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Ramblin' Woman

Since the advent of motion pictures, films have explored the concept of gender roles. While not always done consciously, this exploration has garnered intriguing insights into the human psyche, allowing us to see how gender has been thought of throughout history. So it seems that public opinion on these matters has changed drastically from, say, the 1950s to present day, growing out of the conservative roots it was born in and into a more open and equal state of mind. So why then do we find certain films from the 1970s preaching the same messages found in those of the 1950s, two decades earlier? Although it would seem that the movies we watch today are far more advanced, philosophically, than those of the past, this is not necessarily true. In fact, comparing films from two different decades will often bring you to the conclusion that not very much has changed at all.

Such is the case with the films *I Want to Live!* (1958) and *The Stepford Wives* (1975). *I Want to Live!* is the story of a woman, Babs, who is convicted of murder for a crime she has not done, and is subsequently executed. *The Stepford Wives* is a film about another woman, Joanna, who is also murdered, but for entirely different reasons. What these two films have in common is that they are less about what is portrayed on screen and more about the subtext of the movies. In their own unique way, each deals with gender issues and not meeting the standards of the social consensus in their respective eras. While *The Stepford Wives* was released in 1975, and *I Want to Live!* in 1958, many of the same issues are raised in each, and in much of the same way.

Although these movies were made at very different times, the plots both revolve around strong, independent female leads who do not meet the social standard of housewifedom and, as such, are punished. The films tie in to Peter Biskind's book, *Seeing is Believing*, mainly by involving themes of sexual evolution and the responses to these changes by different political ideologies. Specifically, *I Want to Live!* concerns itself with the evolving gender roles of the 1950s while *The Stepford Wives* focuses on women's liberation and the development of feminism during the 1960s and 70s.

Seeing is Believing observes this phenomenon of changing gender roles during the 1950s, through film. Biskind studies the decade and connects the relationship between what we see on screen and the decade's political atmosphere. He defines for us what the social standards for women are in liberal and conservative films as well as how they were reinforced. For instance, he explains to us that although both liberal and conservative films do not approve of career women, who "succeeded, but only at men's expense" (263) or, more frequently, "[run] the risk of being criminalized, neuroticized, failing, falling ill or under cars" (263), liberal films are likely to reward them with some sort of power or social control once they return to the home. Conservative films, on the other hand, expect women to subordinate themselves to men regardless of if they are married or not. In general, women belong in the home, but liberal films allow them at least a little masculinity once they are there, while conservative films will have nothing to do with it.

Although Biskind's book only studies 1950s films, we can also apply it to *The Stepford Wives*, knowing that these same theories have varied little between the decades. For instance, in both *I Want to Live!* and *The Stepford Wives*, the main protagonists are both career women who are punished for being such. While both women want to conform, at least partially, to the standards of the time, and even try to compromise between their wants and those of society's, they are still punished severely and ultimately executed. This is interesting to note because, as discussed earlier, liberal films would have no problem with a woman accepting her place in the home and even reward her for doing so. They would see this as an opportunity to conform the career woman into their liberal version of a housewife, complete with some limited authority and a responsibility to manage the home. However, this is not how the stories play out.

Both the films' choice to punish these women for being outside of the consensus can lead you to believe that these films are conservative. Conservative films, which are concerned with "shoring up traditional sex roles [rather than] transforming them" (275) have no tolerance for masculine females and thus choose to penalize women for acting outside of the traditional system. There are other signs as well. The way the film treats the only psychiatrists who examine the main characters is very telling of a conservative film. The doctors (read: someone who can "cure" them, instead of punishing them—a very liberal notion) are the only authoritative figures they trust in the movies. Babs puts her life in her psychiatrist's hands, expecting him to prove her innocence, but, in the end, he is unable to do so. Joanna tells her psychiatrist the truth about what is happening in Stepford and while

she wants to help her out desperately, she must go away for a few days—which also happens to be a few days too late. These elements reinforce the conservative idea that punishment is the only cure. On the surface, these aspects make the films seem believably conservative—an open and shut case. Below the surface, however, lies the true understanding.

The Stepford Wives and *I Want to Live!* are interesting films because while they may, at first, seem conservative, they both contain elements that say something else. What you find in both of these movies is that the police are actually a part of the problem (rather than the solution), doctors can't help the main characters, and they aren't given a chance to conform. So if not conservative, what kinds of films are these? By laying down the point that the system is problematic, unhelpful, and unreasonable, these films are radical.

There is a scene within *The Stepford Wives* that backs this point nicely: Joanna has just seen that her only neighborhood friend is no longer loud, messy, and obnoxious, but has instead transformed overnight into a clean, cooking, and soft spoken housewife. She runs home immediately to tell her husband about this—worried that the men of Stepford are responsible for her transformation—and get him to agree to move out of the neighborhood, but instead of listening to her, he becomes angry and an argument ensues between the two. The argument is interesting however, because her husband is not concerned about what Joanna is saying, but instead is mad that she can't be more like the other women in Stepford—which is to say mindless, opinion-less slaves. The argument ends with him insisting that Joanna attend counseling to “fix” herself.

This scene is important because it shows that her husband thinks something must be mentally wrong with Joanna because she is not like the Stepford Wives and is, on the contrary, an independent woman. He wants her to go to counseling to “fix” herself—hopefully to cure her of her free spirit. He doesn’t even pay her concerns about her friend any attention and refuses to believe anything is wrong. Because Joanna is outside of the social consensus, she is thought of as in need of fixing, being essentially punished for thinking that the “Stepford way of life” is wrong.

Throughout this scene and the rest of the film, along with *I Want to Live!*, the theme of punishment is very present. We see that the main characters are early, and often, punished for not being a part of the social standard for women. Although we know that these films are radical and are trying to give extreme examples of society, it is still interesting to look at how they perceive men’s actions toward women. The men in these movies do not talk things out with the women. They instead punish, very often violently, to get these women to conform. It is not just lower class men either who make use of this violence; they are police officers (*I Want to Live!*) and wealthy family men (*The Stepford Wives*). It seems as though they view women as animals and trophies, unable to think in the same ways men do, and so they must be punished to get the message. There is something very disturbing in the nonchalant attitudes these men assume when acting this way, almost as if to say that it is business as usual.

The main difference between *The Stepford Wives* and *I Want to Live!* is the atmosphere of the films. In an abstract sense, the set ups are similar and the movies both play out the same, but they are presented in very different fashions. While *I*

Want to Live! is a dramatic piece, based on a real woman, *The Stepford Wives* is an obvious satire, feeling almost campy at times. Despite these differences, however, there is an unmistakable message to be gathered from both: women are not treated equally. Society is the enemy.

The men in these films, while being the ones who do the physical punishing, are often shown in a somewhat sympathetic light. It's true that when Joanna hits her husband over the head with a fire poker near the end of *The Stepford Wives*, we don't feel much sympathy for him, but at the beginning, when he is excitedly talking to her about being invited to join the very exclusive Stepford men's club, we can see his desire to be a part of the group. Throughout the film, he is pushed every step of the way towards punishing Joanna by the neighborhood men, and after a certain point, he is never shown sober/without a drink in his hand again, assumedly not being able to perform his horrendous duty in clear consciousness. At one point, Joanna even awakes in the middle of the night to find her husband downstairs, drunk and crying by the fire. He does not want to harm her, but must fit inside the consensus. Similarly, in *I Want to Live!*, the reporter who has played a large role in Bab's conviction is at first vicious and unrelenting in his articles about her, but he does it only to sell papers, because that is what the people buy—It is what society wants to hear. Near the middle of the film, however, he converts himself and even tries to make up for his mistakes by working to get Bab's off of Death Row.

While films from different decades may seem to bare few similarities, this could not be further from the truth. In fact, films have changed very little over time, playing out the same plots and handing out the same messages that they always

have. Furthermore, we face many of the same social problems today as we did in the 1950's, especially concerning gender roles, and we often still deal with them in many of the same ways, as well. This idea of punishment as a solution to reinforcing social norms and the social consensus is still as alive and active as it was in the past and shows no signs of departure. There is no specific race or gender to point the finger at, however. Through *The Stepford Wives* and *I Want to Live!* we can see that men are not necessarily the ones responsible for such things and it is society, as a whole, that is to blame. While this is an important fact to gather, it is even more important to realize the dangers of society and the social consensus. These movies serve to help us understand what happens in society when absolute power is given to one group, and the results are disturbing.

Work Cited:

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