

# Representation of Women in Classical Hollywood: The Dumb Blonde, Femme Fatale and The Screwball Heroine

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**Katarina Smoljo**

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Zadar, 2023.



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**Table of contents:**

1. Introduction .....	6
2. The Classical Hollywood Cinema .....	7
3. Feminist film studies .....	11
4. <i>The dumb blonde</i> .....	17
4.1 Definition of <i>the dumb blonde</i> .....	17
4.3 Evolution of <i>the dumb blonde</i> .....	19
4.3 Modern adaptations of <i>the dumb blonde</i> .....	23
4.4 Case study – <i>Some Like It Hot</i> .....	25
5. <i>Femme fatale</i> .....	29
5.1 Definition of <i>femme fatale</i> .....	30
5.2 The becoming of <i>femme fatale</i> and its role in film noir .....	32
5.3 Contemporary interpretations of <i>femme fatale</i> .....	36
5.4 Alfred Hitchcock and his leading ladies .....	39
5.5 Case study – <i>Vertigo</i> .....	41
6. <i>The screwball heroine</i> .....	47
6.1 The screwball comedy .....	48
6.2 Definition of <i>the screwball heroine</i> .....	50
6.3 Howard Hawks and the “Hawksian woman” .....	52
6.4 Case study – <i>His Girl Friday</i> .....	54
7. Conclusion .....	59
Works cited .....	61
8. Representation of Women in Classical Hollywood Cinema: <i>The Dumb Blonde, Femme Fatale</i> and <i>The Screwball Heroine</i> : Summary and key words .....	65

9. Prikaz žena u klasičnom holivudskom filmu: glupa plavuša, fatalna žena i screwball  
junakinja: Sažetak i ključne riječi .....66

## 1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that movies play a significant part in influencing people and their opinions. Hollywood films specifically have proven to hold a great deal of such impact, as they remain a source of amusement, not only for English speaking countries, but for countries and cultures all around the world. Many of the focal elements these films have today can be credited to the period of Classical Hollywood Cinema, which is also often described as the greatest time of American film. The era of Classical Hollywood Cinema is known for its many technological breakthroughs in film, but also for the variety of characters it portrayed through the films' stories. These character models, with shared traits, were common in many films, and have therefore resulted in the birth of various archetypes. They were most prominent in the representation of women, as the roles and values assigned to women changed over the years, many female archetypes hence originate from this period. As a result, they have shaped various presumptions about women that are present even today and have even established themselves as stereotypes.

The study of the representation of the many characters from this period has been a matter for analysis for many theorists, most notably for feminists. They were concerned with the fact that such stereotypes were not only reflections of the ideologies of that time, but they have ever since affected both adults and children and their own understandings of gender roles and ideas of femininity and masculinity. It is because of this that the portrayal of women on screen must be taken into examination, and the impact they have on people today needs to be addressed. Consequently, this master's thesis will focus its analysis on three female stereotypes originating from the Classical Hollywood Cinema, which will be explained through the substantial body of academic research on this topic. The three rather different portrayals of women, *the dumb blonde*, *femme fatale* and *the screwball heroine*, will be defined, studied and further analysed through the case study of three corresponding films: *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *Vertigo* (1958)

and *His Girl Friday* (1940). These analyses will be preceded by an introduction to classical Hollywood and its most prominent features, as well as by some important feminists and their theories related to film and representation of women.

## **2. The Classical Hollywood Cinema**

The Classical Hollywood Cinema stands as one of the most important periods in film history, making its mark, not only on the films of that time, but also on culture, people, and today's films. It is during this period of filmmaking that the part of women in film began to be explored through various roles and stereotypes, and as such, the mentioned period is vital for further understanding the roles of female characters. That is why it is important to briefly analyse the main aspects of the classical Hollywood style.

The Classical Hollywood Cinema refers to the period between 1917 to 1960, as identified by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1998), since it embodies “principles that remain quite constant across decades, genres, studios, and personnel” and which form this “distinct and homogenous” style (Bordwell 1). The classical Hollywood style follows specific rules, where the element of the story is the basic and most important one; the film form is defined by the element of unity; the film itself should be realistic and adhere to the element of continuity and ‘invisible’ storytelling, making it unambiguous and straightforward; and it had to contain an element of emotional appeal, which would go beyond any specific nation and social class. Seeing that the style functions within these norms, Bordwell further analyses it at three specific levels: devices, systems, and relations of systems (1). Some of the primary principles of the mentioned levels will be further analysed to fully understand the style itself, as they are significant to the stereotypes that will later be examined.

As already stated, the story is probably the most notable element of the classical Hollywood style. Conveying a story in a manner that made it comprehensible and genuine was



essential to making the film appealing and interesting for the viewers. The connection between cause and effect was determined by elements of continuity and close causality, which were not to be interrupted with coincidence and unexpectedness in the narration, since this ruins the unity of the film. And narration, a significant principle of the style, was omniscient, as well as “invisible” since the editing and filming techniques made the story “flow”. Another important element were the goal-oriented characters, who, in their efforts to reach their goals, further strengthened the connection between cause and effect. Furthermore, Bordwell adds that the classical film contains two lines of action; one portrays a heterosexual romantic love, whereas the other is casually related to the romantic action (16). The close connection of the second line of action to the romantic one contributes to the narrative logic and stands as one of the most unusual characteristics of classical cinema. In this thesis, the analysed films will provide examples of the mentioned elements, especially that of a lead character who is motivated by his/her goal or an issue they need to solve, which they try to do throughout the film, and usually succeed by the end. This makes the story effortless for the viewers to follow, as they can connect the mere plot of the film to its story, and the progression of the narration runs smoothly.

Motivation is one more key principle of the classical cinema style, and it is closely related to the story of the film. It is motivation that serves in the unity of a classical film, with Bordwell defining it as “the process by which a narrative justifies its story material and the plot’s presentation of that story material” (18). What is more, motivation can be distinguished through several separate types: compositional, realistic, intertextual (which includes the generic motivation) and artistic motivation. The compositional motivation is key to the narration of the film, seeing that it provides essential story information, in other words, it helps the viewers connect cause and effect by providing certain elements of the story which enable it to continue smoothly. Consequently, the realistic motivation cooperates closely with the compositional one, and as the name suggests, it aims to portray the story in a realistic way, in order to make it more

believable. For example, if the story is set in a historic period, the movie set and props are motivated realistically, meaning that they try to make the film as true to its story period as possible. Furthermore, intertextual motivation justifies the story on the basis of specific classes of art, or genre, and it includes the generic motivation, which is the most common one. For instance, a romantic comedy may always have a happy ending, so the viewers expect it. Another, special type of motivation, is the artistic motivation. This refers to the technical virtuosity, costumes, and spectacle, which were used to create a reaction among the spectators, as well as to make them appreciate the film's story even more.

Time and space are two additional key elements of the classical Hollywood film style, and they are essentially subordinate to narration. In the classical film, the story is usually shown in a 1–2–3 order of events. This limits the use of “flashforwards” in the film, as they, by giving the viewers a glimpse of the future, do not comply with the story's order. “Flashbacks”, however, are permitted, even though they are not used often in classical cinema. They are motivated by character memory and require the viewers to be active observers, so they can connect the pieces of the story successfully. Also, they are generally included when the story begins *in medias res*, i.e., from the middle of the action. One important technique Bordwell mentions in relation to time is crosscutting (48). It serves as a narrational process, when two or more lines of action from different settings are connected and happen at the same time, so the scenes are cut parallel from one to the other. This also helps the narration not to limit itself to only one character's point of view. Similarly, space is subservient to the narrative causality as well. In constructing space, cinematographers were inspired by famous paintings, and they used different techniques in filming, for example reframing, or frame cut, to follow moving figures, continuity editing, etc. Moreover, classical Hollywood cinematic space is constructed in planes through different depth cues, for which lighting was the most important element, followed by selective focus. Sound was used to create space as well.

The above-mentioned principles serve the most important aspect of film, and that is the viewers. As we could see, time and space work in accordance with the story, and the motivation serves the classical narration as well, all so that the spectators could engage in the film without any confusion or intermissions. The viewers are those who essentially construct the film's storyline, by acknowledging these different elements that help them to establish the connection between cause and effect. They "connect the dots", create expectations, and make assumptions about the characters and the story, and finally, the ending becomes the culmination of the spectator's entirety of information and hypotheses, as all the causal gaps get filled. This is precisely what Steinberg describes as necessary in "following the tale" (qtd. in Bordwell et al. 7), and so the spectator needs to collaborate in fulfilling the film's form. Furthermore, Gombrich draws attention to the concepts of "schemata" and "mental sets" (ibid. 7), where traditional schemata (patterns for depiction of a subject matter) make the basis of the viewer's expectations or mental set. When applied to the context of classical filmmaking, these concepts, when paired, indicate the connection between the classical film and the spectator. In other words, the viewers are expected to perform a set of activities, making their role a dynamic one.

This chapter can be concluded with the realisation that Classical Hollywood Cinema followed distinct rules and patterns, which are responsible for forming its style. Not only does this apply to the elements that have been discussed in this chapter, but it also refers to the portrayal of certain characters, especially female ones. The female characters all had very similar roles or were depicted in specific ways, which were representative of the societal positions women were assigned to during those times. This resulted in the creation of various female stereotypes, particularly during that era of cinema. Hence the issue of the representation of women in film has been a growing topic and a concern of the feminist film studies.

### 3. Feminist film studies

Anneke Smelik wrote that “cinema is a cultural practice where myths about women and femininity, and men and masculinity, in short, myths about sexual difference are produced, reproduced, and represented” (7), which points to the importance of studying and analysing films within the realm of gender studies, especially because of the influence they had, and still have, on the viewers. Classical cinema was mainly criticized through semiotic and psychoanalytical readings that provided the feminist film theory with new perspectives. The semiotics focused on how cinematic techniques play an important role in the representation of sexual differences, while the psychoanalytical approach drew attention to structures of desire and subjectivity. Moreover, it is important to mention that the feminist film theory initially focused their studies on the ideological contents of films, that is, how the film reflects meanings, and later moved on to study the use of various mechanisms and devices for the production of meaning in movies, as they were then viewed as constructing meaning, rather than reflecting it. Consequently, as Smelik implies, cinema actively produces meanings about women and femininity (9). Hence, some prominent feminist film studies, based on these approaches, will be briefly described in the continuation of this chapter.

An interesting perspective on representation of women in cinema, with a semiotic background, was that of Claire Johnston. Johnston was interested in the structure of representation, and she claimed that, while cinematic images of women do show the ideology of the film industry and cinema in general, they are far too lightly separated from “the texts and psychic structures through which they function, as well as the institutional and historical contexts that determine their form and their reception” (qtd. in White 118). She interpreted cinema as a semiotic sign system, where the woman functions as a sign, and film as a language. Therefore, she uses the concept of “myth” to decode the function of women in classical

Hollywood, and further explains how female characters are defined as a code or convention. Also, “(...) woman as a sign stands for the ideological meaning that she carries in relation to men, while in relation to herself, she possesses no meaning” (ibid. 118). Hence, their depiction is far from positive, as they represent the “not-man”, and the “woman-as-woman” is not present in the text of the film (Johnston 26). As a result, the constructed images of women are, most importantly, appealing, which is the key element in making a film into a success. This type of approach was later criticized by other feminist interpretations, which gave examples of women as signifiers and performers of ideological functions, as, for instance, in the case of westerns, where a woman is a sign for home. However, the semiotic approach, where “language and visual systems can produce signs which have meanings that are determined by codes”, was recognized as significant for the cinema, and helpful in the understanding of how the representation of women was developed by the codes of cinematic representation (De Lauretis 4).

One of the most compelling analyses among feminist film theorists was that of Laura Mulvey, who examined the role of women in classical cinema from a psychoanalytical point of view. Mulvey focused on certain ideas and principles through her essay, such as “phallogentrism”, referring to the “image of the castrated woman” (6). She argues that, by lacking the male genitalia, a woman symbolises the threat of castration and, as such, she stands as a symbol of the male other, where she serves as the carrier of meaning, and not a maker. This contributes to the patriarchal order present in films of that time. Moreover, there is a focus on visual pleasure derived from sexual difference. The first concept she uses in her study of cinematic representations of women, and related to visual pleasure, is the one of “scopophilia”. i.e., the pleasure in looking. Women in films had to be physically attractive, charming, beautiful, and often clueless, as their main function was to appeal to the male protagonist, but also to the male viewer. This ties in with her theory of “the male gaze”, which explains how

female characters had to look appealing to men, since their main two functions were to serve as objects of erotic pleasure for the characters within the film's story, and as erotic objects for the spectators (ibid. 11). Therefore, women are then subjected to sexual objectification, and they eventually become the male protagonist's "possession", which adds to the male power role. This can be seen, for example, through the many roles of Marilyn Monroe, who was in fact perceived as the "sex icon" of her time; or in the films of Alfred Hitchcock, who portrayed an attractive and mysterious female figure, also known as the *Hitchcock blonde*, in his work. These women were beautiful and served as the focus of the lead male character, which will later be examined in more detail. Spectators, therefore, identify with the male figure, since it is the one holding the power. What is more, the "scopophilic" aspect of classical cinema, as proposed by Mulvey, includes voyeuristic and narcissistic elements into the story. The voyeuristic scopophilia "produces pleasure through looking at a character or figure as the object, whereas the narcissistic visual pleasure comes from the identification with the figure in the image" (13). There is also an explanation of the "fetishistic scopophilia", that develops the physical attractiveness of the object and alters it into something that evokes satisfaction.

Teresa De Lauretis analysed the representations of women from both a semiotic and psychoanalytical point of view. She focused on the issue of female subjectivity in relation to the film narrative and female spectatorship. De Lauretis argued that subjectivity is a continuous process of self-production, reproduced by narration, since stories build their structures from the desire of the subject. The narrative is "oedipal" in structure, as well as in power and position, as it constructs sexual differences and allocates roles of men as agents and women as outsiders. For this reason, men are usually portrayed as those finding the answer or solution to a problem or mystery, while women are, in fact, seen as that mystery. What is more, one function of the film narrative is to entice women into femininity, so that the female subject is created to want and desire femininity. It works both with the women's knowledge and without it, making this

function a seductive one. As a consequence, the role of woman is an unlucky one, as she does not find herself capable of her own representation, but instead depends on the masculine representation and the mirror image of the femininity it makes. In addition to this, De Lauretis claims that women are constructed through effects of language and representation, and that the cinema, as a social technology, is “the semiotic apparatus in which the encounter takes place, and the individual is addressed as subject. Cinema is at once a material apparatus and a signifying practice in which the subject is implicated, constructed, but not exhausted” (15). Her feminist semiotics investigates the manners in which structures of narration construct and represent subjectivity and point out a potential change of those structures. And when it comes to the issue of female spectators, Teresa De Lauretis differentiates two processes of identification. On the one hand, the first one comprises an active masculine identification with the gaze (looks of camera and male characters) and a passive, feminine identification with the image (body, landscape). On the other hand, the second process contains the “identification with the figure of narrative movement, the subject, and with the figure of narrative closure, the narrative image” (144). All in all, these concepts give a deeper insight into the roles attributed to women, especially into the representations of “woman”, whilst also including different approaches and theoretical backgrounds.

Another feminist critic with an interesting view on the idea of female desire and representation in cinema is Kaja Silverman, who focused more on the importance of voice, rather than the gaze. She criticized the feminist cinematic critique which focused primarily on the image and construction of woman as the object of the male gaze. Thus, she argued that the female voice stands as a crucial part in making of sexual differences, as it held the same equally important normative representations and functions as the female body (Silverman viii). The female character is determined by castration, so that the male character is given the illusion of completeness and unity. Cinema portrays this through the gaze, but also through the auditory

register and apparatus. According to Silverman, the female voice is "...restricted to the realm of the body which amounts to keeping it outside discourse. In this way the female voice can hardly reach a signifying position in language, meaning or power and is hence all too easily reduced to screams, babble or silence in dominant cinema." (qtd. in Smelik 18-19). The concepts of cultural fantasy and maternal voice are also investigated, and the signifying role of mother in early childhood is highlighted. Silverman reflects on the psychoanalytical approach by Lacan, and claims that speech produces absence, a not presence. In addition to this, the voice introduces a division between meaning and materiality, and the sounds it makes usually surpass signification to some degree, before and after the entry into language. For this reason, the voice is never completely standardized. Further in this paper, it will be seen how the female voice served women's representation, as for example, in the case of the *dumb blonde* stereotype, where Marilyn Monroe not only comes across as foolish with the language she uses, but also her voice is quite distinctive, often described as breathy and sultry, so it would contribute to the seductive nature of the characters she portrayed.

A similar analysis was conducted by Amy Lawrence, who also studied the representation of women in classical Hollywood in relation to the female voice. According to her, the woman's voice contains three main issues: "(1) the physical ability to make a sound, which is then reproduced through cinema/sound technology, (2) a woman's relationship to language or verbal discourse, (3) her possession of authorial point of view, as in the author's "voice." (3). She further claimed that women did not have the same liberties to express themselves as men did, and when they were finally able to speak in films with the new sound technology, their speech was followed by years of ideological burdens. Their voice primarily functioned to serve the male character, and the more they attempted to express themselves, the more they were being suppressed. Throughout the analyses of certain films, Lawrence indicates that female characters that were silent had to be made to speak, whereas the ones that were very



vocal and talked too much had to be silenced, usually by male characters. Such a shift in focus on the female voice, rather than the gaze and their bodies, is quite interesting, as well as important, and it has contributed to the studies on female representation in movies. Not only is it significant what women look like, but even more so what they are saying and in what manner or circumstance. This is particularly fascinating for the films of classical Hollywood cinema, as the various female stereotypes originate from that era.

Taking everything into consideration, the importance of feminist film studies is rather obviously of great importance for feminism in general, but also for the study of numerous other aspects of human life, such as psychology, sociology, and various political and social ideologies. Feminist film studies are based on different approaches, and the main two were explored in this chapter, the psychoanalytical and the semiotic approach. Moreover, there are many feminist theorists, and the focus of their analyses differs. However, the recurring central points were the physical appearance and voice of female characters. Classical Hollywood Cinema delivered certain stereotypes that are even present in today's cinema, as well as society. It brought to light the intricate relationship between the patriarchal ideology and feminist understandings of female figures and female power, and the representation of female characters serves as a perfect example. Thus, the mentioned issues are the central focus of this master's thesis, and the feminist film studies present a valuable and necessary introduction to the analyses that will follow. As media is a powerful tool in conveying messages and ideas, it should be an interest of both men and women to ensure that women are represented in a reasonable way, with all the liberties and logics that are usually allocated to male characters. The centre of attention should not be solely placed on their bodies or lack of intelligence, or even the mysterious side of their nature, as was shown through the *femme fatale*. This paper will investigate three stereotypes of Classical Hollywood Cinema, *the dumb blonde*, *femme fatale* and *the screwball heroine*.

## **4. *The dumb blonde***

*The dumb blonde* is the first stereotype of the Classical Hollywood Cinema's representation of women that will be analysed in this section of the thesis. The definition, question of the stereotype's origin and its influence on the modern-day cinema will be examined.

### **4.1 Definition of *the dumb blonde***

The infamous female archetype of *the dumb blonde* has been a burning matter of feminist critique for years, as it was and still is, a common representation of women on screen and in literature. This stereotype became so prominent that even the phenomenon of the “dumb blonde jokes” became distinctive throughout the years. *The dumb blonde* character, as is evident from its name, is portrayed as a light-coloured, more specifically blonde-haired female, very attractive and desirable in her appearance, but also ignorant and clueless in her thoughts and actions. While there is no evidence that blonde women are less intelligent, this type of woman was represented as dumb, that is, completely ignorant and relying more on her looks than her brains. Also, blonde hair has very often been considered as appealing throughout history, especially when paired with blue-coloured eyes, and even more so in European cultures, tracing as far back as to Greek mythology with the light-haired, beautiful goddess Aphrodite. In addition to this, in modern-day popular culture, there is the stereotype that men are usually more attracted to blonde women than to women with other hair colours. Therefore, it can be seen that the character of *the dumb blonde* is determined by a strong emphasis on looks, especially since it was depicted as having a larger bust and a perfect hourglass figure, thus also referred to as “the busty blonde” or “the pin-up blonde”. Kragić similarly describes the “pin-up type” as referring to physically extremely attractive actresses with a provocative, luxurious, and pure

beauty, especially having large breasts and/or beautiful legs, and whose beauty is emphatically emphasized in the film, and the discourse about the film in magazines and promotional material presents them as the ideal of physical beauty and eroticism (15). Hollywood, therefore, created and fully embraced this new voluptuous version of a blonde female, taking a break from the old representations of blondes, such as the *virgins* and *vamps*. For a complete understanding of these stereotypical female precursors, *the virgin* was described as:

“...a simple-minded, sensitive, and benevolent girl, loyal to her family and friends, who, due to her naivety and lack of greater life experience, becomes a victim of plotters, false protectors and seducers, but who, in contact with a corrupt (often urban) environment, shows moral firmness (as she is most often of puritanical upbringing) and the ability to self-sacrifice ... having long (fair) curly hair, heart-shaped lips, big eyes and eyelashes (Kragić 3-4).

On the other hand, *the vamp* stereotype was established as a character who is:

“... a superior, unattainable woman, whose beauty bewitches, but who, more than with her beauty, attracts with mystery, inscrutability, her frequent contradictory actions and morals, and with a combination of strength and sensitivity, benevolence and unscrupulousness.” (Patalas in Kragić 7)

Consequently, the new and alluring blonde, *the blonde bombshell*, was designed as a continuation of these archetypes, and particularly her main objective was to turn heads and to take full focus of the viewer’s gaze. The stereotype carried a sexual message, and by being rather sexually explicit, these women had to be stupid. This perfectly shows the sexist and patriarchal perspectives of the time, where women could be either intelligent or attractive, but not both: “If you have given yourself over to the pleasures of the body, you must be immune to the pleasures of the mind. This is a traditional criticism of women as the “wild creatures” in our midst” (McCracken 83).

Thus, *the blonde bombshell* was reduced to only her looks, as she did not have much to say, and when she would speak in films, it would not be anything clever or too important. This

resulted in the term *the dumb blonde*, or what the today's western culture also refers to as *the blonde bimbo*. Such a portrayal of women is important for feminist and social studies, seeing that it presented a woman who was considered an example of an almost perfect female representation. So, it is fascinating to observe which qualities a woman needed to have in order to reach the ideal of a perfect woman, particularly looks-wise. The fact that the "perfect blonde" ought to be extremely beautiful, while at the same time must not think too much or ask too many questions, identified blonde women in general with a negative connotation, which further contributed to the oppression of women by men, and resulted in *the dumb blonde* stereotype.

### **4.3 Evolution of *the dumb blonde***

*The dumb blonde* was a prominent representation of women during the period of the Classical Hollywood Cinema, and as such it requires a further look into its origins and development over the years. As it was mentioned previously, this type of female representation was heavily determined by physical appearance, and its main purpose was to serve to the male gaze, that is, to be the sexual object of male desire. This type reached its highest popularity during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the pin-up type, which is a category of *the dumb blonde* stereotype, had its rise closely connected to the World War II, as it was a kind of escape for the soldiers from their dark everyday reality. The type was further popularized by the numerous commercials and consumer culture of the time, with advertisements featuring busty, beautiful blondes with their perfect curls and red lipstick. The portrayal of *the dumb blonde* is still present in today's movies and series, more often ridiculed than it was in the classical Hollywood, but existent.

It may be a difficult task to determine an exact point in time when *the dumb blonde* stereotype was created, as many critics have their own opinions on the matter. Nonetheless, according to cultural historian Joanna Pitman, the first dumb blonde has its roots in Europe, as

she attributes this role to the French courtesan Catherine-Rosalie Gerard Duthé (129). Duthé grew up in a covenant and was a talented dancer before she became a companion of the French aristocracy and established herself as one of the most famed courtesans of that time. She had a habit of making long silences before speaking, which was perceived as a sign of ignorance, since she lacked the quick and witty responses intelligent people would have, and this soon became a source of entertainment for the French society. Moreover, the playwright Landrin in his 1775 play “Les Curiosites de la Foire Saint Germain” (The Curiosities of the Saint Germain’s Fair) portrays her as:

“...a pretty but unanimated doll who barely accomplishes physical acts: she eats, drinks, dances, sings and acts like a real person inhabiting a pretty living body; people realize that she is endowed with a spark of intelligence just when she successfully deprives men from their money. Duthé’s doll is a witless girl, lacking just the most indisputable manifestation of men’s and women’s intelligence at the time: wit.” (Salazar 1)

Furthermore, what laid the foundation for *the dumb blonde* character was the appearance of Jean Harlow in the 1930s film industry. Her career on screen is considered to have established *the blonde bombshell* archetype, and the name itself was coined after the titles of two of her movies; *Platinum Blonde* (1931) and *Bombshell* (1933). Thus, Jean Harlow’s “blondeness” was the start of the blonde era in classical Hollywood, paving the way for both the *femme fatale* and *the dumb blonde*:

In the late '40s, blondness was not yet *the* colour of Hollywood. The movie stars of the period were mostly brunettes or redheads. In the silent movies, blondes were the exception, not the rule. ... There was, in fact, something slightly outré about blondness in the '30s and '40s. It was, after all, associated with Jean Harlow and Mae West. It was associated with frank sexuality in an era when any kind of sexuality made people a little nervous... True, there was a few blondes with influence .... But blondness was not then, as it became in the '50s and '60s, a starlet’s choice. (McCracken 101)

In the 1950s, the focus on a voluptuous female body and blonde hair was heavily present in advertising and magazines, and Betty Grable is a perfect example of that. Her pictures in ads were responsible for her growing popularity which eventually enabled her to establish herself onto Broadway and screen. One of her most famous film successes was *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953) where she, alongside Marilyn Monroe, plays the character of a dumb blonde who is also a gold digger that tries to find a rich man she could marry. Both Grable and Monroe are shown as dumb blondes, as opposed to the brunette character of Lauren Bacall, and they both rely on the intellect of the brunette to accomplish their plans (Matelski). This portrayal of physically beautiful, yet not very intelligent, but rather superficial young women, was a common representation of blondes in films of that time.

The most famous blonde of the 1950s and 60s, as well as the most famous “dumb blonde”, was Marilyn Monroe. In fact, she is considered as the epitome of *the dumb blonde* character, with roles that perfectly describe the type, not only physically, but also mentally. In addition to this, she was the sex symbol of her time, and that is why with every character she played, the emphasis was predominantly on her appearance. One of her most famous dumb blonde characters was the one in the movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), where she plays Lorelei Lee, a showgirl and gold digger. Lorelei’s character is: “(...) breathy, pouting, wide-eyed, prone to grammatical error, constantly surprised by the world and unsophisticated in everything she does. These are, no doubt, markers of stupidity in some people. They are also markers of submission in a sexist society (...)” (McCracken 103). Her most popular quote from the film, that perfectly summarizes the sexist view and objectification of women, is: “Don't you know that a man being rich is like a girl being pretty? You wouldn't marry a girl just because she's pretty, but my goodness, doesn't it help?”

Moreover, her role as Lorelei also stressed the financial dependence of women, as they were seen as incapable of making their own economic security, so they had to seek it from men,

which further emphasized the patriarchal ideology of the time. So, Lorelei represents the idea of women's "exchange value", that is, their beauty and sexuality which become highly valuable commodities, and therefore, women can attain economic power by exchanging their 'assets' with men for materialistic objects and money. Another one of her famous *dumb blonde* characters was in the movie *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), where she played the forbidden object of desire of the lead male character. In this film, there is one of the most iconic Monroe's scenes, where she stands over the subway grate and the breeze blows up her white pleated skirt. Consequently, Marilyn Monroe set the foundations for the beautiful, buxom blonde women who rely on their looks instead of intellect to achieve their goals. Her greatest detriment was that she could never express her full potential and establish herself as a serious actress, as her career was built around this comic blonde character she portrayed so well.

Jayne Mansfield was another sex symbol of the 50s and 60s, and she was a sort of Marilyn Monroe alternative of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. Pitman writes about her in her book *On Blondes* (2004): "One more Monroe acolyte frequently dismissed as a dumb blonde was Jayne Mansfield, whose hair, breasts and general vulgarity won her a flimsy career for a few years. As Bette Davis said of her, 'Dramatic art, in her opinion, is knowing how to fill a sweater'." (228). She was yet another platinum blonde, who embodied *the dumb blonde character* successfully in the movies *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956), *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* (1957) and *Kiss Them for Me* (1957). In her first screen success, *The Girl Can't Help It*, she plays Jerri Jordan, a pretty, but naive girl who can't sing, but her mobster boyfriend wants to make her a famous singer. Jerri does not appear too bright; she is submissive to her boyfriend, and at first, she really doesn't seem to be able to sing at all. But in the end, we find out Jerri was just playing *the dumb blonde* part to get what she really wanted, which is to settle down and be a wife to a good man like Tom (her agent). Furthermore, in *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* she plays Rita Marlowe, whose character is based on *the dumb blonde* stereotype that

was embodied by the roles of Marilyn Monroe. This film is also recognized as Mansfield's "signature film". What is more, Jayne Mansfield is considered to be 'the smartest dumb blonde' of classical Hollywood, as she had a very high IQ and spoke several languages. However, the focus was more on the physical appearance of women, so she was praised more for her looks. Mansfield was, like Marilyn Monroe, featured on the front page of Playboy magazine, which is important to mention, as the popularity of *the dumb blonde* stereotype was frequently attributed to the rise of the Playboy cover girls. She did, however, try to take a step back from her usual character type, and even won a Golden Globe for her role in *The Wayward Bus* (1957).

### **4.3 Modern adaptations of *the dumb blonde***

As *the dumb blonde* was one of the most popular and most commercialized stereotypes during the era of classical Hollywood, it continued to hold its influence in the decades to follow, and many films carried on with this kind of female representation, especially in the comedy genre, where it realized its main, entertaining function. Despite the fact that this type of cinematic portrayal of women has been a constant subject of feminist criticism, especially in recent years, it still has its effect on many movies and TV series, often even in such nuances that may not be noticeable at first to the general public.

One great example of a contemporary *dumb blonde* stereotype would be the American actress Goldie Hawn. She began her career with the typical 'dumb blonde' role as the girlfriend of a radio host in the sitcom *Good Morning World* (1967-1968), after which she played another dumb blonde persona in the comedy show *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* (1967-1973). The latter was responsible for her breakthrough in the industry, and it made her popularity grow to an international level. Hawn was often described as the 'giggly dumb blonde' since she was famous for her high pitch giggles in the middle of jokes, as well as for her chirpy personality.



However, she was also criticized by feminists for portraying sexualized and ignorant female characters at a time when women were fighting for their rights to be equal to men:

“(...) Hawn also managed to raise some feminist eyebrows. “An editor from a women’s magazine came up to me and said, ‘Don’t you feel terrible that you’re playing a dumb blonde in a time when women are reaching out to become independent and liberated?’” recalls the star, who was stunned by the query. “I said, ‘I don’t understand that question because I’m already liberated. Liberation comes from the inside’.” (Marshall)

Another case in point of the media’s stereotypical representation of dumb blondes can be seen in the film *Legally Blonde* (2001), starring Reese Witherspoon as the blonde protagonist Elle Woods. Elle is a pretty, ditzy, superficial and wealthy blonde, who does not seem too bright, rather clueless and ignorant, as her focus is primarily on looks and clothes. She decides to apply for Harvard Law School because she wants to win back her ex-boyfriend, who broke up with her because she wasn’t “serious” enough. He even says to Elle, “I need to marry a Jackie, not a Marilyn.” The film highlights the unfair stereotypical treatment of blonde women, and Elle’s character is a perfect play on *the dumb blonde*, which is also noticeable in the title of the movie. By the end of the film, she proves herself extremely capable and intelligent, and is accepted to Harvard Law School.

Anna Faris has also often portrayed *the dumb blonde* character, her most notable role being the one of Cindy Campbell in the *Scary Movie* films (2000 – 2006). Cindy is a sort of a satirical representation of *the dumb blonde*, as the films are a parody of other popular films of the time. She is naive, slightly insecure and not very smart, and there are recurring gags about her, one that she isn’t busty enough, and the other are the exaggerated sex scenes with her. Another Faris’ ridiculed *dumb blonde* role was in the movie *The House Bunny* (2008), where she played a Playboy playmate Shelley Darlington, who gets kicked out of the Playboy Mansion the day after her 27<sup>th</sup> birthday for being too old. She is then forced to find her own way and she joins a sorority, where her comic adventures begin.

There is another interesting depiction of *the dumb blonde* in the teen comedy *Mean Girls* (2004). The film focuses on actions of a high school clique, and *the dumb blonde* – Karen, is perfectly played by Amanda Seyfried, with this being the role that launched her career. Karen is attractive, but completely ignorant and promiscuous. She is the “dumb one” in the group, who has earned her popularity by her good looks, and her responses are truly meaningless and stupid, making her character the funniest one. Furthermore, Seyfried later claimed that she had difficulties in distancing herself from *the dumb blonde* persona, as the industry tried to fit her into the stereotype. It took her years to succeed and be recognized in other more serious parts.

What all the mentioned film characters have in common is the negative representation of blonde women. They are portrayed primarily as stupid, while at the same time attractive, which further reinforces *the dumb blonde* stereotype in the present-day media. There are plenty more other examples, especially in TV series, where *the dumb blonde* is used as a constant source of entertainment, proving its continuing popularity in today’s modern pop culture.

#### **4.4 Case study – *Some Like It Hot***

*Some Like It Hot* is a 1959 comedy directed by Billy Wilder. It is considered by many to be one of the greatest American comedies, especially from the era of Classical Hollywood Cinema, having earned six Academy Award nominations. The film, also co-written by Wilder, was based on the 1935 French film *Fanfare of Love*. The plot is centred around two male musicians, Joe and Jerry, played by Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon, who after witnessing a mass murder by the mafia, must disguise themselves by dressing up as women in order to escape the gangsters. So, the two men become Josephine and Daphne, and they join an all-female band headed on a train to Miami. There, they meet Sugar Kane (her real name is Sugar Kowalczyk), a singer played by Marilyn Monroe, and the two of them become obsessed with her. The character of Sugar is an interesting matter of discussion as it provides a great example of how

women were represented, and what were the norms of them being labelled as attractive. This is also further reinforced with the two lead male characters, who while pretending to be women, experience the difficulties women are faced with and highlight the social injustice between men and women of that time.

As explained in previous chapters, Marilyn Monroe was considered to be the ultimate *dumb blonde*. Most of her movie roles served as a basis on which the stereotype was created, and the role of Sugar Kane was not far from it. Sugar is beautiful, voluptuous and seductive, while at the same time naïve and foolish. Her character, even though a supporting one, is of great importance to the film, as it portrays the ‘perfect woman’, and it influences the actions of the two male leads, since they are both smitten by her. Furthermore, this role can be described as one of the greatest Marilyn’s film roles, for which she even won a Golden Globe, as she plays almost a caricature of her own image, with elements such as Sugar Kane’s looks, talk, gold-digging ambitions, and even her name, evoking the sexual appeal of a woman.

Sugar Kane is in herself the spectacle of the movie. She is introduced in the scene on the train station, while walking to the train, carrying her suitcase. The music starts playing as Sugar enters the scene and the camera follows her from behind, with a steady focus on her backside and the way it moves: “Look at that! Look at how she moves. It’s just like jello on springs,” Jerry says to Joe. “They must have some sort of a built-in motor or something.” Moreover, throughout the film, the main focus is on Sugar’s body, as she is in every scene portrayed by wearing tight, mostly see-through clothing and often showing her cleavage. In addition to this, even the two male characters, Joe and Jerry, while pretending to be Josephine and Daphne, are subject to sexist discrimination. The first instance they are shown as women, we see a closeup of their legs as they are walking towards the train. Moreover, the two men carry on being frustrated by continuous sexual advances from other men, which also confuses them, since they do not even consider themselves to be pretty or attractive as women. Hence,

they are surprised by the amount of male attention they receive: “Now you know how the other half lives.” says Joe to Jerry after he complains to him about being pinched in the elevator by an older millionaire, Osgood. And Jerry replies: “I’m not even pretty,”, to what Joe says: “They don’t care – just as long as you’re wearing a skirt. It’s like waving a red flag in front of a bull.”. All this brings to light the objectification of a woman’s body, and how their primary function on screen was to serve to the male gaze, which then also correlated to the real life. Women are spectacles for the men to enjoy, and they had to be beautiful and dumb, or even pretend to be dumb, so they would be more appealing, because who would want a woman who either talks back or cannot be manipulated easily. This type of representation was common during those years and especially in comedies, as it added to the humour of a film:

“... women in the 1950s comedy were placed on display, a spectacle of the idealized female image. As sexual projections of the male spectator (both within the film and in the audience), they are either infantilized, domesticated, or sold to the highest bidder. In post war comedies, visions of material and social success were literally mapped onto women’s bodies (...)” (Beach 129)

Besides her good looks, Sugar is also portrayed as ‘dumb’, adding to her *dumb blonde* persona in the movie. When Joe and Jerry first meet her, she is hiding while drinking alcohol, as this was forbidden since the action of the film is set in the time of the prohibition, in 1929. She is drinking because she is sad and does not feel very lucky. Furthermore, in the train scene with just Joe, i.e., Josephine, Sugar says of herself that she is “dumb”, since she always falls for the same men that don’t respect her and make her feel miserable. That is why she joined the female band, so that she can get away from male saxophone players who always end up disappointing her. Thus, she thinks she is dumb when it comes to men and explains it like she has no control due to the power these men have over her, hence she is trying to escape that. In addition to this, Sugar is happy they are going to Florida, as she hopes to find a millionaire that she can marry there. Being a gold-digger is another characteristic often attributed to *the dumb*

*blonde* stereotype, and Sugar is also trying to marry rich. However, rather than judgement, this evokes a kind of empathy for her, as her sadness, lack of intelligence and an unlucky past compel the viewers to justify her gold-digging ambitions. She is, like the most, simply a dreamer, dreaming of a better future for herself. In this sense, the film plays on *the dumb blonde* character, as it gives it depth and a somewhat logical way of thinking, and makes the viewers look beyond just the image of a beautiful woman.

Another attribute to her ‘dumbness’ is the naivety Sugar expresses throughout the film. Her way of thinking and deeply feeling all the emotions, from an overly enthusiastic expressions of happiness or excitement to almost self-destructive expressions of sadness, all add to her child-like behaviour and seemingly innocent mind. For example, when she climbs into Daphne’s bed on the train, she tells her of her childhood: “When I was a little girl, on cold nights like this, I used to crawl into bed with my sister. We’d cuddle up under the covers and pretend we were lost in a dark cave and were trying to find our way out.” Moreover, her well-known breathy voice, soft and sounding like a whisper, reinforces the sexual nature of her character. And to prevent any sexual power she may have from overcoming spectators; Monroe uses this breathy innocent voice (Konkle 102). Also, Piercy goes on about her voice by stating that “part of what men read into her and what indeed she presented was a child in a woman’s body – the breathy voice that so famously embodies that vulnerability, the inability to protect herself” (104). At the same time, her choice of words and smile perfectly depict her playfulness and sincerity, which is also connected to her “not being so bright”. Thus, she can be easily fooled, which then turns out to be the case, with Joe successfully pretending to be a millionaire in order to seduce her. Even the ending contributes to her hopeless, dumb and naïve personality, as she forgives Joe for fooling her without needing any explanation, and completely foregoes her aspirations of marrying a millionaire, which makes the viewers like her even more, especially for her easy-going, agreeable and simple character. Yet, Sugar is once again rid of

her own rational thinking about the future and what might be best for her, she is powerless in that sense, and is again subject to a man's influence, and the film justifies her decision as a consequence of true love.

All in all, the role of Marilyn Monroe as Sugar Cane is one of her most iconic portrayals of *the dumb blonde* character, which contributed to the shaping of the same stereotype that we can still see in present day media. *The dumb blonde*, as represented in films, tried to implement the belief that femininity lies in the oversexualized blonde female and her being available, desirable and vulnerable. So, in order for a woman to be feminine and appealing, she had to be, in a way, both "the virgin and a whore, the innocent and vulnerable but available" (Konkle 103). Accordingly, we can see that Sugar Cane perfectly embodies these characteristics, from her excessively exposed body and steamy kissing scene with Joe, to her childish and naïve behaviour. In addition to this, Marilyn's dumb blonde is the perfect representation of cultural values of the 1950s and 60s in relation to women, suggesting that women are naturally 'available' and vulnerable, which contributes to their feminine desirability. As such, they pose no threat to the superior male gender, despite their breath-taking appearance, and they are in need of being saved by a man, since they are too vulnerable and/or too dumb to take care of their own future. The movie *Some Like It Hot* provided us with a model example of *the dumb blonde* stereotype, with a satirical interpretation, and it also highlighted the issues of the male gaze, female objectification and misogyny, and condemned male insensitivity as well.

## ***5. Femme fatale***

The following chapter will provide an insight into the *femme fatale*, another representation of women that was particular to classical Hollywood. There will be an analysis of the stereotype's meaning, how it came into existence – with a further look into film noir and the duality of female nature that was also reinforced with this stereotype, its contemporary

interpretations in cinema, and the analysis will, finally, be supported by the case study of the film *Vertigo*. The film's director, Alfred Hitchcock, will also be briefly discussed, with a focus on his, rather specific, portrayal of female characters.

## 5.1 Definition of *femme fatale*

The *femme fatale* is one of the most prominent character types in the era of Classical Hollywood Cinema, and as the name itself suggests, it stands for a fatal woman, both in her looks and the nature of her character. Hence, the first things that come to mind when using the term *femme fatale* are notions of mystery, sexual appeal and power, deception and desire. Yet, the term has its own complexity and there have been numerous definitions from various film theorists throughout the years.

Kragić writes about this type by drawing a comparison to the definition proposed by Patalas, and describes her as an opposite to *the virgin*, especially as it is being opposed to the ideals that *the virgin* represents. The *femme fatale*, whose name comes from French, is the embodiment of a malignant woman, fatal for a man who is unable to resist her charms, and sometimes she is also dangerous for her entire surroundings. He further describes her as tall and usually dark-haired, recognizable for her extravagant behaviour and dress sense, and conveying bold and daring expressions of eroticism, as well as foreshadowing the unknown, deadly and forbidden (Kragić 5). She is the film counterpart of the dangerous and irresistible seductresses from the 19<sup>th</sup> century theatre melodramas and literature. The *femme fatale*, as such, is, to a certain extent, similar to *the vamp*, and some theorists consider *the vamp* as the subtype of the *femme fatale*, while others completely separate the two types.

According to Virginia Allen, the term *femme fatale* is defined as a “woman who lures men into danger, destruction, and even death by means of her overwhelmingly seductive charms (...) her danger lives in the moment of abandonment in the sex act – a loss of self-awareness

following a conscious seduction of the male” (2). Thus, she is a sexual being that can drain men of their power and she is a complete opposite of the “good” woman, who “passively accepts impregnation, motherhood, domesticity, and the control and domination of her sexuality by men” (ibid. 4). The *femme fatale* uses her sexuality as a source of seduction and, as such, she presents a threat to the weakened male, making her often the main cause of the downfall of the male protagonist.

Similarly, Mary Ann Doane focuses on the power that the *femme fatale* possesses and explains that the most noticeable attribute she carries is the “threat” that cannot be easily managed or predicted. In addition, she is “the product of the fears and anxieties of the understandings of sexual differences in the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (1). Furthermore, the *femme fatale* is also explained as the “antithesis” to the maternal, and her power fascinates the viewers as it is usually out of her conscious control, and therefore conceals the opposing line between her passive and active state. Doane argues that the *femme fatale* is the carrier of power, not the subject, and that she is “(...) an articulation of fears surrounding the loss of stability and centrality of self, the ‘I’, the ego. These anxieties appear quite explicitly in the process of her representation as castration anxiety” (2). The *femme fatale* is predominantly presented as evil and threatening and is therefore often punished or killed. She stands, not as the subject of feminism, but as the consequence of male fears about feminism.

Wager focuses on film noir in his analysis of the *femme fatale*, which is an important source of that female type, and will later be further examined. He compares the Weimar street film and film noir, and further examines another female representation, opposite to the one of the *femme fatale*. Also, Wager argues that:

“(...) the femme fatale fights against male economic and social domination, usually at the cost of her life or her freedom. She is murdered, tortured, jailed, or at the very least contained by



marriage in the final reel of the film. The femme fatale's resistance is fatal, sometimes to the men who fall for her, almost always to herself." (4)

What is more, Farrimond claims that the *femme fatale* withstands being categorized, as there are some characters that do not fit into the usual categories of seductiveness, danger or deception, and she sees film noir as a pivotal source from which the definition of the term can be derived:

"The femme fatale resists clear definition. The term is connected with sexuality, femininity, danger, violence and deceit, but these connections are slippery, as many of those characters popularly associated with the term do not fit a coherent pattern. Their femme fatale-ness often shifts and dissolves frustratingly under scrutiny. Given the ambiguousness of the figure, it is unsurprising that a number of scholars have returned to classical Hollywood noir, arguably the most prominent reference point for the cinematic femme fatale, in order to question the validity of the term." (2)

Overall, it is clear that the *femme fatale* has served as an important part of feminist and film theories in the study of cinema and its history, especially in discussions about women and their relation to the wicked and wrong. And it can be concluded that the term represents a woman who possesses a kind of dark nature, extreme sexual allure and beautiful looks, power that she cannot fully control but makes men submissive to her, and that brings about distress and deviousness. These characters highlight the comprehensions of female power of that time, from both a patriarchal and feminist point of view, and they have contributed to the emergence and evolution of many strong female characters present in today's popular culture.

## **5.2 The becoming of *femme fatale* and its role in film noir**

The idea of a *femme fatale* holds its roots far back in history in various cultures and their myths, folklore, art and literature. It is almost always an image of a mysterious and beautiful woman who is also the villain of the story, as she lures others into traps and makes her own

aspirations more important than anything else. But how did this archetype come into existence? One may argue, as the human nature possesses a kind of duality, both the good and the evil, so are women shown in the two opposing manners, as good and evil. The evil representation, obviously being the one of *femme fatale*, or the fatal (deadly) woman.

It is argued that the character of *femme fatale* emerged in the cinema because of men's fears about female independence and feminism in general, as Doane stated that "the femme fatale is a symptom of male fears about feminism" (2). Similarly, Lynda Hart claimed that "the femme fatale is a functional construct of the masculine imaginary, a representation that, at once, expresses (while producing) a patriarchal sociosymbolic order's fear of femininity and disarms that fear by disabling her." (141). So, the ascent of feminism was a kind of threat to the male gender. As society was, and arguably still is, mainly male-dominated in all important legal, social and religious spheres, it imposed restrictions on sexual freedoms, especially those of women. Women were assigned the "maternal" role, and they were expected to fulfil the roles of wives and mothers, that is, carers, with "virginal and pure" being the main attributes associated with them, as that was how they were expected to behave. Consequently, any deviation from that powerless role had to be negatively presented. Hence, the role of *femme fatale* came into existence.

This type was characterized as the complete opposite to the motherly and gentle "virgin", it was oversexualized and lacking the maternal instincts, and therefore, it was portrayed as destructive. That was the punishment for women who showed excessive sexuality and used it as a means of power. It is unfortunate that the aspect of sexuality was one of the key elements in female representation, as Kuhn argued that "female characters are generally defined in relation to their sexuality – either by its excessiveness (the vamp, femme fatale, sex goddess) or by its absence (the spinster, the mother, the virgin)" (362). As a result, sexuality and sexual differences between men and women are the central indicator of injustice and oppression of

women, especially as “femininity is defined as passive, receptive and compliant, while masculinity is defined as active, initiating and powerful” (ibid. 147).

One predecessor of *femme fatale*, belonging to *the vamp* archetype, is Theda Bara, who starred in the 1915 film *A Fool There Was*. She popularised the dark and mysterious female character, “the vampire” and was also important in the marketing aspect of cinema, as there were ridiculous advertisements by Fox, such as her name being the anagram of the expression “Arab Death” and that she was the child of a French poet and his Arab mistress, born in the Sahara Desert, and that she was capable of performing dark magic. Also, she was almost always dressed provocatively, and was characterized by seductiveness and mystery. Theda Bara, however, remained in the realm of *the vamp*, as many separated it from *femme fatale*, despite their similarities. Haskell described her as a rough prototype that, in its most stylized form, represented certain traits modified in the later, more normalized successors, the sex goddesses (qtd. in Kragić 5).

It is important to point out that *femme fatale* was one of the most prominent features of film noir, and the archetype itself had truly come to life within the period of this film genre or style. Farrimond explains this connection by stating that:

“Character types are often employed to identify genres, and the femme fatale functions as a highly visible marker of genre for some critics. As described above, classical film noir is a key reference point for critics of the femme fatale, to the extent that noir and the femme fatale seem inextricably connected.” (6)

Film noir refers to the films of the late 1940s and early 1950s, with *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) being labelled as the first film noir. These films are often associated with a certain mood that they evoke, and Paul Schrader defines the term as referring to “those Hollywood films of the Forties and early Fifties which portrayed the world of dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption” (2). Another similar definition is the one proposed by Wager, who states that:

“Classic films noirs are Hollywood crime movies made in the 1940s and ’50s. The films often feature a femme fatale and hard-boiled male protagonist. Lowkey lighting, with minimal fill light, and night-for-night photography provide atmospheric shadows and stark pools of light. Extreme and unsettling camera angles, voice-over narration, and episodic narrative structure may also appear in classic film noir. The crime films of postclassic noir usually include some of these visual and narrative elements. Postclassic noir includes both reactionary retro-noir and somewhat revisionary neo-noir films.” (3)

He also separates the two styles of film noir; the retro noir of the classic noir period (1940s, 50s), and the (erotic) neo noirs (1980s, 90s). Farrimond claims that *femme fatale* of the classic noir period can “attribute her presence in wartime and post-war cinema to anxieties surrounding women’s shifting societal roles in this period”, while the erotic neo noir’s *femme fatales* “take centre stage as narrative antagonist, sexual performer, and sexual threat, and as such they reveal cultural ambivalences towards female sexual choice through “backlash” discourses that arise around the sexually liberated woman” (5).

The first film noir, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), introduces the fatal woman with the character of Brigid O’Shaughnessy, who is played by Mary Astor. Brigid is the typical *femme fatale*, she seems helpless, but she lies and kills in order to achieve her goals and is eventually given up to the police by the detective she tried to seduce. Similarly, one key film noir highlighting a *femme fatale* is the film *Double Indemnity* (1944). A classic in its style, the film features Barbra Stanwyck as Phyllis Dietrichson, a character considered as one of the best *femme fatale* roles in the history of film noir. Phyllis plots with her lover to murder her husband; she is lethal, dangerous and cunning, and relies on her seductiveness and allure to trick others, especially men. At the end, the punishment for her wrongdoings is death. Another cult film noir is *Out of the Past* (1947), in which the *femme fatale* is portrayed by Jane Greer through the character of Kathie Moffat. Kathie’s outer persona, her charm and innocent looking face, help her get away with deceit, theft and murder; she seduces a private detective, and is eventually

killed by police. Furthermore, there are many other *femme fatales* that can be studied in the realm of film noir, also worth mentioning are characters played by Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* (1946). What all these characters have in common, except for the typical elements already stated, is their criminal nature and the fact that the viewers do not have any access to the true reasoning behind their wicked actions. Moreover, they usually provoke sex in order to manipulate men into doing whatever they want, including breaking the law. So, they use their sexuality as a powerful tool with which they can achieve their ultimate goals, As Hales claims: “If woman uses eroticism as a weapon, she will be seen as a criminal in the eyes of society. When piety and want of passion are traded for self assertion and individualism, then the criminal woman is born.” (103). These characters were the basis upon which the stereotype of *femme fatale* was built, and as such they are an important subject matter in the feminist study of female representation.

### 5.3 Contemporary interpretations of *femme fatale*

While *femme fatale* can credit its cinematic rise to film noir, it has ever since been present in many films and genres, as its influence remains noticeable through strong female characters in action films, science fiction, thrillers and horror films. Similarly, Farrimond claims that:

“(...) the femme fatale exists in contemporary cinema in a number of distinct guises, each undoing the idea of the beautiful, evil and mysterious woman that has emerged from accounts of classical Hollywood noir. In cinema of the past twenty-five years, the femme fatale operates beyond the generic limits of film noir, and this, I suggest, is central to the complexity of the figure.” (1)

This indicates the change in the usual characteristics of the *femme fatale* that were tied to it during the era of film noir, and how the more contemporary version of the stereotype functions

more so in the light of new political and social views, more specifically, in the wake of the more recent feminist and postfeminist cultural understandings. Once a woman condemned for her malevolent ways and oversexualized femininity, the *femme fatale* of the modern-day cinema, and specifically of the 90s cinema, is in fact, a woman praised for her driven and aspiring nature and character, as well as for her sexual liberty and femininity that defy the restrictions society has imposed on women and the potential they can realize. This change in the representation of *femme fatale* does not come as a surprise, especially as the position and role of women in society has come a long way since the era of classical Hollywood and film noir, and the stereotype changes and conforms to new cultural views. So, the “modern *femme fatale*” is not necessarily a deadly woman, but one who is ambitious and confident in what she wants and is not afraid to stand up for herself. Yet, the main visual features of this type, such as beautiful looks and femininity, have remained present in almost all modern portrayals of *femme fatale*.

One interesting modern interpretation of *femme fatale* is its emergence in the form of a teenage girl. Teenage girls were usually never *femme fatales* in film noir, instead, if present, they were the “good” characters, often pointing out the evil of the lead female protagonist. However, the 1990s films popularized this type – “The Lolita *femme fatale*”, with roles of devious teenage girls who would often seduce older men and then attempt to ruin their family lives (Farrimond 60). Such representation of young femininity has left its mark on the western culture’s perception about sexuality and femininity of teenage girls, by assigning them certain roles and behaviours more appropriate to adult women, and thus making them subjects of the “adult male gaze”. The teenage girl becomes a threat to the adult male, as she is highly seductive, alluring and dangerous. In addition to this, her main appeal lies in the fact that she is forbidden, since she is underage. Furthermore, the “newer” teenage *femme fatales* move away from their “Lolita” interpretations, with a focus on the representations of the public and private spheres of teenagers’ lives, bringing to question the sexuality of young girls, and giving the

*femme fatale* more depth, as well as making them more sympathetic (67). One example of this is the movie *Cruel Intentions* (1999), where Sarah Michelle Geller plays Kathryn Merteuil, an upper-class popular teenage *femme fatale*, who is sexually manipulative, tempting and pernicious, as she tries to achieve her malevolent goals. Even though she is from a wealthy family, her mother is remarried, and there is an indication that there are problems within the family (infidelity, lack of love and attention, neglect), and this, combined with her drug addiction, may help the viewers understand the reasons behind such behaviour and character. Her ending is, as expected, tragic, as she is publicly exposed and shamed, as well as soon to be “punished” by her parents. Kathryn’s character is, however, different from her “Lolita predecessors” as she rises awareness of the unfair treatment women are faced with when sexuality comes into question:

“Kathryn not only makes explicit the intensity of pressures on young women to conform to societal ideals of feminine virtue, but also makes claims on the very enjoyment of her sexuality that the scenes of sexual manipulation which occur throughout the film would seem to deny her. Kathryn is aware of and affected by the social stigma attached to women’s sexuality. In this film, sexual performance designed to seduce and manipulate men may be a way of getting what you want, but it must exist in secret, along with more personal expressions of female desire.” (ibid. 68)

Other contemporary *femme fatale* representations tie their actions to the criminal activities that were also often the case of film noir, further highlighting the connection of female criminality and *femme fatale*. For instance, in *Basic Instinct* (1992) Sharon Stone plays Catherine Trammell, a manipulative and alluring psychologist and novelist, who is guilty of murder, and seduces the detective investigating her as she tries to avoid being caught. Catherine also brings up the issue of bisexuality, as she is involved in a relationship with another female character, Roxy. Another well-known modern *femme fatale* is Alex Forrest, played by Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* (1987). Alex, after spending a night with a married man, Dan

Gallagher, becomes obsessed with him. She lies, stalks, threatens, commits acts of vandalism and animal cruelty, and even tries to kill his wife, making her not just a criminal, but even more so, the criminally insane. The two mentioned films, together with the film *Disclosure* (1994), can be said to create the unofficial trilogy of “Michael Douglas vs. the deranged career woman” (5). There have been many other portrayals of fatal women on screen ever since, like the Bride in the *Kill Bill* movies, the Catwoman in the *Batman* movies, Mystique in the *X-Men* franchise, or female leads in movies such as *Sin City* (2005) or *Gone Girl* (2014), all of them continuing the *femme fatale*'s presence in cinema, while at the same time bringing a positive interpretation of female power and independence to light. Thus, we can see that the contemporary *femme fatale* is portrayed in a manner that is compliant with the times it lives in, as it presents, and is at the same time limited by, the gender and social politics of our day and age.

#### **5.4 Alfred Hitchcock and his leading ladies**

As the case study for the stereotype of *femme fatale* will feature the movie *Vertigo* by Alfred Hitchcock, it is crucial to briefly elaborate on the director and his, rather particular, representation of female characters.

Alfred Hitchcock was one of the most famous film directors in the world, and his legacy has been a source of inspiration for many in the film industry, as well as for the numerous analyses in relation to film theory, but also gender roles and representation of women on screen. According to Donald Spoto, Hitchcock's biographer, he was, despite being brilliant and masterful in his work, a very troubled and unhappy man. Hitchcock is known to have been eccentric and often times sadistic, as he was tortured by the mesmerizing beauty of his leading actresses, and the fact he could never have them. So, he “played out his own obsessions with women in masterful films of suspense” (qtd. in Jhirad 31). The way in which he depicts women



is influenced by his own personal life and relationships, and the interpretation of his character's roles shows the viewers that this was his own way of looking at women.

He was particularly fascinated with beautiful, cool blondes, who play important roles in almost all his most significant films and have become a signature mark of his work. These blondes are stunning and alluring, while at the same time mysterious, composed and evoking independence. His portrayal of lead blonde female characters has also resulted in the emergence of the term "the Hitchcock blonde". This type of character refers to a "beautiful, sophisticated, poised woman who carries with her an air of mystery and indirect sex appeal. She carries the film as an unexpected source of duplicity and can be a cunning and intelligent adversary. She also represents Hitchcock's idea of a perfect woman." (Saporito). Hitchcock preferred blondes as leads mainly because he saw them as less suspicious than brunettes, as well as less serious. For him, blondes "were the most feminine and most vulnerable women. He loved blondes and couldn't understand women not bleaching their hair for the privilege of working with him", and they surely had to be "icy blondes" or as he called them "Nordic", because they "were easier and more dramatic to photograph in monochrome, and he considered their "coolness" and elegance appropriate contrasts to the kind of passion he wanted to reveal beneath the surface" (Spoto 18).

While blondes remain the most important female characters in Hitchcock's films, brunettes have their role as well. They are in a complete opposition to the leading blondes, not just in the way they look, but also in the way they behave. In Hitchcock's films, brunettes are usually associated with family and simple domestic life, and are therefore, more trustworthy and approachable than the mysterious blonde. Haskell claims that Hitchcock shifts the old traditional views where blondness was associated with purity and goodness, and dark hair with promiscuity, and for him the "moral coordinates are – blonde: conceited, aloof; brunette: warm" (349). Furthermore, there is evidence of "ideological coding" when we look at the

representation of blondes and brunettes in Hitchcock's films, as Walker indicates that "for the brunettes, the blacker the hair, the stronger the personality" (75). What is more, almost all Hitchcock's brunettes are presented as generous and warm, as well as often quiet and introverted. On the other hand, his blondes are more glamorous, sophisticated, cold and manipulative, which can be described as a kind of *femme fatale* type discussed in previous chapters.

Altogether, it is important to take into consideration that Hitchcock's representation of women was a reflection of his own personal opinion about the nature and role of women. He poured his personal desires and aversions into his work, and this is something that is most noticeable in his choice of actresses. He idealized "the blonde woman", giving her a sense of mystery and danger, presenting her as the male character's sign of misfortune or unhappy ending, while at the same time giving her the depth that was often missing in the interpretations of *femme fatales* of the film noir. Hence, his blonde *femme fatales* carry a deeper meaning than what meets the eye. He contrasted them to brunettes, which he portrayed as good and kind, while in the film noir brunettes were often, in fact, the *femme fatales*, with their dark hair being the first and explicit sign of their dark nature. In addition to this, Hitchcock used his blonde heroines to build a sense of intrigue and suspense, characteristics of his films he is rather famous for.

### **5.5 Case study – *Vertigo***

*Vertigo* is an American psychological thriller produced and directed by Alfred Hitchcock in 1958. The film's story is based on the 1954 Boileau-Narcejac's novel *D'entre les morts*, or *From Among the Dead*. When it was first released, the film received mixed reviews, but later came to be known as a Hitchcock classic, and probably one of the best films he has ever made. In addition to this, it is considered as an icon of the traditional detective classic film.

Even though *Vertigo* does not belong to the era of film noir, it has frequently been referred to as the last true classic film noir before the rise of the later neo-noirs. Its representation of the leading *femme fatale* is an engaging matter for discussion, giving the fatal, mysterious woman a new perspective, and eventually a “makeover”, as she turns into another, very different character.

The story is set in San Francisco and centres around a former police detective John 'Scottie' Ferguson, who suffers from vertigo and acrophobia, and is played by James Stewart. At the beginning of the story, we see an event from Scottie's life that is crucial to the present. It shows a rooftop chase after a criminal, where Scottie, because of his condition, puts another cop's life in danger as he tries to save him, and the cop falls off the building which causes him to die. This event scars Scottie both mentally and physically, leading him to retire from the police. The actual story begins when Scottie is visited by his old acquaintance Gavin Elster, played by Tom Helmore, who hires him to follow his wife Madeline, played by Kim Novak. Gavin believes that Madeline is possessed by the ghost of her great-grandmother Carlotta Valdes, who committed suicide. And he thus wants Scottie to follow Madeline to see what she does and where she goes in her free time, to save her from any suicidal thoughts and attempts. Such an attempt occurs when he follows Madeline to the San Francisco Bay, where she tries to drown herself, but he manages to save her and take her home. She does not seem to remember anything, and later even admits to him that she keeps hearing a voice inside her head, telling her that she must die. Scottie is fascinated by her charm and beauty, and he quickly falls in love with her. As they spend more time together, they fall in love with each other, and Madeline also tells him of her visions of a Spanish-looking tower, and Scottie figures out that it is a place in New Mexico. He decides to take Madeline there, thinking it might help her, but the location brings back her memories, she confesses her love for Scottie and runs to the tower to kill herself. Scottie tries to stop her, but his acrophobia and vertigo stop him from climbing the tower, and

Madeline's death marks the ending of the first part of the story. The narrative continues with Scottie being released from a sanatorium where he spent a year following Madeline's death. He continues to see her face in other women, and one day he sees a woman of great resemblance to Madeline, so he decides to follow her. The woman is Judy Barton, also played by Kim Novak. Judy is in fact Madeline, who was pretending to be Gavin's wife in his master plan to murder his actual wife. Scottie, now obsessed with Judy as she reminds him of Madeline, makes her dye her hair blonde and wear Madeline's clothes. By doing all this and after seeing Carlota's necklace on Judy, he figures out Judy is actually Madeline, and he takes her to the tower to confront her and make her confess the truth. There, Scottie conquers his fear of heights as they climb the tower. Judy confesses she was playing to be Madeline because Gavin paid her, and she begs for forgiveness and declares her love to Scottie. He decides to forgive her, they embrace, but a nun (wanting to see who is making the noise) scares Judy and she accidentally falls off the tower, causing her to die in the same way that Madeline did. Finally, we see Scottie standing on the ledge, having cured his phobia, but his heart is once again broken.

The *femme fatale* of the film is Madeline Elster, the so-called wife of Scottie's old friend Gavin. She is at first introduced in the fancy restaurant scene, where she is having dinner with Gavin, while Scottie is sitting at the bar. Firstly, there is a steady focus on her exposed, perfectly white back, with her icy blonde hair meticulously done in her signature updo, and as she stands up and walks away from the table, we see her face slowly coming into frame, finally focusing on her exquisite facial profile. Her face is further enhanced with lighting and music that heighten as we see her close up, and by Scottie's expression, it is apparent that he is taken aback by Madeline's beauty. The camera's following her and the close-up of her face give a sense of intrusion and "voyeurism", as Madeline is put on display as an object of desire, primarily on the basis of her looks. This is the most important visual characteristic of *femme fatale*, her mesmerizing beauty, and Madeline's appearance is presented in accordance with it. Even her

dress sense emphasizes her body figure, with well-tailored expensive looking clothes that draw the eye to her figure, and further add to her overall elegance. The *femme fatale* is known to be portrayed in attractive, often seductive clothing, and this one is not far from it, as Madeline's wardrobe distinguishes her from other ordinary women, and adds to her upper-class appearance, making her whole look timeless and exclusive. Hitchcock was very determined on the physical aspect of his heroine, while Kim Novak at first was not too keen on the look she had to adopt. Novak was hesitant to wear black shoes and a grey suit, claiming it made her look "washed out", while Hitchcock was set on the costumes he carefully planned, in which Madeline had to "look as if she's just drifted out of the San Francisco fog – hence her pale coloring, the formally swept blond wig, the gray suit, the white gloves. She walks and drives a car in San Francisco, where everyone wears suits – and the script specifically calls for a gray tailored suit" (Spoto 225). It is obvious that Madeline's look and allure are designed to also be visually pleasing, and, therefore, they support Mulvey's theory about "the male gaze", and how "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual object, is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle" (11).

In addition to this, another *femme fatale* feature Madeline successfully embodies is the element of mystery. She is a complete mystery to Scottie, and as such, makes herself even more tempting for him, as he becomes eager to discover what lies beneath the surface. Madeline intrigues Scottie by her somewhat cold facial expressions and distant gazes, hinting at an existence of something supernatural within her. While she pretends to be haunted by the ghost of Carlotta Valdes, Scottie does not know she is lying, and thus, Madeline presents an almost inexplicable occurrence and portrays herself as helpless, so Scottie is always there to help the beautiful lady in distress. The mysteriousness of her character is also stressed by the fact that she does not speak for the first 45 minutes of the film, she is simply observed by Scottie and

the viewer, fulfilling the role as an object for observation. Moreover, her mystery further emphasizes her allure, and her lying and manipulation eventually lead to Scottie's downfall, as a true *femme fatale* would. This does not mean she leads him to death, but she does involve him into a murder plot without him knowing and is the cause of his mental breakdown for which he then spends a year in a sanatorium, as well as, of course, the cause of his heartbreak. It is interesting to see how she, while pretending to be innocent and helpless, can make Scottie do almost anything for her, proving her dominance over him in their relationship.

The mentioned mystery is also a part of the character's duality. Namely, her duality firstly lies in the fact that she is not actually Madeline, but Judy. So, Madeline is just a character Judy effortlessly plays, but while being the *femme fatale*, i.e., Madeline, she is duplicitous in the sense that she is aware of her being Gavin's tool, and Scottie their victim, yet she falls in love with Scottie, knowing his affection is based on her deception. Consequently, she is at the same time portrayed as this devious fatal woman who lures a good man into a trap, but also as a woman capable of emotions and love, as she is later transformed into Judy and confesses to everything and declares her love to him. Even Madeline's hair amplifies the duality of her character, as the cold iciness of the blonde is juxtaposed with the softness and innocence of her style. In addition, her sexual appeal is not direct as one would expect; she is cool on the outside, but through her emotional outbursts we see that she is "fiery" on the inside.

Judy Barton is the complete opposite to the *femme fatale*, that is Madeline. And it is interesting to analyse the two characters, since they are both played by the same actress and are in fact the same person, making them a perfect example of the two opposing representations of women. Contrary to Madeline, who is presented as having power, that is, power over Scottie due to her sensuality and beauty, Judy is portrayed as submissive and weak. She is a brunette, a working girl, she wears different – less glamorous clothing, more makeup and talks in a southern accent, therefore, a complete antithesis of Madeline. After their first encounter, Scottie

insists they keep seeing each other, since Judy reminds him of Madeline. Judy is reluctant at first, but she is in love with Scottie, so she agrees in the hope he may love her for who she really is, and not for someone who does not exist. Her “weakness” is expressed in the way she gives in to Scottie’s wishes, as he tries to make her look like Madeline by convincing her to dye her hair and change her clothes. Judy accepts this “makeover” as she asks him: “If I let you change me, will it do it? If I do what you tell me, will you love me?”, to what Scottie replies: “Yes.” and Judy concludes: “Alright then, I’ll do it. I don’t care anymore about me.” She keeps doing what he wants to keep him interested. What is more, according to Mulvey, Madeleine is “a perfect image of female beauty and mystery, and Judy is a woman whose exhibitionism and masochism make her an ideal passive counterpart to Scottie's active sadistic voyeurism” (qtd. in Hollinger 18). So, Scottie’s role of the voyeuristic male gaze is predominately active when focus is on Madeline, not Judy. Nevertheless, it is Judy who is finally “punished” for her wrongdoings; she falls off the tower after getting scared by a nun and has, therefore, met the same fate as Madeline. In this opposing representation of Madeline – *femme fatale* of the film, and Judy – the ordinary working girl, we can see Hitchcock’s personal perspective on the image of women and male desire. For him, Madeline is the ideal woman, who, turns out, does not exist, while Judy is the actual woman. Even in Madeline’s death we see the “unreality” of her character, especially through Scottie’s denial; “the suppression of the cause of Madeleine's death keeps Scottie from acknowledging what will terrify him most: that the woman he is obsessed with is a figment, or fragment, of his imagination, a substitute both for "herself" and for another man” (Hinton 11).

The correlation between a real woman and one that is a product of male imagination can be also made when comparing Madeline to Midge, Scottie’s old lover and friend, who is still in love with him, but he does not see her in that way. Midge is warm, gentle and inviting, another ordinary girl. She is a blonde, but a warm-toned natural blonde, whereas Madeline’s

platinum blondness is artificial, further enhancing her imaginary existence as an ideal woman. Midge is also perhaps too caring, so Scottie sees her more as a mother. He even tells her in one scene: “Don’t be so motherly!”. Hollinger describes Midge as:

“(…) a female character who combines personality traits that might initially seem irreconcilable. She is, first of all, a boyish figure who wears plain sweaters with masculine-type collars and dark skirts. As a commercial artist, she makes her own living and seems to represent an independent, practical career woman, yet she is also a mother figure to Scottie.” (21)

All things considered, it is evident that the role of Madeline in *Vertigo* is a kind of Hitchcock’s version of a *femme fatale* that was so famous in film noir. Madeline is portrayed as sophisticated, seductive and intriguing, and her character is fetishized as an object of desire for the male gender. She manipulates the lead male character, is involved in a criminal activity and is the culprit for the misfortunate events that have struck him. Moreover, she is an example of Hitchcock’s ideal woman, but such a woman does not transfer into real life, where women have a larger role and much deeper meaning and are not simply objects for men to enjoy or fantasize about.

## **6. *The screwball heroine***

The final section of this master’s thesis will delve into the stereotype of *the screwball heroine*, a rousing representation of women in Classical Hollywood Cinema, with a different approach to female portrayal when compared to the two previously examined stereotypes. To fully understand the meaning behind the mentioned stereotype, this chapter will include a closer look at the “screwball comedy”, as well as Howard Hawks, the man behind the “heroine”, and a brief overview of its remnants in modern cinema. Finally, a case study of the film *His Girl Friday* (1940) will contribute to the analysis of the screwball heroine.



## 6.1 The screwball comedy

One cannot define *the screwball heroine* without having a closer look at the genre that gave birth to the archetype itself, and that is the screwball comedy. In 1930s and 1940s, women were most of the “cinema-going audience”, and as a result, films made during those times were to a large extent concerned with portraying the private lives of women, particularly focusing on the main issues they had to deal with every day. Jeanine Basinger explains them as “women’s films”, and while separating them from screwball comedies, claims that in such films “the woman, not the man, was the central figure, and the story line concerns her struggle to sort out the problems of her life. Love versus career. Bad love versus good love. Love versus duty. Love versus demands of motherhood.” (53). Consequently, she argues that women were shown as unable to attain both, they had to choose between a family life or a career, and these movies were a way of reinforcing the conventional values of society, as the ending would usually indicate that women’s true happiness lies in the domestic sphere of life with them fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers.

Yet, what contributed to the rising popularity of such movies, was the fact that women were given a look into how their lives would appear in the other sphere of life, or the “man’s world”. They were portrayed as journalists, lawyers, doctors, detectives, waiters, factory workers or pilots, earning their own money and working on their rise to power. Essentially, as Haskell explained, they had to do something to keep the story going, as they were in the centre of it (qtd. in Basinger 54). With a demand for a more independent and dominant female character, directors began to explore a new way of presenting women on screen. Consequently, a new genre emerged – the screwball comedy.

Screwball comedies also came as a “breath of fresh air”, to lift the spirits of the American society that was concerned with the difficult times of the 1930s; the financial crisis

and the social shift caused by a loss of faith in the system, all a consequence of the Great Depression. Thus, these comedies conformed to the idea of finding happiness, as Gregoire Halbout explains that:

“This madcap genre starts with realistic situations and characters, but applies a parodic treatment that flirts with eccentricity. (...) Everything in these films is presented through the lens of urban American couples of that decade. First encounters, break-ups, reconciliations, marriages, divorces, remarriages, arguments, hand-to-hand combat, and verbal jousting are carried along by a flood of words and a frenetic pace, which convey in cinematic terms the momentum toward a fulfilling outcome promised by a happy ending. The hope and the frantic quest for happiness, as long as they align with a country’s socio-historic reality and reflect the aspirations of the citizen-spectators, provide universal, endlessly recyclable fodder for stories. Especially when the setting is America, ever tempted to portray itself as a promised land (...).” (2)

Screwball comedies are different from the usual romantic comedies, since they focus more on the humour of the story, rather than the ‘love’ aspect. They are characterized by a fast pace, both in dialogue and unfolding of events, sarcasm, unusual plot twists, witty dialogue and a “battle of sexes” – a constant interplay and exchange between the leading man and woman. The relationship between men and women is also explored through their marriage – divorce, often ending in their remarriage, making the screwball comedy – “a comedy of remarriage”, as Stanley Cavell calls it, since he identifies “the theme of remarriage as an essential narrative motif of screwball comedy” (qtd. in Halbout 3). Another strong feature these comedies had was the portrayal of class issues, that reflected the current social problems of that time. This was done, however, in a way that would heighten the humour of the picture, with, for instance, ridiculed portrayal of the pampered upper class. Even the name “screwball” implies something unpredictable – “screwy” and not ordinary. Wes Gehring explains this by stating that:

“(...) screwball comedy probably drew its name from the term's entertainingly unorthodox use in the national pastime. Prior to the term's application in 1930s film criticism, "screwball" had

been used in baseball to describe both an oddball player and "any pitched ball that moves in an unusual or unexpected way."<sup>10</sup> Obviously, these characteristics also describe performers in screwball comedy films (...). As with the crazy period antics in baseball, screwball comedy uses nutty behavior as a prism through which to view a topsy-turvy period in American history." (9)

Moreover, the main attribute of screwball comedies is the presence of a strong female who is in the centre of the story and outshines the male protagonist. Her empowering independence challenges the male protagonist, so he must prove his masculinity as the story unfolds. This "threatening" female character, essential to a screwball comedy, will be further explained in the following sub-chapters.

## 6.2 Definition of *the screwball heroine*

*The screwball heroine* is the lead female character of the screwball comedy and the central figure around which the movie's plotline is built. She is confident, hard-working, intelligent, usually ambitious, stubborn and strong-willed. These heroines are different than the ones of other film genres, as they are the focal figures and the ones who influence the men's actions. Screwball heroines are good-looking, but the emphasis is not on their looks, they are not oversexualized or fetishized as, for example, *the dumb blonde* or *femme fatale*. Even the film critic Andrew Sarris says that "screwball comedies are sex comedies but without sex" (63). Hence, the heroines are mainly characterized by their wit and intelligence, as well as by the "strong" nature of their character. Carole Lombard, an actress most known for her roles as a *screwball heroine*, is said to have set the fundamental standards for *the screwball heroine* through the course of her three films (*Twentieth Century* (1934), *Hands Across the Table* (1935), *My Man Godfrey* (1936)), such as "dishonest, scatterbrained, excessive, or vivacious" (Halbout 62).

So, the heroine is known for her lively and energetic behaviour, often accompanied with her witty, quick comebacks, as she seems to always be ready to “snap back” at her male counterpart. As Wilkins suggests: “This instinct to verbally ‘snap back’ is a common trait of the screwball comedy heroine of the 1930s and 1940s and the ability to provoke these verbal retorts is a key function of the male characters.” (9). So, the actresses playing the screwball heroine had to be skilful in their vocal ability to talk back at a speed that was the key feature of the genre. This, together with her driven and self-sufficient character, made *the screwball heroine* a challenge for the male protagonist. He was challenged, not only to perhaps win her over, but also to prove his masculinity that was put to test by the heroine’s powerful “masculine” conduct. What is more, the personality of the screwball heroine becomes even more determined as she interacts with other characters, and these interactions and the antagonisms they present are the foundations of the comedy’s narrative.

When it comes to love in the screwball comedies, it was not a central focus of the film; “(...) love comes across as hardly more significant than a board game” (Gehring 2). However, it was the pursuit of love portrayed in a funny way through the heroes’ interactions that reinforced the humour. Here, another dominant role of *the screwball heroine* prevails, as she is “often assisted by the fact that only she knows a courtship is occurring” (ibid. 2). The male protagonist is, consequently, often humiliated, either by the manipulations of the heroine herself or the plot. Moreover, it is often the case that *the screwball heroine* finds herself in a romantic triangle, usually with a very desirable male and his clingy fiancée, so her mission becomes to free the man from this controlling woman. Furthermore, when the heroine is behaving or thinking unrealistically or frantically, it can be said that she is still at an advantage, as her illogical feminine mind is still “better prepared than the male for an illogical world, she frequently meets new challenges in a radically different manner from her counterpart” (ibid. 49).

Eventually, through the happy ending of the genre's films, *the screwball heroine* shifts her personal aspirations and gives into love. This is a source of common feminist critique of *the screwball heroine*, since the empowering portrayal of a female character is, once again, reduced to her living in the domestic sphere of life. She eventually finds happiness in marrying the male protagonist, and the power roles are restored to the former traditional presumptions about gender roles. In terms of *the screwball heroine* and the exploration of womanhood, one director has been notoriously famous for his films and his representations of women, the director being Howard Hawks, who will be discussed in the continuation of this section.

### **6.3 Howard Hawks and the “Hawksian woman”**

Howard Hawks stands as one of the most famous screwball comedies directors, and his film legacy represents a shift in the way women were depicted. He began as a silent director but reached his high in the comedy genre with his films accomplishing substantial commercial success. His portrayal of *the screwball heroine* who is assertive, independent, vivacious and action-leading resulted in the emergence of the “Hawksian woman”. The term was introduced by Naomi Wise in 1971, who used it to refer to the traits Hawks' leading ladies shared. Wise described the Hawksian woman as “(...) a radical screen presence who existed apart or beyond more stolid conventions of movie womanhood. (...) The good girl and the bad girl are fused into a single, heroic heroine, who is both sexual and valuable” (qtd. in Basinger 180). In addition to this, the Hawksian woman is smart, experienced and is not afraid to speak her mind, especially to get what she wants. She can beat the male lead in a verbal exchange and is known for her fast talk and quick responses. She shows independence in both her private and work life, and makes her own choices, either by her will or by the economic and social pressures that surround her (DiBattista 180). What is interesting is the way in which Hawks represented the exchange of gender roles, and how the characters, as such, would perfectly complement each

other. The woman would often possess the “masculine traits” one would not expect her to have, and the man was shown as passive, sensitive and therefore, “feminine”. Molly Haskell argues that:

“The perilousness of Hawks' world, the sense of a cosmic (and comic) disequilibrium, comes from the problematic nature of sexual differentiation, an issue that is never completely resolved. But there is an evolution: the "feminine" side that is viewed by the young man as dangerous or debilitating (the "weakening" effect of the emotions) is gradually welcomed as a crucial element in adult - men's lives; and the aggressive side of woman becomes less and less incompatible with femininity.” (1974, 35).

Hawks’ ability to understand men’s desire to be cared for and women’s desire to take action and lead, was a strong feature of his work. However, the archetype had its shortcomings as well. The Hawksian woman was usually the only one with any importance for the narrative, and this importance was drawn from how successfully she would establish herself within a predominately male group. Claire Johnston claims that: “For Hawks, there is only the male and the non-male: in order to be accepted into the male universe, the woman must become a man (...)” (qtd. in Thornham 35). Hawks himself never said to be a feminist, he in turn stated: “I’ve been accused of promoting Women’s Lib, and I’ve denied it, emphatically. It just happens that that kind of a woman is attractive to me.” (qtd. in Walker). He thought that engaging and lively women were more fun and interesting to watch. The Hawksian woman did not gain popularity until late 1930s, and the archetype was shaped through the roles of actresses such as Katherine Hepburn, Rosalind Russell, Barbara Stanwyck, Angie Dickinson, and his most famous Hawksian woman – Lauren Bacall. Hawks remains known as one of the first directors during classical Hollywood to introduce a modern interpretation of a woman – someone who is prepared to be the dominant gender, i.e., his Hawksian woman. Rosalind Russell plays the role of *the screwball heroine* in the Hawks’ film *His Girl Friday*, the analysis of which will follow.

## 6.4 Case study – *His Girl Friday*

*His Girl Friday* is a screwball comedy directed by Howard Hawks, released in 1940 by Columbia Pictures. The screenplay for the film was based on the 1928 play *The Front Page*, written by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, and it was the second screening of the mentioned play. The film's most prominent feature, its fast and overlapping dialogues, earned it the title of having the fastest film dialogue. Hawks explained the need for this in an interview with Peter Bogdanovich by stating: "I had noticed that when people talk, they talk over one another, especially people who talk fast or who are arguing or describing something. So we wrote the dialogue in a way that made the beginnings and ends of sentences unnecessary." (qtd. in Saporito). And as the story revolves around a group of journalists, having a lot to say fits perfectly into the narrative.

The plot centres around two leading characters, Walter Burns, played by Cary Grant and Hildegard "Hildy" Johnson, who is played by Rosalind Russell. Walter is the editor of *The Morning Post* and Hildy is his ex-wife and the best newspaper reporter. Hildy is engaged to Bruce Baldwin, an insurance salesman, and intends to settle down with him in Albany. The story follows Walter's attempts to win back his ex-wife and sabotage her marriage to Bruce, as he assigns her one final story to cover. She must look into the case of Earl Williams, a timid bookkeeper who is accused of killing a police officer and sentenced to death. She agrees to do so, but only if Walter buys a 100,000\$ life insurance policy from Bruce, so that Bruce can receive a 1000\$ commission. While Hildy is investigating Earl's case, Walter keeps trying to frame Bruce with several misdemeanors. Throughout the story, we see Hildy is more focused on her work rather than on her fiancé, who eventually gives up on her, and at the end Hildy agrees to remarry Walter, hoping he is a changed man.

The character of Hildy Johnson is the star of this comedy. And as a true *screwball heroine*, also a Hawksian woman, she is smart, hard-working, energetic, and self-dependent. Hildy is the best journalist at *The Morning Post*, and she is respected and liked by all her colleagues. At the beginning of the film, when she is walking towards Walter's office, everyone greets her and smiles at her, showing how they are all fond of her and are truly happy to see her. She radiates confidence. Being a journalist is a massive part of her identity. She is amazing at it, and it is something that she, ultimately, cannot live without. Namely, the movie follows her struggle to decide whether she wants to stay a journalist or become a housewife by marrying Bruce. She constantly repeats that she is done with the newspaper, and that she wants to be a wife and mother, or in her own words, she wants to be "a woman". In the scene at the press room in the court building, after attacking Walter on the phone for framing Bruce and having him locked up, Hildy tells her colleagues: "I'm gonna be a woman, not a news getting machine. I'm gonna have babies and take care of them, give them cod liver oil and watch their teeth grow (...)". The reason she has a difficult time trying to choose between being a professional and being a woman, is because she wants to have it both, but realizes that that is impossible.

Also, whenever she decides to stay away from journalism, something comes up and she cannot resist the urge to "get the story". Because of this, she completely ignores Bruce, who is waiting for her to get him out of jail. Even when he finally gets out (he had to phone his company in Albany to bail him out) and tries to take her with him to the train, she is so caught up with writing a story that she completely disregards him. As he is leaving, she starts saying, as if she is talking to herself: "If you want me, you gotta take me as I am, instead of trying to change me into something else. I'm no suburban bridge player, I'm a newspaperman." This gives the viewers the answer to what Hildy has chosen, even before the film's ending, and before she herself has realised it. She has accepted the fact that her career is more important to her and that perhaps the traditional domestic life she wanted was not for her after all. This



correlates to her choosing between Walter and Bruce, with Bruce representing the domesticity she craves and Walter the career and professional excitement.

Similarly, her struggle between the two mentioned ways of life corresponds to her having to choose between masculinity and femininity. Her behaviour throughout the film does not suit the traditional views on how women should conduct themselves. She is very straightforward, fearless and she is “one of the boys”. When Walter is trying to convince her not to marry Bruce and move to Albany, he says to her: “I know what quitting would mean to you. It would kill you! (...) You’re a newspaperman!” Hildy replies that is the reason why she is leaving, as she wants to go somewhere she can be “a woman”. This is only one instance where Walter shows how little regard he has for her “being a woman”. He is not a gentleman, or at least not around Hildy. He does not take his hat off in her presence, light her cigarettes, walk behind her, open the door for her, nor does he help her with her luggage. And Hildy is aware of this, as she shows how it bothers her. She wants to be treated like a lady, even though she does not act like one.

What is more, when Hildy is with her journalist co-workers, she adapts to the group, even changes the way she talks by adopting their language and joking with them. So, they treat her as one of them, and are surprised when they learn she is getting married and moving to Albany. There is a scene where they read her article about the interview with the accused murderer and one of them says: “I still say that anybody that can write like that ain’t gonna give it up permanently to sew socks for a guy in the insurance business.” This emphasizes their admiration for her skill and the opinion that she should not leave journalism to become a stay-at-home wife. It also adds to the feminist interpretations of Hawks’ “all-male group”, and how if a woman wants to succeed in such a group, she must forgo her “feminine” and embrace the “masculine, i.e., be like a man (Thornham 35). In addition to this, Hildy’s femininity is further diminished by her yelling, running, punching and her not being afraid to confront or “attack”

men. She verbally (and rightfully) attacks Walter on the phone, and when she is chasing Cooley to get all the information on William's escape, she jumps on him. So, Hildy must "be a man" to succeed in a man's world. Yet, regardless of her masculine behaviour, her femininity is still present. Wood argues that Hildy is the perfect example of both genders: "she is twice the man Pat O'Brien was (Hildy's male version in *The Front Page*), yet she never ceases to be very much a woman." (74).

What makes Hildy *the screwball heroine* that she is, is also her relationship to Walter. He is her ex-husband as well as boss, who cares most about his newspaper. At the beginning when she tells him of her plan to marry Bruce, Walter is taken aback. He is hurt, showing vulnerability, a trait rarely seen in men in films. Thus, he shows the "feminine" of his gender. However, the viewer quickly forgets that, as Walter goes on to be egoistic, unscrupulous and with little or no consideration for others. He frames Bruce and sends him to jail multiple times and is not bothered by his mother's presumable death. Hildy divorced him because he would not give her the care, attention and home she wanted. She even tells him at the beginning of the film: "Walter, you are wonderful in a loathsome sort of way." Yet, despite all of that, it is obvious that he does love her and wants her back. He also proves himself to be a "modern man", since he appreciates Hildy's talent and does not want her to waste it. He sees her as equally capable as men, if not even more, and constantly reminds her that she should not give up her passion. It is Walter who Hildy chooses in the end; thus, she also chooses her career over the domestic life she desired. After their reconciliation, Hildy is again disappointed by him, as instead of going on their honeymoon to Niagara Falls, they are going to go to Albany to cover the story about the strike. This hints at the viewers that Walter has not changed after all, and Hildy is back to being treated as she was before. It also shakes up the idea of gender equality that is present throughout the film, as Hildy is eventually back to being submissive to Walter and doing as he (her boss) tells her. Consequently, it is difficult to conclude whether Hildy

fulfilled her wish or not. On the one hand, she chose what she loved to do and that is to continue being a reporter, while at the same time, by choosing Walter, she has quite possibly returned to him being in power and her being weak and obedient. Walter is, as such, a threat to Hildy's life and future (DiBattista 276).

Generally, Hawks' *His Girl Friday* has presented the audience, not only with an interesting, witty and exciting plotline, but also with a new perspective on gender roles and gender equality. It explores the notions of masculinity and femininity by reversing the typical behaviours assigned to men and women, and portrays a strong woman, who by having a man's job becomes "one of the very first female journalists on screen" (Allan 391). Hildy, while living in a men's world and adapting to their ways, manages to keep her femininity. So, the lead female character of Hildy perfectly embodies *the screwball heroine*, who fights her way through the men's world and earns her status as an equal. However, the film does criticize femininity to a certain extent, or at least what is considered as "feminine". This can be especially seen through the character of Mollie Malloy, Earl's lover, who serves as a complete opposite to Hildy. Mollie is weak, emotional, dramatic and passive; she portrays the stereotypical femininity. And, therefore, her ending is tragic, as she throws herself out of the window, as a form of sacrifice for Earl. Similarly, DiBattista summarizes the ending of the film by suggesting that it eventually reinforces the stereotypical views on gender roles:

"Yet who is to say that this comic ending is not of the most conventional even as it is of the most aberrant kind? Hildy finally gets to go on her honeymoon, to spend her time in the only way that really matters to her – with Walter, who treats her not as a woman, but as a newspaperman." (297)

## 7. Conclusion

Taking everything into consideration, it is evident that the era of Classical Hollywood Cinema contributed to the overall film industry, not only through its technological advances, but also through the rich variety of characters it portrayed on screens. The female archetypes from this period have been a matter of study for many film theorists, but also feminists, as they shaped the stereotypes present today, both in cinema and in popular culture. Three of these representations have been discussed in this thesis: *the dumb blonde*, *femme fatale* and *the screwball heroine*. These stereotypes are all very different portrayals of women, and they were of great importance for the films they were part of, especially for the narrative and the development of other characters as well. Directors used many different techniques to emphasize the depiction of such characters, like camera angles and shots, lighting, costumes, etc.

The first stereotype discussed in this thesis, *the dumb blonde*, is perhaps the one that is still the most present today. Used for comic relief and amusement, the stereotype sadly represents women, namely blonde women, as ignorant and lacking character. The focus is predominantly on their appearance, which is fetishized to the extreme, as its only function is to serve to the “male gaze”. It shaped the understandings that women are most desirable when they are passive and submissive to men, as well as beautiful, seductive and sexual. On the other hand, *femme fatale* was a complete opposite, as it showed a powerful, yet dangerous woman, who was also very sexual, but was aware of it and used it to bring destruction to those around her, specifically men. This character type is said to have arisen as “a symptom of men’s fears about feminism”, and her punishment was her portrayal and ending. Such a liberated, intelligent woman, whose focus is not on having a family, had to be a dangerous and manipulative criminal who eventually ends up dead or behind bars.

Similarly, *the screwball heroine* was also intelligent and self-sufficient, but she was not fatal nor menacing. Out of the three analysed stereotypes, *the screwball heroine* is probably the most optimistic one, and has been credited as such by feminists. It represents a woman who is hard-working, confident, and fearless; she works in a men's world successfully and as their equal. Yet, the character was criticized for it having to adopt traditional notions of masculinity to thrive in a male-dominated surrounding. All in all, these stereotypes have heavily influenced today's cinema, which resulted in the appearance of many strong female characters inspired by *the screwball heroines* and *femme fatales*, but also in the appearance of dependent and sexualized women, who share common traits with and are inspired by *the dumb blonde*. Hence, it is important to bring attention to the study of such characters, and many other from the mentioned era, as they continue to shape the views on the roles women are expected to fulfil in society.

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## **8. Representation of Women in Classical Hollywood Cinema: *The Dumb Blonde, Femme Fatale and The Screwball Heroine*: Summary and key words**

The Classical Hollywood Cinema stands as one of the most important periods in film history, during which films transitioned from silent to sound and developed distinctive visual and narrative styles of filmmaking. Similarly, the element of storytelling became a powerful tool in capturing viewers' attention, as well as influencing their understanding and view of life and human relationships. Films from that era had specific ways of portraying different characters, especially those of women. *The dumb blonde, femme fatale and the screwball heroine* are among some of the most prominent female representations of classical Hollywood and have ever since been subject of analysis for numerous film theorists and feminists. They have influenced both the audience and the way women are shown in films today. The three mentioned representations of women were the focus of analysis in this master's thesis, which was based on various academic research and three case studies of films from that era. *The dumb blonde* was analysed through the movie *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *femme fatale* was closely examined in the movie *Vertigo* (1958) and *the screwball heroine* was further investigated through the case study of *His Girl Friday* (1940).

Key words: Classical Hollywood Cinema, representation, women, feminist theory, film

## **9. Prikaz žena u klasičnom holivudskom filmu: glupa plavuša, fatalna žena i *screwball* junakinja: Sažetak i ključne riječi**

Razdoblje klasičnog holivudskog filma jedno je od najvažnijih u povijesti filma, tijekom kojeg su filmovi prelazili s nijemih na zvučne te razvijali osebujne vizualne i narativne stilove snimanja. Slično tome, element pripovijedanja postao je moćno oruđe u zaokupljanju pozornosti gledatelja, kao i utjecanju na njihovo razumijevanje i pogled na život i međuljudske odnose. Filmovi tog razdoblja imali su specifične načine prikazivanja različitih likova, posebice žena. Glupa plavuša, fatalna žena i *screwball* junakinja među nekim su od najistaknutijih ženskih prikaza klasičnog Hollywooda i još su uvijek predmet analize brojnih filmskih teoretičara i feministica. One su uvelike utjecale i na publiku i na način prikazivanja žena danas u filmovima. Tri spomenuta prikaza žena bili su u fokusu analize ovog magistarskog rada, koji se temeljio na različitim akademskim istraživanjima te na tri analize filmova toga perioda. Glupa plavuša analizirana je kroz film *Neki to vole vruće* (1959.), fatalna žena pomno je proučena u filmu *Vrtoglavica* (1958.), a *screwball* junakinja dodatno je istražena kroz analizu filma *Njegova djevojka Petko* (1940.).

Ključne riječi: klasični holivudski film, prikaz, žene, feministička teorija, film