Brief History

The workforce has changed quite dramatically in the last 100 years. Let us take a brief look at the history of working women to better understand where we have come from in order to discuss where we are going.

During the past century most women in Canada performed unpaid work in the home including being primarily responsible for domestic and childrearing duties. (Strong-Boag, 8) This work, along with the associated gender discourse, reinforced the stereotype that women are more suited for the private realm of the home compared to the public world of men and paid labour. (Strong-Boag, 9)

In the early 1900's, women began entering the workforce but only if they were not married, had no children or were past the "marriageable age". It was even commonplace for companies to fire women as soon as they were married. This can be referred to as the marriage wall. According to Rosalind Chait Barnett, a researcher at the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University, the maternal wall that women are up against now, that is the discrimination of women based on their reproductive status, was preceded by the marriage wall. She indicates that a gender difference myth still exists today claiming that "...only mothers have the special innate abilities needed to promote children's healthy development..." (Barnett, 669)

This gender difference myth, or current gender discourse, characterizes women as caring, loving, gentle and good which links them to domestic, caregiver and volunteer duties. These duties are unpaid which begs the question: Is expecting financial compensation for your contribution to society only a male trait? Canadian feminist historian Veronica Strong-Boag notes that "Wages were widely regarded as a male privilege." (9) The issue with gender discourse is that it offers generalizations but does not reflect the experience of all women because of the diversity within the group. Thankfully, discourse of any type is fluid and only represents the current dominant cultural norms so there is always room to create change.

The onset of war altered this gender discourse. As men went off to war, women took over the physically demanding roles that they were previously thought not able to do. Rosie the Riveter appeared during the 1940's and the propaganda campaign increased the number of women working outside of the home by encouraging women to take factory jobs and convincing husbands to "let" them support the war effort. Unfortunately, many women were forced back to the home or clerical positions after the war. (Barnett, 669)

In fact, it wasn't until the 1970's economic downturn that an increase in women in the workplace occurred. Because the "family wage" was falling short, women started working outside of the home to help support their families financially. (Barnett, 670)

But these were not the factory or physically demanding jobs of the war era. By 1981, the majority of jobs held by women were clerical, also termed “pink collar”, or in the sales and service industry. Generally these were low paying and with limited advancement opportunities. Thirty years later, not much has changed. A recent statistic indicates that “...70% of female employees work mostly in teaching, nursing and related health occupations, clerical positions, or sales and service.” (Mills, 325)

By 2000, dual income earning couples were the norm and the majority of women are now in paid work positions outside of the home. And although women’s educational and professional attainments are on the rise, this does not mean that equality abounds in the workplace or in the home. (Barnett, 670)

With the increase of women in the workplace there is also a rise in men’s participation in the home. Men have reduced their hours at the office and have begun contributing more at home. Although this represents a huge coup, there is still a large gap in the division of household labour. It is narrowing but still present. The unequal division of labour can be referred to as working a “double shift”. This describes the dual role of performing both paid and unpaid labour. Because of this “double shift”, many women suffer role conflict and overload. They are physically and mentally unable to complete both jobs and it affects both workplace and home. (Wilson and Rees, 137)

Despite these changes – acceptance in the workplace, ability to perform physical labour, increased representation, increased educational attainments, and other gains - Barnett asks, “...why do women employees still face obstacles to advancement?” Women have shown an interest and aptitude for many careers but there is still an underlying notion that women work in lower paying jobs because they so choose.

Organizations insinuate that leadership qualities are a masculine trait. As noted above, gender discourse assumes that women are more caring and collegial and certainly not capable or willing to lead. And Barnett discovered that, “... women who have attained power are being asked whether they even want it.” Or when they achieve it, bow out due to conflicts between work and home. (671) And society’s expectations of “breadwinner” are still different for men and women. Even how men and women are described is antiquated. For example, men are often deemed: tough, competitive, assertive, and leaders. Women are described in terms of their appearance, emotions, and sexiness: sexy, affectionate, and attractive. (Wilson and Rees, 137)

Much feminist research suggests women in leadership roles have two key styles: 1) collegial/democratic and 2) interpersonal skills focus. But the mainstream research says otherwise. Women are pitted against one another in competition for meager advancement opportunities and rail against existing leadership (either male or female). (Sachs and Blackmore, 270) For example, Judyth Sachs and Jill Blackmore, Australian academics, reviewed the role of leadership within primary and secondary schools in Australia. What they discovered was that women did not work together as expected but divided based on role, either management or direct reports. Even the pool of direct reports broke down further based on seniority, age, family status, and other such factors.

As Barnett states, “As long as these myths continue to thrive and be reinvented, women will be penalized in the workplace...” She states that the only way that there will be change in the workplace is to disregard antiquated notions of gender difference and recognize that both women and men have “nurturing and achieving capabilities”. (672)

Emotional Labour

Amy S. Wharton, sociologist followed the lead of Arlie Hochschild’s in the Hochschild’s book *The Managed Heart* in looking at emotional labour. Wharton looks specifically at the non-economic costs and rewards of emotional labour. She describes emotional labour as managed expression of emotion in the workplace and emotions that are displayed versus internally felt emotions that are not on display. Her operational definition of emotional labour refers to, “...the effort involved in displaying organizationally sanctioned emotions by those whose jobs require interaction with clients or customers and for whom these interactions are an important component of their work.” (160) In its most simplistic form, emotional labour can be described as “feeling rules” or a “public/professional face”. Although social interaction in the workplace is often viewed as a positive experience, what must be noted is that employers rather than employees dictate the terms of emotional display. (Wharton, 162)

Although emotional labour has always been an expectation of women, for example in childrearing, elder care, volunteerism, job postings are now formalizing these expectations. For example, employers are requesting: communication/soft and interpersonal skills, people workers, team players, relationship builders, and customer service providers. Emotional labour is present in many industries; but in particular, clerical or sales and service, which explains why approximately one quarter of jobs held by men compared to over half of all jobs held by women, involve emotional labour. (Wharton, 168)

What Sachs and Blackmore found was, “...in daily life rationality is seen to be a virtue and revered while emotionality is seen to be an encumbrance and reviled. It is seen to be an inappropriate dimension of life in schools, as in other organizations.” (268) Extreme emotions are not seen as professional because, “...being professional was a code word for being in control...” (271) Following these “feeling rules” isn’t always easy but as Sachs and Blackmore discovered, “...behaviour cues, such as a side glance, an embarrassed silence or a slight change in body position from one of their peers is enough to provide a rule reminder.” (270) These findings regarding non verbal reminders reveal how to perpetuate the current gender discourse that includes the ideas of leadership as a male trait and also that women are unprofessional because they are less in control of their emotions.

Wharton discovered that two of the psychosocial results of performing emotional labour include job burnout and a decrease in job satisfaction. According to Hochschild, the negative impact of such labour stems from the loss of control over what is normally a private act, the actions of emotions. Wharton discovered that the fusion of self and work roles is what leads to higher rates of job burnout because there is no separation between

public and private. This is often the case with nurses, doctors and childcare workers. (161)

Robin Leidner, a professor of sociology, focused her research on the service industry. She states that “emotional labor is crucial to the performance of interactive service work, jobs that involve direct interaction with customers or clients.” (81) Leidner found that “for the service worker, inhabiting the job means, at the very least, pretending to like it, and, at most, actually bringing his whole self into the job, liking it, and genuinely caring about the people with whom he interacts.” (83) Leidner found that although emotional labour benefits the client, there is a loss of autonomy, a sense of indignity, depersonalization and inauthenticity when employees are asked to behave like someone else. (93). And interestingly, given the male pronoun in the quote above, the sense of emotion as part of a holistic view of work, seems related to men as women are more often thought of naturally caring or too emotional or both.

In the Sachs and Blackmore study, one woman described the physical cost of performing emotional labour as, “I vomited every morning coming to work. I’d get up and be sick. I didn’t want to come to work. I lived in dread and fear of staff meetings.” (277)

Although most research focuses on paid labour, emotional labour can also be unpaid. Often women are performing emotional labour both at work and home that is doing double duty. Performing and multiple emotional roles can lead to a work-family overload. Interestingly, women are more affected by emotional labour at home than work. Thus if they are performing a high amount of emotional labour at home it has a greater affect on burnout rates than if performing higher rates of emotional labour at work. (Wharton, 170)

So what are the cultural and political implications to a change in the gender discourse by the increasing role of women in the workplace?

Women on Film

The Public Sphere

Social theorist Jurgen Habermas published his theory of the public sphere in the 1962 text *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. He describes the public sphere as "... a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed." (398) A public exists when private people, who are not representing business or acting as professionals, come together. It is an opportunity for private citizens to gather and critique the state. He believes that a critical examination of the governing power by its citizens is necessary for a fair and representative democracy.

It is important to distinguish between Habermas' theory of public versus private spheres and the issue of private versus public in relation to gender discourse. Gender discourse uses public and private to describe outside versus inside the home. Habermas uses the term to describe groups of people as in the gathering of private individuals that becomes a public when they are gathered. It is essential that women take part in Habermas' public in order to create change within the gender discourse. Taking part in paid work, outside of the home is one way to become a part of this dialogue.

Habermas argues that, "When the public is large, this kind of communication requires certain means of dissemination and influence." (398) Using the media, for example newspapers, magazines, radios, television, film, and the internet, meet these requirements. But because of the media's influence, the preferred critical public turned into an undesirable passive consumer public. The ideological domination has shifted from government to private business and consumerism.

According to Habermas, film influences the public sphere. The production and distribution of film is a coercive power because, "...what the public wants means what the dominant ideology wants." (Comolli and Narboni , 755) But because films are manufactured and involve labour, even new genres for example "indie" films and so called "New Cinema" are part of the economic system where they are transformed into a commodity. To be clear, ideology refers to a set of agreed upon social ideals. Ideology refers to the products of social relations. These products are the "knowledges and representations characteristic of or in the interests of class" (O'Sullivan et al, 139-40). The same products may characterize groups as well including gender or racial group. The key point is that ideology is seen as natural such that social inequality including gender inequality is perceived as natural as well. (Lorber, 30)

Entering into the paid workforce, and in turn into the public sphere, makes women just as susceptible to passive consumerism as men. As a result, films about working women are released to appease that demographic and often in the form of "chick flicks" or melodrama. (Rowe, 4)

For film makers, rejecting the current dominant cinema, Hollywood Realism, often means losing your audience and suffering an economic loss at the box office. For women whether producers, distributors and supporters of subversive female films, rejecting Hollywood Realism not only (almost) guarantees a limited audience but also can mean suffering an economic loss at the box office which would otherwise enable the funding of future films.

Alternatively, film scholars, Florence Jacobwitz and Lori Spring argue that Hollywood Realism is too often described as a, "...mystifying style which seamlessly conceals its formal devices in order to invisibly direct viewer response along an ideologically-safe projectile." They believe that, "...Hollywood Realist film can both express social criticism and articulate the desire for change..." which can eventually lead to ideological change. (355)

In my analysis of the three chosen films, I will illustrate how they reflect or resist current gender discourses.

Issues of Representation

Christine Gledhill, professor of Film Studies, is a prolific researcher of women's film history and feminist film theory. She states, "...all social practices... take place within representations and are saturated with meanings and values which contribute to our sense of who we are – our culturally constructed identities." Gledhill argues that public debates, "... become material – signifiers and signs – for the construction of an imaginary world which work over the social and gender contradictions of such events and return then to public discourse." (Gledhill, 339 -341)

Stuart Hall is a preeminent scholar of cultural studies and in particular, the issue of representation. He describes representation as, "... using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people." (15)

According to Hall, there are three general ways in which people can "read" cultural or ideological texts and these are the dominant, the oppositional and the negotiated reading. The dominant reader will agree with the representation, the oppositional reader will disagree and the negotiated reader will "...accept a part of whatever ideology is on offer and adapt it to their own situations; they take what is there and try to make sense of it for themselves." Most film goers are negotiated readers and the chosen films will be "read" as such. (Kord, 6)

By language, Hall refers to signs and images. As humans, we consider these signs and images and apply meaning based on our cultural experiences. Because language is fluid and culturally relevant, "...things – objects, people, events, in the world – do not have in themselves any fixed, final or true meaning." (Hall, 61)

There are three different theories of representation – reflective that "reflects meaning that already exists", intentional that "expresses only what the speaker or writer wants to say", and constructionist that is representation that is "constructed in and through language".

The constructionist approach has had the most impact on cultural studies because it argues that signs can be used to interpret both the real and imagined world and meaning is produced through language and read through codes. (Hall, 15) The two main models of constructionist theory are: semiotic which is associated with Ferdinand de Saussure and discursive which is associated with Michel Foucault.

Saussure is often regarded as the “father of modern linguistics.” He argues that language is a system of signs and involves two components: the signifier and the signified. For example, when you see, hear or read the signifier ‘movie’ the signified will be triggered. In this example, it would be the concept of a moving picture that you imagine. Although the two components are, “...required to produce meaning... it is the relation between them, fixed by our cultural and linguistic codes, which sustains representation.” (Hall, 31)

Using Saussure’s work as a foundation, Foucault focused on the relationship between the signifier and signified which is foreshadowed by his predecessor but more specifically on the issues of knowledge/power within the production of meaning. Foucault’s three main ideas within knowledge/power include the concept of discourse as a system of representation; issues of power and representation; and the question of the subject as one of limited reflective awareness. (Hall, 43)

E. Ann Kaplan insists that the value in critically examining films is not by reviewing the spectator, but instead reviewing the representations in the film. In other words, analysis should not dwell on the audience but instead what the audience is being delivered. (14)

But can the representations in the film and the audience itself really be viewed in isolation? Foucault’s theory of power/knowledge insists we acknowledge that humans are both subject of and subject to discourse. The three chosen films will be “read” from a negotiated and discursive constructionist point of view.

Feminist Film Criticism

Laura Mulvey, professor of Film and Media Studies, was at the forefront of feminist film theory with her focus on the male gaze. In her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Mulvey describes how, “...film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of look and spectacle.” (585) According to Mulvey, there are three camera “looks”: 1) camera recording event, 2) audience watching final product and 3) characters within the film. (595) And within the film, “...the female spectator must assume an (uncomfortably) masculine position.” (Stacey, 369)

Like Kaplan, Mulvey believes that the issue of representation should focus on the film representation and not the audience reaction. On the other hand, Jackie Stacey, chair of Cultural Studies at the University of Manchester claims that female spectatorship has largely been ignored and by ignoring the female spectator we silence them.

Like Stacey, Gledhill believes that feminist film theory must look at how the audience “reads” the film and also how it is produced and distributed. Gledhill asks what

knowledge can be leveraged from film theory that could possibly, "...make an intervention into both the production and distribution of films and the way they are understood and used by women at large." (253) Stacey and Gledhill expand on Foucault's notion of knowledge/power in their feminist film theorizing so that production, distribution, and spectatorship are theorized through this lens.

Going to the movies often means suspending our disbelief and entering into a world that looks nothing like our own, but does this mean that they are completely, "...irrelevant to *lived experience* or without *significance*?" (Gledhill, 340) Women in film are often viewed from within stereotypes that often make them seem one-dimensional. For example, "...child/woman, whore, bitch, wife, mother, secretary or girl Friday, frigid career woman, vamp, etc." (251) Gledhill claims that, "A crucial issue of feminist film criticism is the examination that "women as women" are not represented in the cinema, that they do not have a voice, that the female point of view is not heard." (251)

Gledhill asks why women are, "...drawn to the cinema to consume such images [those that signify a male discourse]?" (252) Jacobowitz and Spring respond by stating, "...women spectators, produce and consume patriarchal discourses without disturbance, having largely come to internalize an image of themselves dictated by a male dominant society." (355)

Feminist film criticism must look beyond traditional literary criticism that focuses on the characters and storylines by instead looking to the narrative, genre, lighting, mise en scene, and all other technical aspects. Gledhill suggests that changes cannot be made to sexist images of women on film without recognizing all aspects of film production and their effect on the audience. She believes that women must recognize that they are being oppressed and then decide to show their "reality". For example, on film, women are often portrayed for male pleasure, voyeurism and male fantasies. Therefore to criticize this oppression you must then show what real women are and show images of women that are not only for male pleasure and purpose but move beyond this stereotype.

But this solution is not without problems. Gledhill cites three:

1. What is the "reality" of women? All images are already created and they must speak to feminists and non-feminists alike.
2. "Realism" ignores the need to engage with the multiple function of the cinema as entertainment/ritual/art/fiction..."
3. "Realism" involves complex techniques and devices. There is an assumption that what we see in film is real. So to change this norm, the filmmaker would need to make techniques and devices that would alter the audience expectations of what realism is. (255-56)

Similar to Gledhill's first identified problem, Canadian feminist historian, Mariana Valverde asks, "How could one talk about the experience of women when race, ethnicity and class intervened so as to prevent any confident generalizations?" (229) How are these factors built into representations of reality?

Most feminist film theorists' focus on melodrama and female comedy/laughter has only recently been reviewed. Most popular films, both critically and financially, revolve around women's identification with loss and Kathleen Rowe suggests that if we associate melodrama with females, we are giving into the Western stereotype of "women and madness". She writes, "...for many women, the social contradictions of gender have been played out most compellingly in artistic forms centered on their victimization and tears rather than on their resistance and laughter." (Rowe, 4)

Also, many films of the 1990's and 2000's claim to be films of female empowerment but as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra explain, "these texts do not sustain any easy or straightforward relationship to women's experience..." (107) They showcase traditional roles for women as "the right choice". Persistent post feminist themes include "retreatism" or "downsizing". For example, the retreatist scenario involves a well-educated, white, professional woman feeling empowered to embrace her "caring nature", who then retreats from the workplace and the public sphere to dedicate her time to her family. (108) This can be seen in the 1998 film *One True Thing* which will be discussed further on.

I will incorporate feminist film theory into my analysis of the three chosen films and focus on both the production/distribution and the role of the spectator.

Chick Flick

Chick flick and chick lit are two forms that specify a genre within popular culture. A chick flick is designed to appeal primarily to young female audiences and conversely, these films are not designed to appeal to male audiences. They are heavily emotive and relationship based and because they represent current gender discourse, feminist film theorists often discuss them in a derogatory manner. For example, Molly Haskell describes Hollywood women's films as "emotional porn for frustrated housewives." (Gledhill, 345)

As noted earlier, Habermas suggests that film is a reflection of the public sphere. As such, because the medium acts as a productive power as per Foucault's notion of power/knowledge and often reflects current gender discourse, it was important that I review films as part of the public sphere that take up working women from the chick flick genre. Also, because women are a large component of employees that perform emotional labour, the genre of "chick flick" with its reliance on emotion can best reflect the experience of many working women.

Working Women on Film

Film Selection Criteria

In order to narrow my film search I created a rudimentary rubric (refer to Appendix A). First, I sought out films that represented chick flicks as a genre but also that showed women in the workplace. The films had to represent women early in their career, who were unmarried and childfree. Second, I wanted to review films spanning the last three decades to note any changes. Third, I wanted the films to have achieved both financial and critical success. I looked for films that had grossed over 100 million at the box-office but also received critical acclaim. The films required a “fresh rating” on the site RottenTomatoes.com and either a Golden Globe or Oscar nomination or win. My final goal was to select films that were written by women.

It was surprising, but I’m not sure if it should have been, how difficult it was to locate films that met my requirements. In fact, I had to forgo my initial goal of a box office gross of greater than 100 million dollars, a Rotten Tomatoes rating of greater than 80% and a female writer on each film. By becoming less restrictive, I was able to locate the following three films: *Working Girl*, *One True Thing*, and *The Devil Wears Prada*.

Working Girl

The film takes place in the competitive and male dominated brokerage industry during the early 1980’s bull market. Tess (played by Melanie Griffith) is a Staten Island secretary who takes the ferry to work in New York every morning. She has taken night classes and continuing education courses to remain competitive with her peers. Unfortunately she is continually overlooked for an internal mentoring program because of her lack of educational pedigree, Harvard and Wharton are mentioned.

What is not overlooked is her attractiveness. Early in the film, her boss Lutz informs her that a manager in arbitrage may be hiring a new secretary and that she should meet him for lunch to discuss the opportunity. When the arbitrage manager breaks out the champagne in the back of a limo and suggests getting a nice hotel room to “celebrate” a recent deal, Tess asks the driver to stop the car and gets out in the pouring rain to escape his advances. When back at the office she writes “Lutz is a pimp” across the ticker tape and quits. Tess is then assigned to Katherine’s desk in mergers and acquisitions. Tess seems unsure but relatively excited at the prospect of working for a woman.

Because Katherine has consistently assured Tess that her ideas and feedback are not only appreciated but encouraged, Tess approaches Katherine with a merger idea for Trask Industries. Katherine thanks Tess for her idea but dismisses its feasibility. While on a ski trip, Katherine breaks her leg and must stay in the hospital. She asks Tess to manage the office and her home in her absence. While in her home, Tess is surprised to discover a tape recorded memo about her merger idea with specific instructions to bypass her. Devastated, Tess goes home to her boyfriend Mick (played by Alec Baldwin) only to discover him in bed with a mutual friend.

Faced with adversity, Tess changes her life. She lives at Katherine's home and works in her office while Katherine continues to recover. She wears Katherine's clothes, invests in a more professional hairstyle and assumes the lifestyle of her boss. She then decides to forge ahead with her merger idea with Trask Industries and consults Jack Trainer whom Katherine intended to contact with Tess' idea.

When Tess first meets Trainer he says, "You're the first woman I saw at one of these damn things that dresses like a woman, not how a woman thinks a man would dress if he was a woman."

When Katherine finally discovers that Tess has been working on the Trask deal with Trainer she goes on a tirade referring to Tess as a slut, bitch and uses the term secretary in a pejorative manner. She compares Tess' strategy to that of a child and when she finally confronts Tess in front of the business partners she claims that the only way she could get ahead is to lie.

Tess returns to the office to pack her things and while leaving the building is confronted by Trainer who asks her to explain how she developed the idea for Trask radio spots. When he realizes that Katherine couldn't possibly have come up with the idea, he supports her defense when they run into Katherine and Trask in the lobby. So in the end, Tess is offered a job with Trask, she and Trainer live happily ever after, and Katherine is shamed back into her office fighting back tears when Tess calls her a "bony ass".

One True Thing

One critic describes Renee Zellweger characters as uneducated or undereducated and working in lowly positions, if at all. Their ambitions and dreams are not usually work related. (Kord, 75) But her character Ellen in *One True Thing* is quite the opposite. She is Harvard educated, extremely career focused and driven. But when her father, George, asks her to come home and take care of her ailing mother, Kate, Ellen reluctantly appeases his request.

The film, set in the 1990s, opens with Ellen bustling through a New York magazine office looking for more responsibility and dreading a trip home to celebrate her father's birthday. Kate has created a literary themed dress up party for George and Ellen is mortified that she and her friend Jules have to participate.

She is excited to see her father whom she idolizes. George is a well educated English professor and Ellen constantly seeks his approval. She has very little interest in her mother Kate. Kate is a homemaker, heavily involved in her family and community and spends her life nurturing her family and home.

When Ellen informs her boss that she will need to take time off to take care of her mother, he is unsupportive and begins reassigning Ellen's work to her peers. Afraid to lose her career she assures her boss that she can freelance and complete the interview with Senator Sullivan as agreed upon. Ellen finds it difficult to complete her interview for the magazine and when her job is in jeopardy, she asks her father to cut down his hours at

work in order to help at home. He claims he is too busy and even with Ellen's job threatened his work takes precedence over hers and her mother's needs.

During her time at home she begins to see her mother and father in a different light. She works hard to learn how to help her mother around the house and begins to appreciate the time and energy it takes to create a warm and nurturing home. She also starts to see through her father's repeated jokes and stories and see how vulnerable he is about the state of his career.

When Ellen finally has an opportunity to interview Senator Sullivan and hopefully redeem her position with the magazine, she is surprised when she asks him whether the work it takes to make it to the Senate is worth it and he replies, "Oh, I just hope I can make it up to my wife and kids. You know, that's all that counts. That's all that counts."

Near the end of the film, Ellen begins to embrace the life that her mother chose to lead. She becomes more caring, nurturing and develops a positive relationship with her mother for the first time. She even finishes her mother's mosaic table that she scoffed at in the beginning of the film. She gives up her big city life, career and boyfriend to take care of her family.

Kate dies of a morphine overdose and at her gravesite George explains his love for his wife to Ellen, "...she can do anything. Run the house, run our lives, keep everything so beautiful and so warm."

The Devil Wears Prada

This film is based on the ridiculously popular "chick lit" book of the same name and has achieved a similar level of financial success.

Andrea, is a practical, common sense young journalism graduate looking for a way to break into the industry. She dares to eat carbs, wear sensible footwear and take public transport. Andrea's first big break is as an assistant to Runway magazine's Editor in Chief, Miranda Priestly. She recognizes this as a great opportunity despite her lack of interest in fashion. And when she thinks she is being overlooked during the interview, Andrea states, "I'm not skinny or glamorous but I'm smart, I learn fast and I'll work very hard." Miranda decides to give her a chance.

Miranda is feared because of her impeccable sense of style, power held in the fashion industry, incredibly high expectations of the magazine and demands of her staff. Andrea quickly learns how high the expectations and demands are when she is on call for Miranda 24 hours a day.

Andrea works closely with Emily. Emily is thin and stylish and has worked for Miranda for years. Hiring Andrea for her previous position elevates Emily to first assistant. She is incredibly excited about the promotion which comes with a trip to Paris fashion week in the spring. Like Miranda, she has limited patience for Andrea's lack of fashion sense and knowledge of the industry.

When Emily becomes ill, Miranda asks Andrea to attend an evening work event which means missing her boyfriend Nate's birthday. Andrea is upset that she is going to miss the birthday party but is more afraid of Miranda's reaction. After her commitment to Miranda is complete she has the opportunity to meet The New Yorker editor in chief but chooses to go home to try and rescue Nate's birthday instead. Her struggle for some semblance of a work/life balance continues throughout the film.

In reflection, Andrea decides not to finish off her internship with Miranda, heads back to New York and finds a job with a small newspaper. She's back to her carbs, sensible shoes and public transit and appears to be "back to herself".

Films in Review

These three films are entertaining but the underlying questions for my final project are: 1) how do these films reproduce and resist gender discourses, and 2) do they reflect the role of women in the workplace?

Gledhill identifies what is absent from media sources: "...women at work, home as a workplace, struggles to change levels and economic structures, the issues of sexual roles, expression of women's sexuality and so on..." (254) All three films discussed incorporate these usually absent issues. All three show women at work. *Working Girl* relates Tess' sexuality to the workplace and her need to be taken seriously as a sexual being as well as a contributor to the workplace. *One True Thing* depicts life as a homemaker. And, *The Devil Wears Prada's* Andrea struggles to raise her economic status while resisting gender discourse about appearance even though she does succumb for a time.

William and Rees explain that roles of women in the workplace on film are often minimized to that of the: mother as in maternal towards colleagues, seductress as in uses sexuality to her advantage, pet - shown off as an example of company's liberalness, or iron maid or woman who is feared by all. (138) These stereotypical roles are seen in two of the three films: *Working Girl* and *The Devil Wears Prada*. Tess uses her sexuality to get ahead, Katherine is the company's pet, and Miranda is an iron maid who is feared by her employees. In *One True Thing*, Ellen does become more maternal but it is not towards her colleagues but her mother. One could describe her mother as a colleague because they are working at home but it would be stretching the definition. Alternately, the idea that caring is a feature of domestic life reinforces the idea that work life is not a place for emotional work. Yet, the work on emotional labour discussed earlier indicates that workplaces often have an emotional labour component.

Like William and Rees, Kathleen Rowe discusses the roles of women in film. Her main focus is on the role of "the unruly woman". As mentioned earlier, until recently, most films aimed at women were melodramatic and Rowe suggests that funny women (or at least those that can laugh at themselves) are an example of change in the dominant cinema's ideology. But although this should be viewed as a success, she also recognizes

that the change has also created new stereotypes. Here she describes eight qualities of “the unruly woman”:

1. The unruly woman creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate, men. She is unable to or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place.
2. Her body is excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites.
3. Her speech is excessive, in quantity, content, or tone.
4. She makes jokes, or laughs herself.
5. She may be androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social construction of gender.
6. She may be old or masculinized crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque.
7. Her behavior is associated with looseness and occasionally whorishness, but her sexuality is less narrowly and negatively defined than is that of the femme fatale. She may be pregnant.
8. She is associated with dirt, liminality (thresholds, borders, or margins), and taboo, rendering her above all a figure of ambivalence. (31)

Using Rowe’s eight characteristics, Tess, Katherine, Ellen, Andrea, and Miranda, would all qualify as unruly women. For example, Tess attempts to break into a male dominated industry with her unwillingness to confine herself to the role of secretary. Her Staten Island accent is excessive and she is often associated with “looseness”. When Tess first meets Trainer, she says, “I have a head for business and a bod for sin.” She drinks to excess and wakes up the next morning in Trainer’s bed. Her boss, Katherine, too can be considered an unruly woman. She constantly tries to dominate Trainer as well as her male business partners. She uses her sexuality during business interactions but it is not “negatively defined” (31). For example, when Tess compliments Katherine on her ability to influence a male colleague with the false promises of a more intimate relationship, Katherine assures her that she doesn’t deal with any of that “...chasing me around the desk crap.”

Like Tess, Ellen is struggling to make her way in a male dominated industry and rejects her mother’s homemaker lifestyle. She dresses plainly and in an androgynous fashion. For example she wears jeans, t-shirts, and black boots. And being a journalist, Ellen is not afraid to state her opinion and often offers blunt responses. On the other hand, her mother is the complete antithesis of the unruly woman. She “knows her place”, does not dominate the men in her life but instead supports their goals, and does not display excess in her speech, dress or mannerisms.

Andrea is no different than Tess or Ellen. She struggles to find success at work and is self-deprecating. And Miranda also meets Rowe’s requirements by dominating the men in the workplace, but not her home life, refusing to fade into the background with age, dealing with the social taboo of being twice divorced and putting career before family.

The current gender discourse indicates that women are inherently caring, nurturing, and more equipped to work within the private sphere as in childrearing, elder care, and housework. This gender discourse is prevalent within the three films. For example, Tess is expected to “care for” Katherine by managing her home and running errands.

In *One True Thing*, George asks that Ellen move home to help take care of the house and her mother. Her father insists that her brother can't help because he is at Harvard even though he's failing and will eventually drop out and despite Ellen's concerns that her career will be affected by a leave of absence. He asks her, “you have a Harvard education but where is your heart?” This is not a question he asks of himself or of Ellen's brother because gender discourses do not include men having ‘heart’ or doing the emotional labour involved in having heart. When told she was staying, Kate insists that Ellen not leave work to take care of her because she recognizes the importance of her career but Ellen counters with a very laboured “It's the right thing to do.” In a fit of frustration, Ellen asks her mother, “How do you do this? Every day, all day in this house and no one notices? Doesn't that drive you crazy?” Her mother replies, “But this is my family Ellie. These are the people I love.”

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andrea is asked to drop off the magazine for review each night at Miranda's house. She gets a glimpse behind the iron maid curtain. She sees Miranda struggling to appease her husband that mirrors Andrea's own experience at home. Miranda seems in control in the workplace but appears quite vulnerable at home with her dissatisfied husband and precocious twins. While in Paris Miranda reveals that she is getting a divorce and of her concerns of how this decision will impact her children. She explains that she's able to accept the awful names the press will use to describe her, The Dragon Lady, career obsessed, ice queen, but says, “It's so unfair to the girls!” Miranda is a contradictory character because she is dominant at work in a way that is normally accepted for men and yet she exhibits some ‘good’ mothering qualities. And because Miranda embraces the gender ideology regarding the role of women as nurturer, she is somewhat redeemed from her “unruliness” in the office.

As mentioned earlier, leadership and success in the public sphere is seen as an intrinsic male trait and this stereotype is seen in all three films. For example, at the end of *Working Girl*, Trainer supports Tess by telling Trask, “I'm telling you, that's your man” thus implying that to be successful in the work world a woman must act like a man. In *One True Thing*, George chastises Ellen for not using more masculine word choices in her article and claims that her writing is too emotional. And in *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andrea comes to Miranda's defence when she says to an accomplished male journalist, “Okay she's tough. But if Miranda were a man no one would notice anything about her except how great she is at her job.” Women who portray leadership qualities in these films are questioned and questionable as in unacceptable.

Noted earlier, the majority of work done by women involves emotional labour. Paid work for women in clerical roles is often deemed “pink collar”. The reality of emotional labour and clerical work is reflected in all three films. Tess is a secretary, struggling to move up the corporate ladder; Ellen is doing her father's bidding and taking care of her

ailing mother; and Andrea begins to “lose” herself behind the mask she creates to deal with Miranda’s constant demands and lack of gratitude.

One psychosocial ramification of performing emotional labour is a loss of self. This can occur because there is no separation between work and home roles or making public what is usually private or repressed - emotions. This can be seen in all three films. For example, at their first meeting, Katherine tells Tess, “You are my link to the outside world.” Tess is expected to reflect an image of her boss that she clearly does not embody. Katherine and Tess could not appear more different. Tess is curvy, blonde and trendy while Katherine is athletic, brunette and traditional. When Tess changes her hairstyle and raids Katherine’s wardrobe her best friend, Cyn, labels her a “total imposter”.

When Andrea faces a particularly difficult errand she stammers to herself, “I can’t let Miranda get to me. I won’t!” She refuses to let Miranda see her frustrated or struggling to complete a request. Performing emotional labour can also lead to work-family overload. For example because of Andrea’s need for perfection in the workplace she becomes isolated from family and friends which causes conflict with her boyfriend and best friend in particular. Andrea confides to co-worker Nigel (played by Stanley Tucci), “My personal life is hanging by a thread.” “That’s all?” Nigel replies, “Oh, join the club. That’s what happens when you start doing well at work darling. Let me know when your whole life goes up in smoke. It means it’s time for a promotion.” In order to get ahead, as in a promotion, women, like men must give up their personal life. But for women, giving up their personal life goes against gender ideology and causes far more dissonance. As well, women cannot expect home support for their ‘choice’ to succeed at work in the way that men are able to expect support from wives, mothers, sisters, and female friends.

Because Rowe suggests that women’s sexuality in film is negatively defined, can women’s sexuality ever be positively expressed? But more importantly, do women on film express their sexuality for themselves or for the spectator as Gledhill suggests? Feminist film theorists Mulvey and Kaplan, as discussed earlier, believe that the issue of representation of women on film should focus on the screen presence of women as sexualized and that the current dominant cinema, Hollywood Realism, is produced mostly for the male gaze. They would argue that women’s sexuality would only be positively expressed if it openly criticized the current oppression.

All three films offer stereotypical voyeuristic views of women’s sexuality. For example, in *Working Girl*, we see Tess in her underwear and topless. There are three scenes of Tess scantily clad: 1) modeling lingerie for Mick in her bedroom, 2) trying on clothes at Katherine’s house and 3) vacuuming Katherine’s house while topless. In *One True Thing*, Ellen fears her father’s adultery and imagines what his trysts would entail including mostly young, nubile students.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andrea feels pressured by the other women in the office to dress and act a certain way. She tells co-worker Nigel, “So, I don’t really see the point of changing everything about myself for this job anyway.” When Nigel points out that she

hasn't even tried to learn the business, Andrea decides to dress stylishly. Then there is a montage of Andrea's new fashions. The camera follows Andrea through her new morning routine - sans bagel, sensible shoes and public transit - and with each cut of the film; Andrea is shown in a new outfit. The audience is prompted to focus on the actor's body including scenes of her putting on intimate clothing items like stockings and lingerie, thereby sexualizing her as she acquires the business of fashion.

Thus while the three films offer resistance to current gender discourse by showcasing women working outside of the home and some in high powered and/or leadership roles, the films also reflect current gender discourse by minimizing the role of women in the workplace at times to reproduce stereotypes as well as sexualizing the various female characters for the viewing and pleasure of a male audience as this is theorized in work on the male gaze.

Conclusion

Do contemporary films, aimed at women, reflect the role of women in the workplace? Based on my analysis above the answer is yes. The characters in all three films perform emotional labour, have a strong commitment to family, struggle to balance work/life commitments and attempt to break into a male dominated industry. As to whether these films reproduce and resist gender discourses the answer is yes. The films do reproduce current gender discourses but they also include elements of resistance. The films are still steeped in the dominant cinema and created through the lens of the male gaze but the characters can be considered "unruly" and their desire to develop a career outside of the home begins to resist the current gender discourse that indicates women are better suited to the private sphere of domestic life, caring and emotional labour.

Questions for Further Research

1. How does emotional labour affect specific careers?
2. What are the physical consequences of emotional labour?
3. Will increased in representations of women in the production and distribution of the dominant cinema change the current gender discourse?

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Appendix A: Rubric

Film Title	Year Released	Writer	Female Leads	Oscar Nominations	Rotten Tomatoes Rating	Box Office Gross
<i>Working Girl</i>	1988	Kevin Wade	Melanie Griffith, Sigourney Weaver	Lead and Supporting	83%	>100
<i>One True Thing</i>	1998	Anna Quindlen (novel), Karen Croner (screenplay)	Meryl Streep, Renee Zellweger	Supporting	89%	>23
<i>The Devil Wears Prada</i>	2006	Lauren Weisberger (novel), Aline Brosh McKenna (screenplay)	Meryl Streep, Anne Hathaway	Lead	75%	>120