

---

# THE MESSAGE AND THE MOVIES

## CINEMA AS IDEOLOGY

### Week 8: Sexual Politics and the Nymphet Syndrome

#### The Hollywood 'Lolita' – Early American Cinema

*"At this time, there were two yet distinct overlapping types of Hollywood Lolita: the comedy Lolita and the tragedy Lolita. The urchin and the waif. The cute and the pathetic. Both were child-like, but coped with dramatic situations in the different ways called for by their personae."*

Sinclair, M. (1988) p.15

- Lilian Gish
- Mabel Normand
- Mary Miles Minter
- Mary Pickford

#### Hollywood as a Predatory Place

##### D.W. Griffith

- His early two-reelers often featured a young girl being assailed by an older 'foreign-looking' middle aged man
- She was always rescued by a clean cut younger man
- This triangle was indicative of his own chauvinism and racism

*"One cannot help wondering if this triangle – bestial older man, pure-minded younger man, and the half-grown girl over whom they fight – was not the symbolic reenactment of Griffith's own struggle against his sexual urges."*

Sinclair, M. (1988) p.17

##### Charlie Chaplin

- In 1918 just averted 'disaster' when he whisked pregnant sixteen-year-old Mildred Harris over the Mexican border to marry her, thus avoiding prosecution
- He met her when she was just 14
- Louis B Mayer punched him in a restaurant and called him a 'filthy pervert'
- There were doubtless many 'nymphets' in Chaplin's life
- However, one would be more significant than the rest

*'Lillita McMurray was seven when in 1915 a chance visit took Chaplin to Kitty's Come-On Inn where her mother, Nana, was a waitress (she was of Mexican descent; the father was Irish- American). After his divorce from Harris he continued to see Lillita and gave her walk-ons in two of his films, as an angel in The Kid (1921) and as a maid in The Idle Class (also 1921).'*

##### Lillita McMurray/Lita Grey

- She was to co-star with him in The Gold Rush (1924), but collapsed on the set when two months pregnant.
- A lawyer uncle, Edwin McMurray, pointed out that he could bring charges of statutory rape.
- Their marriage took place on 24 November 1924 - and not secretly, as Chaplin had hoped.

*"Well, boys, this is better than the penitentiary but it won't last."*

Charlie Chaplin

**Jodie Foster****The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane (1976)**

Nicholas Gessner

- Rynn was described as ‘*a nymphet*’ by Anthony Synnott
- Anthony Cortesse described the character as a ‘*a 13-year-old imp of maturing sexuality*’
- The film’s unusual subject matter seemed to split opinions and how it was interpreted wildly differed from critic to critic
- Some saw argued that the film explored issues around ‘the independence of children’ and was a worthy discourse on the rights of children
- Some saw the film as one about teenage rebellion
- However, others questioned the ‘adult sexualizing’ of children within the piece

**Treatment of Childhood Sexuality**

- When she was just three, Foster auditioned for a new Coppertone advertisement. The original though, was beginning to look a little suspect.

“...a few years ago, they did a study about incitement to rape, and one of the things that cropped up most often was the old Coppertone suntan oil ad – it had a little puppy tugging at a girls swimsuit. It had just the right mix for these rapists of adolescent sexuality, female nudity, rear entry, animals, violence...”

**Paul Schrader (writer of Taxi Driver)**

“There had long been something disingenuous about Hollywood’s treatment of childhood sexuality. Look at old stills of Shirley Temple, for instance in *Kid in Africa* (1932) and it is startling how similarly dressed she is to Iris in *Taxi Driver*.”

**Macnab, G. (2005) p.33**

**Jodie Foster in Taxi Driver (1976)**

- At first her mother was outraged that she was considered to play a ‘hooker’,
- However, she went on to fight for the opportunity for her daughter to play alongside de Niro
- Welfare authorities raised concerns – she fought them
- But they backed down once it was agreed that Jodie would undertake four hours of therapy
- 12-year-old Foster employed her own form of method acting by preparing for the role by donning high heels and walking around the streets of New York
- Her older sister acted as body double in more salacious scenes

**Alien (1979)**

Ridley Scott

**Influences on the film****It, Terror from Beyond Space (1958)**

Directed by Edward L Cahn

- Has a crew trapped on a ship with an alien being
- The alien is virtually indestructible.
- It hides in the ventilation system.
- Takes out the crew one at a time.
- Is killed by asphyxiation in an air lock

- Though *Alien* (1979) works well as a Sci-Fi feature it also contains many more traditional horror film conventions.
- Dark and shadowy locations
- The sense of claustrophobia
- A haunted house style feel
- *Alien* also (seems) to be a film of mixed messages

### The Birthing Motif

- The film contains numerous ‘births’ and ‘reproductive’ imagery
- The first ‘birthing scene’ is at the beginning of the film – suggests that giving birth is a painless, sterile experience – removing the burden of pregnancy and birth from the female
- The sleeping pods are womb-like and the crew wear nappies

*“But the crowning image of reproductive horror was yet to come. The poster art for Alien (1979) was deceptively simple and evocative: a cracked egg in a dark void, and the tag line In Space, No One Can Hear You Scream. Whether this was internal or external was not made clear.”*

**David J Skal**

- The film contains disturbing imagery regarding birth and the female sex organs
- One of the crew gives ‘birth’ through his stomach
- The alien could be interpreted as female
- She eats men, consumes them

*“Most science fiction and fantasy films depict woman as the helpmate to man, and she is more often than not a hindrance at the crucial moment when the protagonist is trying to escape from or defeat the villains and monsters... How many times have we seen the heroine trip and fall as the couple run from their pursuers, and how many times has the hero been forced to go back and help her to her feet to carry her quite literally from danger?”*

**Rebecca Bell-Metereau**

*“...a utopian fantasy of women’s liberation, a fantasy of economic and social equality, friendship, and collectivity between middle-class women and men... (Ripley) appropriates qualities traditionally identified with male, but not masculinist, heroes.”*

*“(There are) covert anxieties (which) must be seen as a response to feminism as a collective force.”*

**Judith Newton**

- The image is unquestionably phallic
- The accompanying dialogue seems to reflect the possible male anxieties about the rise of feminism and the supposed slipping power of the patriarchal system

*“It’s been dead for years”*

- The men override Ripley’s direct orders
- “Listen to the MAN” – Dallas referring to Ash
- He attacks Ripley

*“Ripley’s confrontation with Ash is the film’s most immediate projection of the male’s anxiety towards a future of sexual equality. Within minutes of Ripley’s assumption of command, Ash confronts her in a scene that invokes an attempt at sexual domination by way of rape and murder.”*

**Jason Haggstrom**

- 
- Ash attacks a barely conscious Ripley with a rolled up (porn) magazine – an oral rape and attempt to assert male domination
  - The mise-en-scene is littered with naked women – suggesting the objectification of women
  - When Ash is defeated he spurts ‘semen’ like liquid all over the ship – suggesting the ‘patriarchal system’ won’t be conquered so easily
  - Ripley’s near-nudity seems to have no purpose
  - It was not originally in the script
  - It feels more titillating

*“It’s nothing more than a standard of the horror genre to place at least one female into a role of sexual object for the audience.”*

- This scene might reflect the continued power of the more sinister patriarchal system
- Ripley, though victorious in the end, in this scene, is at her most vulnerable, literally stripped almost naked
- It devours the male crew
- Could be described as a metaphor for male anxieties about feminism
- Visually it remains deeply phallic
- Teeth
- It attacks by forced penetration
- Lambert’s attack resembles a ‘rape’ scene