

Chicks with Brains: Representing Women's Intellect in Film

Since the Second Wave Feminist Movement during the 1970s, Hollywood has slowly begun to give prominent and leading roles to women. However, the intellectual representations of women are out of line with reality, in many cases failing to reflect the successes and struggles that women have faced in a resistant social and political environment. This area considers the portrayals of traditional myths about “chicks with brains” across film history, as well as new myths and/or myth-busters that may have arisen since the Second Wave.

In what ways does Hollywood control expectations about the brains of women by foiling their intellect with their own bodies? Beautiful and naïve Elle Woods becomes a successful lawyer based on her knowledge of hair care products in *Legally Blond*; Natalie Portman is an astrophysicist whose sarcastic charm wins over Thor, heir to the God's Realm of Asgard in superhero blockbuster *Thor*; and *Easy A* reminds us that smart teens—even ones as stunningly gorgeous as Emma Stone—aren't accepted in the brutal high school hierarchies of popularity. How are smart women cast as threats to the social order, as in Julia Roberts' portrayal of 1950s Wellesley College co-ed Katherine Ann Watson in *Mona Lisa Smile*? What do we make of cinematic strategies that cast women as the counter-intellectual to men of superior intellect, such as Bella Swan in the *Twilight* saga, and Cameron Diaz in *Bad Teacher*, or don't allow them to display any characteristics of the intellectual at all?

This area seeks to critique the myths of women's intellect in film across multiple genres and historic time periods, and across cultures and national borders (films do not need to have been produced in the U.S.). Papers might consider film history as well as cultural, social, or political history when formulating their analysis, in order to examine the twin complexities of subjugation by the film industry as well as the broader oppression of women in society.

Questions for consideration may include, but are not limited to:

- ◆ In what ways are women in film imprisoned by their intelligence?
- ◆ In what way are women ostracized for it?
- ◆ Are there cases in which women in film are set free, or live better, as a result of intellectual growth?
- ◆ How do female roles in film reinforce standards of beauty, submissiveness, and silence, over intellect, problem solving, or leadership?
- ◆ In what ways are smart women infantilized, or commodified, by their intelligence in film (i.e.: chicks, babes, and honeys who are, despite their appearance or place in society, intelligent)?

- ◆ How does an actress's personal standards of intellect in her real life affect the way she is given roles, or seen on screen?
- ◆ Are there successes (i.e. females in film who are intelligent without also being objectified or villified)?

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