

The Evolution of Feminism Through Chick Flicks from 1960s to 2010s in Hollywood

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Abstract: Chick flick, the commercial film that appeals to female audiences, roots from “woman’s film” prevalent in early 20th century. This essay traces the evolution of chick flicks from the 1960s to 2010s in Hollywood. We divide the chick flicks in three stages (1960s-1970s, 1970s-1990s, 1990s-2010s) by the development of feminism from the second to third wave. We analyze several films chosen to represent the chicks flicks of each stage—Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961), Pretty in Pink (1986), The Devil Wears Prada (2006) ----from three aspects: (1) The characters' personas, including their outlook on love, values, etc; (2) Narratives, including role relationships; (3) Makeup and costume. This essay also discusses the use of the word “chick flicks”, as a result of its ambiguous and ambivalent definition in social and cinematic scale and tries to reappropriate its meaning: labeled as cheesy and senseless for decades, chick flicks need redress to gain a equal status as other films. We contend that chick flicks change or evolve alongside the progression of the movement of feminism, especially the second and third wave of feminism. To be specific, the chick flicks cover themes from a simple romantic story of how two people fall in love to more diverse topics about life, personal growth, and even social issues.

Keywords: Chick Flick, Waves of Feminism, Gender Stereotype, Reconstruction, The Male Gaze

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1970s, there is a new genre of films that has become popular in America called chick flicks. Chick, a word along with the girl, was considered an insult, a demeaning diminutive, casting women as childlike, delicate, naive fluffy creatures in need of protection and guidance or as appendages to hip young male. In this case, chick flicks can be regarded as superficial commercial films that appeal to female audiences that are 15 to 25 years old. However, with the development of feminism, the political movement that fight for the equal power between different genders, the content of chick flicks is changing. This article divides the history of chick flicks in three different stages by the wave of feminism. The first period is 1960s to 1970s which is at the second wave of feminism, the representative is breakfast at Tiffany’s by Black Edwards. The second period is 1970s to 1990s which at the transition between second wave and third wave of feminism, the

representative is *Pretty in Pink* by Howard Duech. The third period is from 1990s to 2010s which is the third wave of feminism, the representative is *The Devil Wears Prada* by David Frankel. We compare these three stages in the perspective of the costume, personality of the characters and the narrative to see the development of feminism. In this way, we also think the word chick should be reappropriated that not have the bad meanings.

2. Film analysis

2.1. Chick flicks from 1960s to 1970s

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, feminism sought equal rights for men and women in terms of work rights and political status. In the context of the Second World War, the Second Wave of Feminism was born and the purpose of feminism turned into the pursuit of women's equality in the cultural context, for example the definition in the feminist topic. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Blake Edwards 1961) is one of the chick flicks between the First and Second Wave of Feminism.

2.1.1. Embodiment of feminism from characters' personas

In this film, the heroine's own growth, or we can say her changes after her experiences in life, can be divided into two parts, which can also be reflected in the heroine's changing name — Lula Mae and Holly Golightly. Poor and destitute in Lula Mae's period, she and her brother were taken in by the doctor, Doc. Golightly, in his home, where she became the doctor's wife at an early age. But this was not the life Lula Mae wants, so she comes to New York and becomes the glamorous woman she imagines, Holly.

First, this film represents a departure from the conventional stereotype of women remaining within the domestic sphere and assuming the role of family caretakers. In contrast to the conventional role of a doctor's wife, Lula Mae pursues her ideal marriage while developing into an autonomous individual, so she left the doctor and chasing her ideal marriage.

The film simultaneously perpetuates a negative stereotype of women while reflecting a more progressive aspect of women's mindset. Holly once said, "You could always tell what kind of a person a man really thinks you are by the earrings he gives you." (*Breakfast at Tiffany's* 1961) This statement effectively objectifies women, as if they are to be imbued with value by men. Additionally, the film depicts the female characters in a manner that is perceived as unintelligent. This is evidenced by their actions. For example, she nearly burning down the house when she celebrated the welcome party at home. Also, once Holly met a man in the prison, if she chat with the man, he will pay for her, but she unintentionally assisting the gangsters in communicating code words during the chatting.

Earlier we could say that Holly's love of vanity was to give her brother a better life because her brother is in the army, but after she knew her brother's death Holly continued to indulge in richness and honor. We can say that she is obsessed with the upper class. It is evident that the film industry of the period regarded women as frivolous.

2.1.2. Embodiment of feminism from narratives

The film maintains a consistent focus on heterosexual relationships, instead of the same sex. The host, Paul, who fell in love with Holly, represents the term of love and romance, draws out Holly's mania for Tiffany, who symbolizes an upper-class lifestyle, or a homecoming for her. The film then employs a party to introduce the opposing term, representing wealthy by introducing the two supporting roles: Rusty Trawler and Jose da Silva Pereira.

Holly's initial infatuation with Rusty was predicated on his inclusion on the Forbes Rich List. When she discovers that Rusty is married, she becomes obsessed with Jose as a potential romantic

interest because he can take her to Brazil. But he also ends up staying away from her due to concern that such an association might negatively impact his professional reputation. This raises the question of whether wealth is truly a defining factor in the outlook on love. At the end of the film, when Holly remains in a state of self-pity in the aftermath of Jose's departure, Paul's utterances offer a resolution of this question. Holly is terrified somebody will stick her in a cage named love, but she is already in a cage which built herself [1]. As a result of her childhood trauma, Holly is incapable of accepting love, because she thinks love is untrustworthy. She considered this evade to be an instance of authentic liberty, yet this was not the case. But we can also find out that Paul and Holly are redeeming each other rather than the heroine just putting her foot down to fulfill the male character's masculinity.

Additionally, the film illustrates various manifestations of the male gaze. For instance, also at the party, men are typically present in the company of women, discussions about male-female relationships are inevitable, and the camera lingers on Paul and the agent's offensive remarks about Holly.



Figure 1: Screen shot from breakfast at Tiffany's

2.1.3. Embodiment of feminism from makeup and costume

Coco Chanel once said, "Fashion changes, but style endures" [2], and she's the one who really made her style eternal. In those ultra-conservative days in 1960s, women wore their hair in high buns, tight tops and bodices, floor-length skirts and lots of pleated petticoats [3]. Coco Chanel, as an Avant-Garde Fashion Leader, opened up a whole new world for women. The "Little Black Dress" by Chanel eschewed conventional beauty standards of body curves while enabling a greater number of women to engage in physical activity in such attire. While a single item of clothing may appear inconsequential, it is accurate to assert that the "Little Black Dress" constituted a significant innovation that altered the public perception of feminism and gender equality [4].

If Coco Chanel is regarded as a pioneer in the field, Hubert De Givenchy is considered a brilliant innovator who initiated a new fashion trend of the Little Black Dress: the cocktail black. The design was more feminine than Chanel's iconic Little Black Dress. Givenchy created a more fitted waistline, which contributed to the overall playful aesthetic, aligning with the portrayal of women in the 1960s as positive and vibrant [4]. The black dress worn by Audrey Hepburn at the beginning of Breakfast at Tiffany's is representative of the modified Little Black Dress created by Givenchy. It is notable that, compared to the costumes in Sissi (Ernst Marischka 1955) or Gone with the Wind (Victor

Fleming 1939), the chick flick films released during the same period, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* reflects a significant evolution in the portrayal of femininity. In contrast to the prevailing trends of the time, costume in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* eschewed the exaggerated silhouettes and vibrant hues that were prevalent in the preceding decade in favor of a more minimalist and comfortable aesthetic, which established a new trend in 1960s films.

2.2. Chick flicks between 1970s and 1990s

The period from the 1970s to the 1990s was the heyday of the second wave of feminism. The content includes fighting for gender equality, reproductive rights, abortion, contraception, divorce, women's right to work, etc., and also brings social attention to domestic violence and marital rape. *Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch 1986) is one of the representative chick flicks in this period.

2.2.1. Embodiment of feminism from characters' personas

In this film, the shaping of the heroine's character is progressing along with the evolution of feminism. For example, the heroine Andie in the film has independent consciousness and her own mind, and she breaks the image that women are forced to play a submissive role under the male chauvinism. The film revolves around the heroine Andie, a 17-year-old high school student whose parents divorced, and her mother left home when she was five years old. Since then, her father has been depressed and stayed at home without work. However, such a tough family environment did not destroy Andie, but evoked her independent spirit. Because of her poor family, Andie had to rely on good grades to win scholarships and even worked in a record store after school to support her family, which also reflected her independent characteristics and altruist. Compared to the heroine Holly in the previous period, Andie's got more heavier burdens, she needed to undertake family's expenses, while Holly just needed to help herself escape the family of origin. There are three boys who like Andie. The first is Duckie, who accompanied Andie from childhood to adulthood. Being flamboyant and outgoing, he was never shy about showing his love in public. The next is Steve, who is dissolute and rich. The last one Brian, an affectionate gentleman.

2.2.2. Embodiment of feminism from narratives

The film depicts two kinds of relationships, one is between men and women, and the other one is between women. In the relationship between men and women, the director mainly focused on the interaction among Andie and these three guys. Duckie, who chased after Andie boldly, was refused by Andie since Andie only treated him as her best friend. Steff, a playboy, was fancied by Andie's beauty. But Andie refused his love in disgust because Steff called Andie a chick. As for the hero of this film, Blane is much gentler. But what touched Andie the most is his full respect toward her, Blane always adopted Andie's advice and never pushed Andie. In this part, Andie's choice was completely out of her real heart and clear mind.

However, the relationship between girls is such a stereotype. Other girls in the school were supposed to be jealous of Andie because of her beauty and smartness. So, they would like to do any terrible things to Andie, such as teasing Andie's outfit in class.

2.2.3. Embodiment of feminism from makeup and costume

The costume in the film *Pretty in Pink* shows the unique personality of each person. Andie's clothes are mostly cheap clothes bought in second-hand shops, so she is looked down upon at school, but Andie has a strong heart so she does not care about it. Andie has her own unique aesthetics, so she will choose the clothes she likes and make clothes by herself. But there still exists the stereotype to

women all of the color of the clothes are pink, and the back of the Andie's bedroom is also pink, but not all of girl like this color. Iona, Andie's colleague at the record store, dresses in a 1980s rock style that manifests her aggressive personality. Steff and Blane both wear classic Polo shirts with suit jackets, which shows their superior status and presents a sharp contrast. Duckie's quirky rock and roll outfits, vintage dance shoes show his flamboyant and lively personality.

2.3. Chick flicks in 1990s- 2010s

After the accumulation of producing experience for almost half a century, in every respect from popularity to quantity, chick flicks have finally reached their peak since the mid-1990s when the third wave of feminism initially emerged. Feminists at that time mainly focused on the issues about reappropriation of the words with semantic derogation of women and sexual liberation: for example, increasingly more people start to accept the word "bitch" can serve as a positive concept when praising women. Women empowerment also became prevalent, which means women were encouraged to make decisions that were previously denied. Besides, as women in more diverse races, classes and ages took part in the activities, feminism also narrowed down into different sub- genre, one of which is post- feminism. It appears as a term in media around late 1980s. Postfeminism began to appear as a term in the media by the mid-1980s, but perhaps began to be significantly present as a concept in 1991 when Susan Faludi published *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*. [5] Opponents of post- feminism believed that we had already achieved the goal of feminism and emphasized individualism, for they repudiated any single group of women to represent all of them to make common decisions without considering personal situations. Post- feminism also strongly relates to pop culture; chick flicks illustrate, reflect, and present all of the cultural characteristics associated with the chick postfeminist aesthetic: a return to femininity, the primacy of romantic attachments, girl power, a focus on female pleasure and pleasures, and the value of consumer culture and girly goods, including designer clothes, expensive and impractical footwear, and trendy accessories. [5] In addition, the films called chick flicks that once widely believed as inferior manifest a stronger sense of progression of feminine awareness in this stage, having their unique but considerable box office appeal, so the warrant of endowing the word chick flick also is in urgency. *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel 2006) is a good representation that will be precisely analyzed in the following part.

2.3.1. Narrative

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, the story takes place in New York in the early 2000s. Heroine Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway) is a young graduate who has been dreaming to be a journalist since she was a kid. With blind passion and intelligence without real working experience, she was left by chance to work for the editor- in- chief of *Runway* (a fictional fashion magazine in this film) Miranda, who is widely known for her rigor in work. After making efforts to fulfill Miranda's demands and to catch up the pace of her intense working schedule, Andy becomes an irrefutably professional woman, but simultaneously as she continuously focuses more on her job, it starts to have an imbalance between her personal life, mainly the relationship with her boyfriend Nate, and her career. In the end, Andy gives up the work position in the fashion field and begins to pursue the career that she favors from the bottom of her heart: working in a journalism company, and she meets her boyfriend Nate peacefully, but she does not get back together again with him.

The story of this film is mainly unfolded along the growth and progression of heroine Andy, which symbols that chick flicks enter a new stage: simple romantic story is no longer the emphasis of a whole film; the professions and personal interest of female characters is a key point instead of merely designed as a promotion to a love story.

Nevertheless, one of the most controversial topics about *The Devil Wears Prada*, argued by audiences and critics, is the design of its ending: heroine Andy says “I wanted to say that you were right about everything” to Nate, supporting his opposition to her career in *Runway* magazine. While some audiences who called Nate as the real villain within the film deems that “His criticisms of her are decidedly unconstructive and he seems oddly intent on blocking Andy’s career advancement,” commenting the design of the ending can be seen as retrogradation of feminism, because they improperly draw an equal sign between quitting her job as Miranda’s assistant and sacrificing for her boyfriend or romantic relationship, other feminists rather embrace it as correspondence to the concept of post- feminism and the third wave of feminism. Instead of getting lost in the perfect life in a worldly sense filled with extravagant feasting and revelry with luxurious and fancy couture not to balk at paying the price of overstretching herself, Andy backs to the journalism field following the sound from the bottom of her heart. Just as the individualism advocated by post- feminism, Andy’s choice is made based on her personal situation, according to her own desire and persuasion, which also manifests the core of women empowerment.

2.3.2. Character setting

Andy knows nothing about fashion and trend at the beginning; what she truly into is always writing; she is passionate and intelligent when facing work, making her every effort to behave perfectly as an assistant; she is also self- respected, which means that she put her own personality, such as honesty, and personal desires and aspirations, at the initial place, and knows and respects what she really wants. All these glitter qualities make her an independent, modern and anti-stereotyped female character.

However, when talking about another main character, the person whom Andy assists for, we can evidently see bias and gender norms reflected from her. Miranda Priestly, the devil in this film, a tough, severe and self- regarding chief editor, is usually described as “career- obsessed” and “the dragon lady” according to her dialog just because she is a powerful and severe woman, which preventing her being a tender and self- sacrificing housewife to satisfy the expectations normally held from the society. Purely professional woman is not completely acceptable, while the career- centered man is sought- after. Women should be liberated from trivial chores which cannot help women to receive corresponding practical social value in monetary terms, to pursuing greater achievements not restricted in family scale, to break down the bias and gender norms.

2.3.3. Costume and makeup

As a fashion relevant film, *The Devil Wears Prada* has a stylish and trendy costume that strives to fit reality. The symbolized or stereotypical color (pink to represent sweet and young women) or outfits (dresses wrapping bodies tightly) are not emphasized to appear in this film. “The film was directed by David Frankel, who directed many episodes of the series, and the show’s stylist, Patricia Field, assembled the film’s pricey accumulation of designer goods. Like the series, beloved by young women internationally, the film shies away from any critique of fashion as either a superficial distraction from real human development, or an insidious capitalist force tricking women into overpriced clothing and out of their disposable income.” [5]

To probe the definition of beauty and its performing form appearing in the film, we can still observe the shadow of male gaze and realize that we women are not deciders who define how people think about fashion and beauty. There is a scene that Andy firstly enters *Runway* company, and she is satirized by Nigel for her choice for lunch, corn chowder, is composed with cellulite that easily makes people gain weight. There is also a comparison between the lunch for other girls in the row and that of Andy: every tall and slim girl wearing fancy clothes grabs a box of salad, while Andy with an old- fashioned blue sweater on has a bowl of corn chowder. This scene conveys a piece of

information to audiences that if you want to have even only a little to do with fashion, you have to be slim and restricted to your diet. Size zero, two is regular, size four is acceptable, and size six is the clue of being excluded from fashion. “The beauty is the sensuous presentation of idea” — G. W. F. Hegel. [6] Our interpretation of beauty is always controlled by male elites, so the trend inevitably shows a tilt to meet the favor of male, so called male gaze.

2.3.4. Reappropriation

Chick flicks have been stigmatized for a long time. Mainstream cinematic romances are customarily held in low cultural esteem and their review discourses often reflect the low expectations attached to them. [7] People are ashamed to choose a film labeled as a chick flick to watch in public, for which have been widely but mistakenly considered as inferior and cheesy. The box office market share of chick flicks slashes after 2013, according to the Figure 1. (it is a histogram of the box office share for romantic comedy, which include most of the chick flicks approximately). Just as the transformation of traditional and narrow word use from woman’s picture (*Breakfast at Tiffany's* mentioned above) to chick flicks (*The Devil Wears Prada* discussed now), though the themes and content change slightly, the audiences do not just simply disappear into the air, which can be implied that chick flicks never die, they eternally exist in different forms. However, why do producers or poster makers stop calling films chick flicks? Alongside the awareness of feminism, traditional content reinforcing feminine and following the conventional family value in chick flicks is overshadowed by that in girly films mainly about friendship, personal growth and other serious societal topics in life, but if we accept the transformation as an excuse for the decrease of chick flicks, it will be a acknowledgment that chick flicks, a word with chick which is narrowly defined as insulting word refers to young women in, do not deserves serious themes, which is dangerous discrimination! Therefore, to redefine the word chick, to reclass the films called chick flicks, every extraordinary film about girls should be entitled as chick flicks, the pronoun of great films targeting young women audiences.

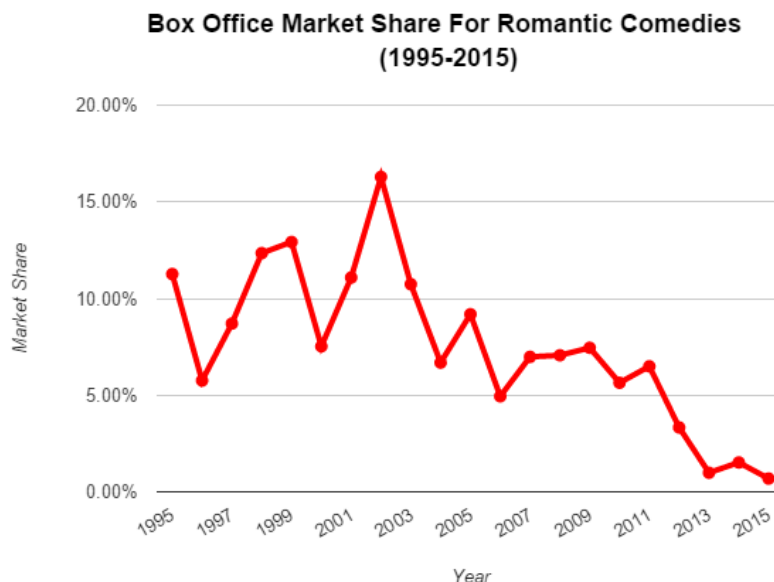


Figure 2: Histogram of the box office market share for romantic comedies (1995-2005)

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the movie in the first period show that the woman is independent and unintelligent, the costume follows the mainstream of the people, for example the little black dress. The director mainly

focuses on the heterosexual, ignores other relationships between man and woman. In the second period of the history of the chick flicks, the narratives shows that girls can live depends on themselves, instead of the man, to show that women are smart and hard, for example in *Pretty Pink* the main character study hard and gets the scholarship. The costume is special, that does not follow others like. In the last period, the story began focus on the growth of the woman. The costume become more diverse never mind the fat or thin. The female character is intelligent and ambitious.

So, by looking at these three stages we can observe that the chick flicks change in a good direction. More specifically, the conscious of feminism is growing among the world, woman not only be a good wife in the family, but they can also be anything that they want. It is a good trend that chick flicks are not superficial, and women not only care about love. Chick flicks nowadays break up the stereotype of the woman, in this case, the meaning of chick flicks should not only be regarded as stupid love relationship films, but they can also contain more themes. The meaning of “chick” should also be reappropriated, ‘chick’ should not be the word that shoulders many bad meanings, people also cannot be ashamed about watching chick flicks. From these perspectives, we can see the rise of feminism. In addition, in our view, on the one hand the development of feminism influences chick flicks, on the other hand, chick flicks also help the growth of feminism.

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