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How Changes in Women's Film Representations Reflect Changes in Society and Feminism: The Case of Modern WWII Spy Film and Modern Feminism

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

How Changes in Women's Film Representations Reflect Changes in Society and Feminism:

The Case of Modern WWII Spy Film and Modern Feminism

A Capstone Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree with Honors

Department of Communications and Department of History

By

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Introduction

Modern feminist ideals and movements impact not only society at large, but the entertainment industry as well. The WWII film genre was created to cater towards the male gaze, and often disregarded accurate female perspectives and portrayals. Yet, changes in feminism, tied to the fourth wave, have begun to alter some previously untouchable genre conventions. Using Feminist film theory, such as Laura Mulvey's gaze theory, alongside universal film theories, like Auteur Theory and ideas of perception, helps to give a full picture look at female representations in films. These theories can be examined alongside the evolution of industry genre standards and feminism itself to understand how and why these female representations are shifting in film.

One of these cornerstone theories is Laura Mulvey's gaze theory. Scholars have debated the relevance and validity of Mulvey's specific points, but much of the core behind these specifics is still relevant. For example, the set-up of a cinema with its dark room and bright screens does lend itself to a voyeuristic kind of viewership: that is to say that the contrasting environments create a distinct separation between subject and viewer, one reminiscent of a voyeuristic fantasy.¹ Despite the fact that a film was made to be viewed in this manner, production techniques immerse viewers into a private world beyond reality. When watching a film, an audience is observing the lives of other people, even though the people have been entirely made up. Another important idea that Mulvey brings up is the cinematic focus on the human body, more specifically, the female body.² Across Mulvey's film analysis, women served two main purposes: to be an object of erotic desire for male characters and to be an object of erotic desire for a male audience.³ The passive, inactive, image of a woman on-screen serves as raw material for the active gaze of men.⁴

¹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999): 806

² Laura Mulvey, "Unmasking the Gaze," *Lectora* 7 (2007): 7

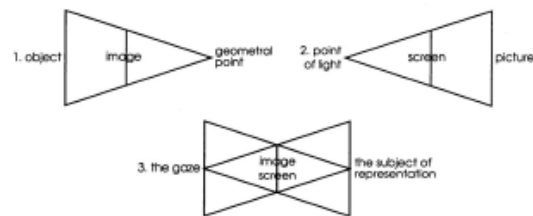
³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999): 809

⁴ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999): 815

Many scholars, such as Anneke Smelik, have pointed out flaws in some of this reasoning. One main flaw is Mulvey's exclusion in consideration of female spectatorship as women do, and have always, viewed movies.⁵ This observation has led others to conduct studies and surveys on female spectatorship, to see if any gaps could be filled in the original theories regarding female viewers and those in the LGBTQ+ community.

Nonetheless, the idea of Gaze regarding film is an important one. For an image, or series of images, to capture a truthful vision of reality, the camera needs complete isolation from the human gaze and bias.⁶ When it comes to film, this is impossible. There is no separation between human gaze and lens. Everything the lens sees is being controlled by a director and team of cinematographers in order to control audience's frame of vision. According to Auteur theory, the director is the most integral part in carrying out a film's message. Their gaze and perspective shape the way a film is produced. This theory suggests that "directors transcend the business of filmmaking" and that they have total control over their art and the final product put out into the world.⁷ The structural approach places emphasis on the structures of the film industry, using them to explain how films turn out the way that they do.⁸ The most probable theory combines the two ideas, giving the structural aspects a macro level of responsibility and directors a smaller, but still important, sense of control over a project.⁹ Whatever might be the case for a particular film, it is created through a specific lens. People behind the scenes have control over the final product and appealing to certain gazes is a big part of production.

Additionally, audiences view films through a lens of their past experience: each one sees a film differently, and there is no definitive truth to these viewing experiences. Societal phenomena impact the way films are both created and viewed: there will never



⁵ Anneke Smelik, "Feminist Film Theory," *The Cinema Book*, (2007): 494

⁶ Kaja Silverman, "What is a Camera?," *Discourse* 14, no. 3 (1993): 9.

⁷ Martha Lauzen and David Dozier, "The Role of Women on Screen," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 23, no. 4 (1999): 357

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

be a separation between human and camera. The third diagram in this image¹⁰ shows the intertwined nature between human gaze and film image. The human gaze sees an image on screen representative of a story or subject. They do not see that subject directly: the subject is filtered. Similarly, the subject of representation gets filtered through this “screen” before it can reach the human gaze. In this instance, the filmmaking industry and processes are behind that screen. They are creating the filters through which films are viewed.

Gender is an element that plays a huge role in film as it is often a huge part of gaze and perspective from both audience and production perspectives. Questions have arisen whether the gender of directors changes gender dynamics broadcast on screen. This does appear to be the case in a group of films produced in the late 1990s. In films directed by men, major female characters took up 336 minutes of screen time, while their male counterparts occupied 1,868: male characters were allotted about five and a half times the screentime women were given. On the other hand, in films directed by women, key female characters were seen on screen for 853 minutes while men showed up for 776: there was only a twelve percent difference in gender appearance.¹¹ These two sets of statistics are incredibly different, and there does appear to be a correlation between gender of director and prominent character lines. However, the directors of the films in question have denied this idea, notably the female directors. Director Victoria Hochberg stated that “telling a director she has a ‘woman’s voice’ is telling her that her experience is unique, but in the movie business that usually means it’s not good unique, it’s who-cares unique... no matter how you justify it, being called a ‘woman’ anything in this culture is not a compliment. I have a director’s voice. That’s it.”¹²

Sarah Megan Thomas, writer and actress in the 2019 film *A Call to Spy*, took part in an interview that sent the opposite message. She states “I kind of always star with the genre that I think is a commercial genre that people enjoy watching but maybe hasn’t had the female lens in the way it could... But it’s true, we need more women producers, writer, directors to tell those stories ...I think one of the things that’s not talked about enough is that we need more female producers. Because female producers can green light the female

¹⁰ Kaja Silverman, “What is a Camera?” *Discourse* 14, no. 3 (1993): 11.

¹¹ Martha Lauzen and David Dozier, “The Role of Women on Screen,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 23, no. 4 (1999): 358.

¹² Martha Lauzen and David Dozier, “The Role of Women,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 23, no. 4 (1999): 359.

writers and directors.”¹³ This modern view on women in the film industry is very different than Hochberg’s. Thomas uses “female” and “women” as job descriptors many times throughout the piece. Additionally, she uses these labels with a sense of confidence, believing that they are something to be proud of. She also points out that experience and lens do matter when creating stories.

This shift in filmmaker attitude from Hochberg’s attitude to Thomas’s also reflects a shift in feminism as a whole. Historically, feminism has focused on the lack of things that women have not had access to: it was a fight against female oppression. While modern feminism still raises issues, there is a much stronger focus on more positive ideas of women. There is a bigger spotlight on what women *can* do, versus a sole focus on things they *cannot* do. Movements related to sexual harassment still remain prominent in modern feminism, with the Me-Too movement bringing the issue to the forefront of media. Another key change in the past few decades has been the central shift to a diverse notion of feminism. Feminism has shifted to further include LGBTQIA+ individuals, those of various races, and women with different socioeconomic status in its definition. It is no longer a movement limited to the cisgender, white, heterosexual, middle class. Feminism has opened to include a more diverse group of women. That being said, the term “woman” is constantly being redefined to fit new diversity. Finally, feminist studies have begun to take a look at how women communicate with each other and how they are communicated to others in the media.¹⁴ Specifically, this relates to the way that women are being portrayed on screen: much more thought has been going into the implications of this presentation than in past years.

Feminism has changed greatly in the past few decades. The case of Hochberg and Thomas goes to show that attitudes in the film industry regarding women have also begun to shift in a similar direction. This raises the question: does modern feminism, specifically fourth wave feminism, effect the images, themes, and production techniques behind on-screen portrayals of women? To what extent screen attitudes and movements impact the worlds built on screen?

¹³ Sarah Megan Thomas, “Sarah Megan Thomas on *A Call to Spy* and Female Stories, Interviewed by Sandie Angulo Chen, AWFJ, 2020.

¹⁴ Ania Malinowska, “Waves of Feminism.” *The international encyclopedia*, 2020, 6.

Method of Analysis

To investigate this question, six WWII spy films of the twenty-first century will be examined. The films have been divided into two groups. The first group consists of films created and produced before modern feminism came to a head in the fourth wave. These films are Michael Apted's *Enigma* (2001), Paul Verhoeven's *Black Book* (2006), and Jean-Paul Salomé's *Female Agents* (2008). The second group of films were created and produced amidst the movement a few years after its beginning, approximately 2010. This second group consists of Morten Tyldum's *Enigma* (2014), Robert Zemeckis's *Allied* (2016), and Lydia Dean Pilcher's *A Call to Spy* (2008).

These films were chosen due to their comparable content and inclusion of female main characters: those characters are either spies or part of intelligence gathering. *Enigma* and *The Imitation Game* both tell the story of Alan Turing and the Bletchly Park code-breakers. *Allied* and *Black Book* include spy missions that involve going undercover in enemy territory. Finally, *Female Agents* and *A Call to Spy* have an all-female main ensemble of spies on missions in Nazi-occupied France. To examine differences in images, themes, and productions of movies, the films need to be comparable in content. Thusly, each pair of films have similar plot structures to each other, despite the fact that in each of the three pairs, one film was produced in the early 2000s and the other in the late 2010s. This allows for reliable comparison, as the groupings of films from both micro-eras have similar make-ups.

The WWII spy film genre contains a variety of film styles and foci, for example *Munich-The Edge of War* (2021) and *The Catcher Was a Spy* (2018) do not utilize women as main characters at all and *U-571* (2000) takes place in a submarine instead of above ground. Beyond ensemble gender, there are also many underlying plots that WWII spy and intelligence films take on. Some films focus on groundwork, some look at the workings of government, others examine the decisions behind the groundwork, and some are intelligence based. In addition to plot structure, these films include a variety of main character groups. There are sometimes pairs conducting missions, teams conducting missions, and some are done solo. These factors mix and match to create a plethora of bases for movies.

This also brings up another question: why use WWII spy films to examine feminism's impact on the film industry? Overall, this genre has been very male centered for decades. This male-centered-gaze allows for a better observation of changes in women's representation and appearance as 1) there is less overall content to look at and 2) smaller patterns and nuances in female perspective are more juxtaposed with the film as a whole, and thusly are more noticeable. Issues with women's portrayals in entertainment media have come to light more in recent years, and it will be interesting to see if these issues have impacted male-gaze based genres at all. It helps answer the following question: do modern awareness and movements change harmful, stereotyped portrayals of women in entertainment media, by giving a baseline set up in such a way that smaller nuances in change can be detected.

When watching the films, two main categories were examined: they are 1) themes and 2) visuals. The thematic category consists of film elements relating to the overall story at play. This includes elements such as thematic messaging, gender attitudes, and recurring symbolic events. This category of analysis is different than images observations. Images focus on the picture on the screen: observable pieces of the film that make up its overall look. Some examples of images relate to character physicality, color choices, recurring scenes, and displays of emotions. While some of these elements may support a larger thematic or story arc, this category focuses on the appearance of each one and how said appearance impacts audiences, tying back to Mulvey's ideas of gaze within on screen shots.

Analysis

Themes

Films are made up of a series of thematic arcs, and these arcs build the tone of a film. Some common ones relating to women in the WWII spy film subgenre are othering (a women's relation to other women in the film and the opposite sex), Family, Duty beyond that family, story arcs related to stereotypes, and, specific to the overarching war film genre, violence. The overall picture created by a female character's relation to other characters, her sense of family throughout the film, her duty to the war effort, tropes she fits in to, and her relationship to violence give audiences an idea of the kind of womanhood a filmmaker wants to portray in

their film. The question at hand in this analysis is: do ideals of modern feminist movements impact thematic elements directly related to female characters and womanhood?

Othering

Some themes within this body of films were equally present across the decades, one being the othering of women along the lines of the “I’m not like other girls” trope. To start, this trope can be found in the earlier group of films. This is specifically seen in *Black Book* (2006), when Rachel notices that she’s “the only woman in the Boys Club.” This is a fact that can be easily seen on screen: it is very observable to the point that it becomes unnecessary to outright state it. A huge part of this scene is the fact that Rachel is a woman in a man’s world, which is position that very few women find themselves in. This detail sets Rachel apart from other women in the world of the film, and the history of the time, as she manages to sneak into a “club” that is difficult to get into. While this gives her a sense of empowerment, it simultaneously implies to audiences that any woman who did not make it to this point, for whatever reason, is lesser in a way.

This theme is also seen in *Enigma* (2001) when Hester refers to Tom as another “patronizing male” and that she’s done dealing with his ways. Unlike other women in this film, she has a spark and feistiness that drives her to debate with Tom. There is an air of unnatural self-righteousness to the phrase “patronizing male.” It is not natural dialogue at all, even with the altered dialect of 1940’s Britain. Hester is a smart, nerdy woman who will not take disrespect from anyone, including men. This gives her a sense of feistiness to an audience, one that appeals to men – as Mulvey’s gaze theory might indicate. This feistiness centers around affairs that relate to men, and no other women in the film shows the same spunk. The other women blend together, robots in the governmental machine, while only Wallace has the inner strength to speak out.

By nature of the subject matter, only a few women make it to the top of the government spy ladders and therefore female main characters are surrounded by casts of men. In the case of these two earlier modern WWII spy films, these women at the top are treated as if they are exceptional compared to everyone else. This places a sense of “othering” between those in the spotlight and those who did not make it. Hester and Rachel “are not like other girls” and get to join the men in the man’s world, a “luxury” offered to only a few.

This “othering” of female main characters in comparison to the rest of the cast is a character theme that has carried over into more recent films as well, however it has taken a very different spin. In *Imitation Game* (2014), Joan excels at a puzzle test in a room of just men. However, she does not take up Turing on his offer to join the codebreaking team, and her reasoning lies in the fact that she is a woman. She states that she would be the “only woman in a group of men” and that this fact makes her very uncomfortable. Unlike those in earlier films, Joan does not embrace being in the “boys club.” In fact, the exact opposite happens as Joan turns down an opportunity to stand out, instead electing for a position on the all-female computer operating team who sent and received coded messages. Here, the othering exists just between men and women, not within the group of women themselves.

A similar trend is seen in *A Call to Spy* (2019) when Vera Atkins is discussing spy plans with higher-up officers. Contrary to Joan’s decision, Vera has put herself in a position where she is the only woman. Yet, instead of making her stand out as being “better” or “more daring” than other woman from the time, the emphasis is placed on the fact that she should *not* be there. An officer states “Women shouldn’t be in the field. Certainly not you” directly to her face. The focus isn’t on the fact that Vera is in a more powerful position than other women. Instead, she is grouped with all of the other women in the country. “All” women should not be in the field, and Vera is a part of that all.

These more recent films do not compare main women to others within their respective universes, instead grouping women together. Some like Noor and Virginia from *A Call to Spy* receive exceptional roles, but the full focus of the film is on their roles: not the fact that men typically hold the positions. Instead of “othering” women from other women, these newer films “other” women from men in a group. Neither one of these portrayals is completely healthy or accurate, but they do touch on different issues. The earlier films make use of the “not like other girls” trope, a trope that has been under scrutiny in recent years. By pitting women against each other for the sake of either 1) the male gaze or 2) power in the “boys club” toxic femininity is displayed. But at the same time, these two women have broken out of the typical mold female character are forced into, which is a show of feminism: breaking free from oppression. It also places women

in more of an “active” role in the plot, making it harder for the male gaze to objectify them, according to Mulvey’s theory.

The more recent films take feminism in a different, more modern way, borrowing from modern feminist ideals. Instead of focusing on female oppression and things that women cannot do, the focus is on things that women are actually doing. Joan might feel uncomfortable working in the man’s world, however there is some very important work she can still do at the complex. She also helps out Turing outside of the systems set in place, putting her mind to good use, but on her own terms. And while Vera, Noor, and Virginia are reprimanded for being in the man’s world, they continue to do their jobs. The mere mention that they are not fit for these jobs does have an oppressive tone to it, but it also solidifies the fact that they are out there, as a group, doing those jobs. There is more positive, female unity among the woman in the films produced in recent years.

Family vs Duty

As the female characters across all six films are all working for their governments to win the war, a sense of duty is seen throughout. However, it is interesting to examine how their sense of duty interacts with their familial desires.

Children or pregnancies are seen on screen, and tied to the main female characters, of the three films in the early group. While pregnancy is never shown on screen in *Black Book*, children are. The events that occurred during the war are framed to be Rachel’s memories as an older woman. At the end of the film, a child runs up to her asking “mommy, what are you thinking about,” to which Rachel replies, simply, “the past.” She keeps her time as a spy and her family in two separate spheres. Her duty and her family are separate: only after her duty was completed could she start a family. Rachel also spares her children all details of her time serving. “The past” is very vague and could be referring to any number of things. She could have said “the war” instead, but chooses to be unclear. One might argue that she does not want to think about the traumas endured during the war, however the entire movie is a representation of her thinking about it. Therefore, Rachel is making distinct lines between her children and the past she lived through to get them.

Similarly In *Enigma* a family is also started after the war. Hester is seen pregnant in the film's final scene, and Tom walks to her side, ignoring Claire, a woman he knew during the war. Again, after the war has come to an explicit end, a main female character winds up on the path to start a family. As the scene is placed at the very end of the movie, it is meant to be an epilogue of sorts to show what the characters are up to after the war. Hester is a bright, intelligent, feisty young woman. There are many interesting things she *could* be doing that are shown at the end, even alongside the pregnancy. However, the pregnancy is the only glimpse of after-war life that audiences get.

Another instance of pregnancy is seen in *Female Agents*, when Louise finds out she is with child about halfway through the film. This remains a background arc for a solid portion of the movie's duration, and it all comes to a head when she is tortured, pushed under water, and punched in the stomach: all things that imply that she lost her child. Louise loses her entire family over the course of the film. Her husband died before the events even take place, her brother dies in the torture chamber, she loses her child, and the women on her team all die in the field. Louise is left lonely and miserable at the end of the film, unlike the two other women who are happy with lovers and children. Her life revolved entirely around her duty, and when it was over she had nothing else to turn to. The pregnancy trope itself is interesting: often it has no value to the plot and is on screen just for shock factor or to give a female character a family. It is reasonable to believe that this trope fits in with the male gaze and male desire.

Family and pregnancy are much less prominent in the more recently crafted films. Instead, the duty of these women takes center stage without the contingency of children. The mild exception to this can be found in *Allied*, where Marianne and Max's family becomes a major plot point in the second half of the film. The first portion focuses on the mission the two have, a mission that Marianne, not Max, is in charge of. The two later fall in love and have a family. Marianne is not working for a government anymore, while Max is still involved in the war effort. In that sense, Marianne abandoned her duty for her family. On the other hand, her family does not make up her entire post-job character. It is discovered that she was actually a German spy, and this discovery takes up viewer interest. While all of her duty has been abandoned in favor of her child, her

experiences in the field still remain pertinent to the plot. They are not just brushed aside like women's experiences in earlier films.

Joan from *The Imitation Game* does not want a family. In fact, it is made very clear throughout the film that she wants to work instead, an unconventional lifestyle at that point in history. It is revealed in the final scenes of the film that she does get married, but her personal life stays out of the story. Similarly, *A Call To Spy*, shows no children or family. Noor's mother is shown in a few scenes, but beyond that the film focuses entirely on the women doing their jobs. This makes sense and is in line with what the writer conceived when creating the piece. Thomas wanted to create a film highlighting women doing their jobs well. This film focuses entirely on the duties of these women. Virginia's excellent work in the field: Noor's job as the first female transmitter, Vera's role as the only women working at intelligence Headquarters. The film's never strays from these positions and the women's on-screen time is almost exclusively limited to scenes related to the dangerous jobs they are undertaking. They are depicted in their jobs without any underlying sexual nuance or portrayal, again showing modern films breaking away from the male gaze, even within a genre that has a heavy masculine tradition.

The three films that were produced in the early 2000's all show family as taking a traditional role in women's lives over their duties and actions throughout the film. The women's end-states all relate to the family they have created, are creating, or lack. On the other hand, the more modern renditions of these spy tales take a much stronger focus on duty as opposed family's sake. This major change in character arc and plot element does fit in with ideals of modern feminism. Instead of focusing on the roles women are restricted to, and ways they are oppressed, modern feminism focuses on more positive images and empowerment—focusing on what women *can* do despite societal pitfalls. This is shown in two of the more recent films, *Imitation Game* and *A Call to Spy*. Instead of connecting these female characters to their families, or lack thereof, these films place a larger role on women's continued duties and lives outside of these restraints. While many of the films observed stick women with families or death, these two pieces show more to these characters than motherhood, suffering, and traditional gender roles.

Violence

As these films take place during war time, violence is a key theme throughout the on-screen portrayals and historical background. As far as it related to female portrayals, observations fall all over the map. However, there is a general pattern that disconnects women from direct violent acts, except for *Female Agents*.

For example, *Black Book* shows Rachel with a gun, but she never uses it against anyone in the film. She does kill a man, although this is achieved by cutting his oxygen off in a sealed coffin. It's an indirect form of killing, and not particularly violent. In *Enigma*, Hester almost beats Tom with a bat after he breaks in, but nothing comes of this. A male officer also kisses her against her will: an unwanted sexual advance. However, overall, the violence enacted by women is minimal.

Female Agents sings an entirely different tune. All four main ensemble members shoot and stab multiple people during the film. It is a part of both their survival, and goals as spies. Louise is even a trained sniper. However, she fails to shoot the Germans as her brother is captured, the camera showing a close up of the emotion on her face. This is the only sign of hesitation that the hardened figure shows throughout the entire film. Emotion prevents her ability to be violent. A similar emotional moment is seen in *Allied*. Marianne does not hesitate to enact extreme violence, shooting up the Nazi gathering. However, she freezes when the gun is aimed at a woman she befriended. Again, emotion got in the way of a women and her military duties.

There is no female-enacted violence in *Imitation Game*, and in *A Call to Spy* the violent acts are limited to Virginia exploding a train, and presumably people. However, none of these characters enact any of direct, violent acts that audiences have come to correlate with war.

Stereotyping

A few stereotypes relating to women's roles in society, and personalities, came to light throughout these films. Now, stereotypes and tropes are everywhere in film, and they are not necessarily a bad thing. Oftentimes they are paired with character complexities that challenge the very nature of the trope at play.

Interestingly enough, even though the earlier films have more prominent stereotypes, most of the films gave their characters enough complexity that the stereotyping did not make up their entire character.

For example, In *Black Book*, Rachel is painted out to be a slutty seductress. However, she is playing a character, and her motives behind this character are bringing down the Nazi Party. *Enigma* paints the portrait of two conflicting women: a beautiful blonde and a smart, practical brunette. However, the beautiful blonde had stolen government documents in order to decode them, an action that does not fit in with the expectations of her stereotype. Hester, however, never quite breaks free from the constraints of her typology. In *Female Agents*, a hardened boss, prostitute, smart-yet-naïve bomb mechanic, and officer's mistress make up the main group. However, the hardened boss shows her emotional side, the naïve one does not hesitate to intervene when things get violent, the prostitute shows great dedication to her spy position, and the mistress is willing to turn her lover in. All of these women start off in boxes but prove to audiences that they are more than just their stereotypes. The directors and scriptwriters allow them to push these boundaries.

In the more recent films, there is some stereotyping as well. Marianne, from *Allied*, is seen as a sneaky woman who has double-crossed several governments and loved ones. However, her dedication to her family, such as her willingness to protect her daughter and husband, shows that she is not evil at the core. Joan, from *Imitation Game*, is brilliant, finishing a crossword puzzle in record time and beating the other men she was competing against. Filmmakers chose to 1) not center her appearance on her smarts and 2) give her high levels of emotional intelligence alongside her logical knowledge. *A Call To Spy* was the only film that did not include the major stereotypes surrounding women in this genre of film. Vera's boss-like persona is similar to that of Louise's, but the filmmakers gave her enough backstory to the point that this persona felt more personality driven, rather than trope driven.

As modern feminism has a heavy focus on redefining womanhood, it makes sense that these more recent films let go of stereotypes as the basis for their characters. This way, there is more variety in the women on screen, not just among each other but within portrayals of similar characters. Even though earlier films let women break free of stereotypical boxes, these tropes still serve as major pieces of their characters.

Images

In addition to larger thematic pieces, smaller images within film reveal a great deal regarding a filmmaker's intentions. The previous section focused on thematic elements in female character's arcs. This section focuses more on on-screen images that help build up a theme, but also make statements on their own. These pieces relate to the physical element of cast members, common shot framing, genre-specific scenes (such as parties and large group gatherings in between action sequences), colors that appear in outfits or sets, and the final shots of each character on screen.

Physical Features

Previously, this paper discussed thematic, character arc related stereotypes. However, the WWII spy film genre makes use of another, more image-based, form of stereotyping. And that is the physicality of its main characters. Below are images of each main female character across these six movies.

Almost all of these women look very similar to one another. They have hair curled to just above the shoulder, as was the popular style during WWII, and many of them don various hats throughout their respective films. The women are petite, about average height or shorter. Their faces are a soft, rounded heart shape, and the addition of pouty lips and wide, rounded eyes give them a sense of innocence or naivete, despite the horrors they surely have witnessed. There are some small differences between them, such as chin



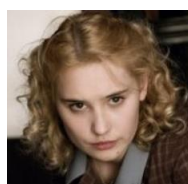
Hester: *Enigma*



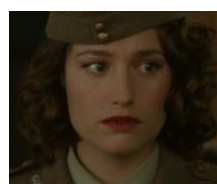
Claire: *Enigma*



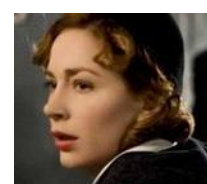
Rachel: *Black Book*



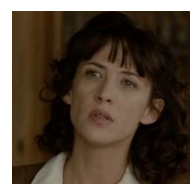
Gaëlle: *Female Agents*



Suzy: *Female Agents*



Jeanne: *Female Agents*



Louise: *Female Agents*



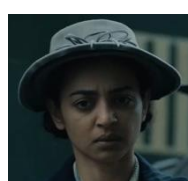
Joan: *Imitation Game*



Marianne: *Allied*



Virginia: *A Call to Spy*



Noor: *A Call to Spy*



Vera: *A Call to Spy*

length and jaw pronouncement, but these are elements that vary between actress to actress. Overall, these female leads were cast in a very similar way. The overall look of the women is the same and interchangeable.

Three women break this visual facial pattern—Noor, Vera, and Louise—and Virginia breaks patterns of physicality. Interestingly enough, three of the four pattern-breakers appear in recently made films.

Vera and Louise break this physical stereotype in the same way. They both have more defined, angular jaws. Their noses are longer and have less of an upturn. Hairstyles here also break the norm: Vera's in length, and Louise's addition of bangs. Additionally, their lips are thinner and contain less of the "pout" seen in other leads. Overall, these two characters lack the gentle femininity found in the majority. Their features are more masculine and hardened. Two other things connect these two women. 1) They can be found in the female-ensemble spy films of this analysis and 2) they hold positions of power. Louise is the one pulling her group together, both a spoken and unspoken leader. Vera works at headquarters, overseeing the work of the other spies. This image ties back to the theme of "othering," earlier discussed. It sets these two women apart from the pack: they are special, while the others are more visually replaceable.

Noor also breaks the typical genre pattern through her race. She is the only non-Caucasian presenting character. Noor is half Indian, half British, although she was cast to appear more the former than the latter. However, she still represents the film industry's attempts to be more diverse in both their castings and the stories that they choose to share. The inclusion of a non-white character in a more recent film is in line with modern feminist ideals: redefine the category of "women" to be more inclusive. Virginia is also the embodiment of this ideal, although it's not her race that adds diversity to the genre. Instead, her disability is what makes her unique. Virginia lost her leg after it got infected when she was younger. The expansion of women in these films to include those with disabilities also embodies a larger shift in feminism itself: be more inclusive.

Overall, the inclusion of characters who break the typical mold makes the female characters on screen appear more like real people, not just images with the purpose of pleasuring an audience.

Nudity

Beyond observable physical features, the physicality of these women is important in another way. Blatant nude scenes are present throughout the films, and many of these scenes serve no purpose to the plot, instead existing as a blatant objectification of women.

The film with the most outright nudity is *Black Book*. Relatively early on in the film, Rachel needs to dye her hair in order to disguise herself as Aryan. This includes her pubic hair. The act of dyeing it is seen on screen and it looks suspiciously like masturbation. Soon after, it is implied that she sleeps with a resistance fighter, as he mentions how he “gets to have her first.” During her mission, she gets naked and gives a Nazi a blow job, then going on to have sex with that officer a number of times on screen. One night, he asks her if she is Jewish, and she responds by undressing and placing his hands on her body, asking if each individual part “is Jewish.” Despite the fact that she is found out, they continue having sex. Also, while it is not an outright nude scene per se, when Rachel sings at the gathering, she is wearing a sheer dress that leaves little to the imagination. Rachel finds power over men through her body and their objectification of it, thus nude images are prominent throughout the film.

There is less outright nudity in *Enigma*, however female objectification still appears in its images. This notably happens in Tom’s flashbacks of his time with Claire. They have sex once, but the shots in this point of view focus on Claire’s body parts, with close ups of her rear end and pans up and down her legs a number of times. The camera work follows her as if she is more an object to be observed and less a person. These shots have no bearing on the plot and are there to show off her assets.

There is female objectification in the actual story of *Female Agents*, as a show is put on for the men in a hospital. It includes women stripping on stage for an audience of soldiers, wearing bras that entirely expose their nipples. The bras eventually get taken off and thrown towards the crowd. These images objectify women both from an audience standpoint and from perspectives in the story. In both cases, this outright display of nudity is for entertainment purposes. Nudity also appears later on in the film, as Louise and Gaëlle are tortured. Part of their torture is the exposure and embarrassment that comes with an objectified stripping.

These kinds of images are minimally present throughout the more recent films. Sex is alluded to in *Allied*, but is only shown on screen once—and even so, it’s done in a fade-to-black manner. Marianne

unbuttons her shirt, revealing cleavage, to test Max before they venture out into the city. Max also catches a glimpse of Marianne in the mirror getting dressed, but nothing is shown explicitly beyond her bare back. The pictures are not nearly as explicit, vulgar, or objectifying as those in earlier films. An additional observation: no nude shots make it on screen in either of the other recent movies, *A Call To Spy* and *Imitation Game*. Instead of focusing on women's bodies, the camera work focuses on their faces, emotions, and jobs.

The three earlier films in this selection all have shots on screen with the blatant objectification of women. These scenes show off the bodies of their respective female characters in a way that shocks, and pulls in, audiences. WWII films have been created largely for a male audience: a factor that cannot be ignored here. Oftentimes, they show a male hero undergoing heroic deeds. When women enter the picture as major characters, filmmakers still needed to keep films enticing for their audience demographics, hence the barrage of sex scenes and nudes. There was a shift in this technique, however, as nude scenes are all but absent from modern spy films featuring women. Instead of dedicating some screen time to the showcase of their features, these films emphasize their faces: treating the female characters more like people as opposed to objects. By humanizing these characters and not portraying them as sexual objects, filmmakers break free of the male gaze trap: they do not treat their characters as something to sexually objectify

Color

Color symbolism is important in any storytelling medium. It often sets the mood of a scene, character, or series of key objects. The colors on screen shape the tone and mood of a story: viewers pick up on the tone being emitted, even if they consciously miss the color cues. One color that reappeared throughout the selected films was red. The color red is complex when it comes to symbolic analysis. Sometimes it reflects anger. Other times it could be passion, love, danger, or sexuality. As it relates to fashion, red often gives off feelings of excitement, passion, or danger. Overall, it is a very intense color that holds a lot of meaning. And that meaning, as it appears throughout these films, remains consistent.

In *Black Book*, red appears a number of times related to Rachel. She wears bright red lipstick throughout much of the film. This is a shade of lipstick that was reportedly disliked by Adolf Hitler, as it has

connotations with being sinful and sexually amoral. Because of this, many women across the world began to wear it for patriotic and rebellions reasons as a silent protest against fascism. Rachel's red lipstick is a symbol of her rebellion; however, the Nazis she spends her time with see it in a different light, likely taking Hitler's sinful stance with the choice. And Rachel does nothing to contradict that opinion of her, as she uses her body to get into the inner circle to do her spy work. A red scarf appears in a train scene later in the film, and soon after that same scarf is used to kill a man. After the Nazi she has seduced discovers that she is Jewish, Rachel is seen wearing a bright red dress in the next scene and at a party after the fact as well. Red here centers around danger, deception, and sin. It is an enticing color, pulling audience members into both the story and Rachel's sexual objectification.

The color red also appears in a notable manner in one scene in *Enigma*. Claire, Hester's roommate, is seen wearing a red hat right before she disappears with government secrets. Similarly, in *Female Agents*, Suzy wears a red dress when she confronts, and hopes to shoot, her former Nazi lover. In all three of these films, the color red is 1) surrounded by deception and 2) limited to women.

In the more recent films, however, this deceptive color is essentially nowhere to be seen. It does make an appearance in *Allied*, when Marianne wears a red shirt after her husband discovers that she is a traitor. She also wears a red coat as he confronts her about it. In the other two films, it makes no notable appearances. The distancing from red, symbolic of deception and sin, in more recent films is in line with the modern feminist goal of providing a more positive picture of women. It also strays from stereotypes.

Final Images

Another pattern that can be seen across the films is patterns that lie in the final images of each main female character.

In *Black Book* Rachel's final moments on screen take place years after the war, and she can be seen walking away with her two children and, presumably, her husband. Hester, from *Enigma*, is seen pregnant next to Tom. In *Female Agents*, the last on screen images of Gaëlle depict her suicide as she lays on the ground in a cross formation before taking a cyanide pill. Suzy is seen next to her former lover, and a few shots later is

in a body bag, being carried away as he shot her before she could shoot him. Janelle is seen dead in an image taken at a concentration camp. And Louise is seen crying silently, left alone in the world.

Allied's Marianne shoots herself as well, as she would rather die than surrender. Joan from *Imitation Game* is seen helping out Turing. It is known that she is married, but the scene only shows her and her old friend. In *A Call To Spy*, Noor is seen being executed. So far, all of the main women in these films wind up dead, with children, or viscerally lonely without either. The final two women break this pattern. Virginia is seen walking away, off to carry out another mission in France.

The earlier films follow an essentialist model of thinking: that there are some traits that are essential to a woman's being. In this case, family is a big one. The women without families either end up dead or so miserable that they might as well be. However, there was a shift away from this ideal in the later films. Marianne from *Allied* had a family and still killed herself. Joan got married, but her husband is not a central piece of her identity. Virginia continued to work in the field and survive, and Vera got promoted: these two women focus on their work at the end of the films, giving them more options. The shift away from family or death mirrors a shift away from essentialist theory in modern feminism. The movements have evolved in order to include more definitions and components to what women are beyond their relation to men and children.

Conclusion

The WWII spy film genre is largely male focused and alongside positive change in female representations, a handful of themes and tropes have remained consistent, despite modern calls for change. A few thematic and character-based arcs show up similarly in both micro-eras examined in this study, before and after the fourth wave of feminism. Stereotypes have been lessened throughout the more recent films, but still very much exist. They have, however, become less intense and offensive. Women also stray away from violence in films from both micro-eras, and in more than one instance their emotion gets in the way of their work.

On the other hand, there is much more positive change to these themes than stagnation. For one, films have started pitting women against each other much less often, instead opting to have them stand together as a unified group. Family also became less of a central focus in the lives of these female characters: filmmakers opted to focus more on their lives and wartime duties than their inevitable fate to become mothers. This connects to the final images of the women seen on screen. Earlier films had three options: pregnant, dead, or miserable. However, two of the recent films showed women being good at their jobs, continuing to have a life outside of these genre expectations.

Visually, there is a physical type that filmmakers like to cast to represent women during WWII. However, some filmmakers have begun to start straying from the type, although it is still largely used to represent the visual culture of the time. The inclusion of other races, disabled women, and those with less femininity has begun to open up the definition of “women” within the portrayals of WWII times. The objectifying nudity that was overtly pronounced in earlier films has toned down significantly, and in most cases is absent, in the recent films. More respect is shown to the female characters, as they have started to be treated as people: not objects to exist to please the male gaze. Additionally, the color red is often tied with sin and danger and throughout the films is paired with the nefarious deeds of female characters, but this color connection is largely absent in films made after the modern wave of feminism in question.

All in all, ideals associated with the fourth wave of feminism have impacted this genre of film. Notable thematic and image-based differences exist between films released between 2000-2008 and those created between 2014-2019. A number of feminist movements took place between these time frames, and many nuances of the genre have shifted to accommodate created ideals. The notion of a “woman” is becoming more physically diverse, negative stereotypes are minimized, and a more positive picture of female empowerment has been created. Earlier films followed many of the elements theorized by Mulvey in her gaze theory, while more recent films have started to stray from a voyeuristic perspective. Women’s stories are being shared: women are no longer on the screen for looks.

The next step in this investigation will be to examine audience reactions of the films, at the time they were produced, alongside elements of the actual production. This paper observes the final product of all of

these decision, however an examination of the actual decisions behind each film could shine further insight on how the industry is responding to changing feminist ideals.

This analysis could also be further supported by expanding the bank of films analyzed to include more titles. It could also include groupings of films produced in different micro-eras: for example, a grouping produced between 1985-1990, before the third wave of feminism. That way, it could be established if a larger pattern of societal change impacting film exists.

Another, more data-based study could be conducted as well. Participants could watch clips of various films included and then answer questions about their perspective of women. A study of this sort would allow further insight into the true impact that female portrayals in film have on attitudes. It is clear that society has an impact on entertainment media, but it is also important to establish the impact that that media has on society in return.

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