

The Strange Object of Desire
Representations of Prostitutes in the Cinema
PhD thesis summary

My Ph. D. thesis is focused on the subject of prostitutes and prostitution in the cinema. My main goal was to explore the depiction of female prostitute characters in Hollywood film in comparison with (more) independent American and European cinematography. The figure of the fallen woman has fascinated filmmakers since the very beginning of the cinema and led to creation of certain types of representation, which have been highly contested. Evolution of these types is likely a reflection of changes both in cinematography and society, the subject to be more thoroughly explored in my Ph. D. As my field of interest has not been carefully studied so far in Polish literature, my thesis seems to display the quality of the pioneering work. The previous investigations, yet very limited, have been devoted to genre films, most of all to the melodrama and action films. My aim was to deconstruct the old patterns and propose new types of prostitutes' cinematic depictions. Since I believe (and my belief is based on film sociology) that film characters, especially the most conventionalized ones, reflect social stereotypes of their times. Thus, the figures of fallen women represent to some extent women in general and the way they function in society.

Misleading definition

Easy as may seem, defying "the world's oldest profession" turns out to be really difficult due to the fluid – culturally as well as historically relative – borders between sexual freedom and debauchery. In my thesis I use different types of definitions – historical, juridical, sexological etc. – so as to emphasize the ambivalent nature of prostitution. "If in life it is sometimes difficult to define just what constitutes a prostitute, it is even more so in

the cinema, which often thrives on tantalizing ambiguity"¹ - notices Russell Campbell, the author of "Marked Women. Prostitutes and Prostitutes in The Cinema". While he "have striven to confine it to characters who one can fairly assume, on the strength of the evidence presented, make cash transactions for sexual services with multiple clients"², in my dissertation the term mentioned will be used in an extended way including gangsters' molls, mistresses and courtesans. It seems critically important under the circumstances in which the frequent subject of the study are films representing the Hollywood's classical era and thereby highly conventionalized and heavily censored.

The most popular figures

Taking into account the rate of occurrence on the screen, I decided to divide film prostitutes into seven different categories. After brief introduction and indicating theoretical background in the first chapter I devoted remaining parts of my thesis to subsequent types. Because of my ambition to write both about cinema and society my choice of references is vast. I start with psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung) and feminism (from Julia Kristeva to Molly Haskell and Mary Ann Doane) and continue to Gender and Queer Studies (especially Judith Butler). To explore the feminine identity I reach for the writings of Georg Simmel and Zygmunt Bauman on the figure of the Stranger and combine them with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization. I also include sociological ideas of deviation, social stereotype and stigmas.

The first figure I mention is the "noble courtesan" (e.g. "Camille", dir. George Cukor, 1936). Then, there comes the "hooker with a heart of gold" (e.g. "Pretty Woman", dir. Garry Marshall, 1990) and the "victimized prostitute" (e.g. "Marked Woman", dir. Lloyd Bacon, 1937). I describe the fourth type as the "fallen femme fatale" (e.g. "Belle de jour", dir. Luis Buñuel, 1967) and the fifth as the "holy sinner" (e.g. "Breaking the Waves", dir. Lars von Trier, 1996) while the sixth I give a name of the "transgressive prostitute" (e.g. "All About My Mother", dir. Pedro Almodóvar, 1999). The last representation is the "working girl" (as in Lizzie Borden's film from 1986).

¹ R. Campbell, *Marked Women. Prostitutes and Prostitutes in The Cinema*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006, p.3.

² R. Campbell, op. cit., p.6.