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Lydia Guertin

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Hollywood Culture: Portrayals of Romantic Interactions and Gender Tropes Pre- and Post-Sexual Assault Awareness Movements of the 21st Century

Lydia Guertin

Since the 2017 allegations of sexual assault against director Harvey Weinstein and the subsequent trending hashtag “#MeToo”, sexual assault awareness has become a leading edge of fourth-wave feminism. This study explores the impacts of sexual assault awareness movements on Hollywood film by examining 18 films from 1999-2001, 2009-2011, and 2016-2018 and analyzing categorical data gathered to generate trend lines for various aspects of the portrayal of romantic interactions and gender tropes from 1999-2018. These trend lines and correlation coefficients show drastic changes aligned with the goals of fourth-wave feminism, particularly in camera angles, sexual interactions, heteroromantic relationships, and trope portrayal and, in some cases, show shifts directly aligned with the timing of Hollywood sexual assault scandals. These findings demonstrate the influence of American activism, specifically “#MeToo” and sexual assault awareness movements, on cultural markers, in this case, Hollywood film portrayals, and encourage further research on the implications of public activism on cultural and societal norms.

Keywords: film analysis, sexual assault awareness, feminist film theory, gender in film

Introduction

According to the United States (US) National Victim’s Center, the incidence rate of sexual assault, defined as “sexual contact or behavior that occurs without explicit consent of the victim,”¹ is growing at a faster rate than any other violent crime in the United States². Sexual assault can include gender-based harassment, pressured sexual contact, blackmail, and rape, making the identification of “assault” subjective and difficult for people who have not experienced sexual assault firsthand. Over the past 20 years, the rise of sexual assault awareness movements has ignited a widespread American cultural shift through advocacy

for knowledge of the types of unacceptable behaviors as well as the ubiquity of these movements across ethnicities, ages, and genders. From the “#MeToo” movement in 2017 that aimed to spread awareness of the range of victims and the “Time’s Up” movement in 2018 advocating to remove offenders in positions of power to the publication of *She Said* by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, a frontline nonfiction account of the news break that ignited allegations against Harvey Weinstein in 2019³, women have increasingly advocated for awareness of the reality of workplace sexual harassment and Hollywood sexual coercion through positions of power. Likewise, an increasing number of sexual assault documentaries have been released

1 “Sexual Assault”, *RAINN*, accessed January 20, 2020. www.rainn.org/articles/sexual-assault.

2 Jennifer Finnegan, “Sexual Assault Awareness Month: A New Focus to Stop Rapes”, *Off Our Backs*, vol. 27, no. 4 (1997): 3

3 Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, *She Said*, Penguin Press, 2019.

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since 2000. Some examples include *The Invisible War* (2011), which uncovered sexual assault in the US military, *Twist of Faith* (2004), which reported on sexual abuse and misconduct in the Catholic church, and *The Hunting Ground* (2015), which explored widespread college campus rape culture⁴. Since the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women issued a recommendation in 2017 that widespread violence against women be seen as a human rights violation⁵, changes in social and legal categorization of the severity of sexual assault crimes will likely be seen in future years. Some examples of shifts in social norms have already been seen through the conviction of rapists and the increased concern and support given to victims who have come forward in recent years, as exhibited by the Kavanaugh confirmation of 2018, where Justice Kavanaugh was held accountable to the testimony of a woman claiming he had raped her. Although some cultural shifts in the perception of sexual assault can already be seen, this study aims to assess whether there are perceptible shifts in Hollywood film direction choices from time periods before, during, and after these sexual assault awareness movements. This study targets Hollywood film portrayals because of their ability to change gender stereotypes and acceptable social interactions through film's vast influence and coverage in mainstream media⁶.

Traditional romantic roles between characters are demonstrated well in 20th century movies like *Pretty in Pink* (1986), where the female, subtly-beautiful outcast ends up dating her quirky best friend rather than the popular "hottie," but non-traditional romantic roles have been increasingly visible due to a number of films involving gender expression and identity, especially in young adult movies like *She's the Man* (2006), where the female protagonist cross-dresses to play soccer on the boys' team and attracts the popular boys instead of chasing them. Since Hollywood

film set in America is likely intended to portray the American lifestyle through its depictions of partying, romance, sexual interactions, and everyday relationships, this study will draw comparisons between how actors and directors have chosen to portray romantic interactions and the consequent impressions given about American values and attitudes towards romantic and platonic interactions. Romantic interactions are here defined as male-female interactions, for the purpose of a clearly-defined history of gender roles between males and females, that are either overtly sexual or suggestive in tone and/or display romantic dynamics or interest, such as touching or one-on-one time. The results of this study may predict how society will react to future awareness movements, allowing a better understanding of current American ideals and their basis, and aim to understand in more depth how American society and culture has already responded to instances of sexual assault in politics and Hollywood. This study is grounded in feminist film theory and Laura Mulvey's "male gaze," a concept defined by University of Puget Sound Gender Studies Professor Ann Putnam, who asserts that the "male gaze" is a combination of film effects that "[highlight] a woman's 'to-be-looked-at-ness,' a system which is always 'cut to the measure of [male] desire'"⁷. Viewing Hollywood film and culture through this lens allows traditional gender stereotypes and andro-centric thinking of the 20th century to be seen more easily, and thus allows shifts in said concepts to be visible in changes in cinematography and direction choices.

Literature Review

Much of the inspiration for this study came from film studies covering aspects of romantic films, specifically a study titled "The End of Romance: The

4 Gary Crowdus et al, "Transforming Trauma into Political Activism: An Interview with Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering", *Cinéaste*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2015): 44. www.jstor.org/stable/43655496.

5 Rachel Hall-Clifford, "Where There Is No Hashtag: Considering Gender-Based Violence in Global Health Fieldwork in the Time of #MeToo", *Health and Human Rights*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2019): 132. www.jstor.org/stable/26727077.

6 James Dowd and Nicole Pallotta, "The End of Romance: The Demystification of Love in the Postmodern Age", *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 43, no. 4 (2000): 554. www.jstor.org/stable/1389548.

7 Ann Putnam, "The Bearer of the Gaze in Ridley Scott's 'Thelma and Louise'", *Western American Literature*, vol. 27, no. 4 (1993): 291. www.jstor.org/stable/43021037.

Demystification of Love in the Postmodern Age” by James Dowd and Nicole Pallotta. That study aimed to assess a perceptible shift in attitudes towards and approaches to long-term romantic relationships in Hollywood films from 1930 to 1999. Dowd and Pallotta took a simple random sample of all films from 1930 to 1999, except those on videocassettes, from specific genres of romance, and chose to analyze specifically English-language Hollywood films because “the romance [in Hollywood films] is a clearly defined genre that has a sufficiently long history to cover the period of interest”⁸ This rich history of film is one of the reasons the study below centers around Hollywood film. Dowd and Pallotta conducted a well-controlled experiment where the genres, ages of film, and romantic plot points were viewed as objectively as possible under the constraints of film creativity and general diversity to decrease variation and bias in the analysis. The researchers concluded, through extensive analysis of romance’s portrayal and the depiction of marriage and its motivations, that the decline of romantic drama and traditional marriage ideologies is due mainly to an increased sense of realism in young couples that has taken away from the utopian romantic ideal of the past. Though Dowd and Palotta effectively conduct the same type of experiment as the one below, there are significant differences between the content of “The End of Romance” and the study of this paper, as this study is largely recent films—since 2000—and covers a much smaller sample of films due to the specific cultural change being observed and its recent nature. There is a gap in current film studies in assessing the modern effects of “fourth-wave feminism”⁹, or the post-2000 wave of feminism associated with cyberactivism and female empowerment, and sexual assault awareness movements due to how recently these movements have begun. This study aimed to ad-

dress and fill that gap through analysis of several recent films from before and after feminist movements, such as “#MeToo,” to determine if there has been a perceptible shift in the portrayal of romantic interactions and gender stereotypes in the wake of increased awareness of the commonness of sexual assault. Likewise, inspiration was drawn from related studies covering similar concepts in the genre of romance, such as “Wealth and/or Love: Class and Gender in the Cross-class Romance Films of the Great Depression” by Stephen Sharot, “Women Stripped Bare: Rape in the Films of Hong Sang-Soo” by Marc Raymond, and “The Bearer of the Gaze in Ridley Scott’s ‘Thelma and Louise’” by Ann Putnam. Each of these presents an example of a well-designed film study, so they were used as models when designing the following methodology, especially in the aspects of identifying the “male gaze” in cinematography¹⁰, exploring motivations and intended effects of including sexual harassment in film¹¹, and collecting common female gender tropes in film¹². As referenced above, Ann Putnam’s survey gave this study a lens through which to analyze the cinematography of the films chosen by describing different aspects of the “male gaze” and how this bias can be displayed, which eventually factored into how notes were taken during film evaluation. The constraints of the gap this study intends to fill were refined through examples in “Men, Women, and Chain Saws [sic]: Gender in the Modern Horror Film” by Carol Clover, where she identifies a conjunction of psychology theory and film theory¹³, and “Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy: Gender as Genre” by John Alberti, where Alberti asserts that his gap was defined by the lack of connection and review of the intersection between humor and gender studies¹⁴. These examples helped me understand more clearly how the lack of knowledge of post-sexual-assault-awareness

8 Dowd and Palotta, “The End of Romance”, 554.

9 Marc Raymond, “WOMEN STRIPPED BARE: RAPE IN THE FILMS OF HONG SANG-SOO”, *Revue Canadienne D’Études Cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2017): 46. www.jstor.org/stable/26532120.

10 Putnam, “The Bearer of the Gaze”, 292.

11 Raymond, “Women Stripped Bare”, 47-48.

12 Stephen Sharot, “Wealth and/or Love: Class and Gender in the Cross-Class Romance Films of the Great Depression”, *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1 (2013): 89-90. www.jstor.org/stable/23352508.

13 Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 68.

14 John Alberti, *Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy: Gender as Genre* (Tim Miles, 2013), 120.

Hollywood, combined with an already lacking database of romantic film studies, could culminate in the study described below.

Methodology

The sample of films used in this study were first determined by narrowing the genres from which to choose. Finding enough films of appropriate genre proved challenging because a standard of production quality and direction was set by using only films that were nominated for Oscar awards in the categories “Best Picture”, “Best Original Screenplay”, “Best Story”, “Best Story and Screenplay”, “Best Dramatic Picture Direction”, and “Best Cinematography”, which already narrowed the pool of available films. Oscar nominations are, in American culture, meant to represent the best work that the film industry has to offer, hence why Oscar nominees were chosen. Only films that had male-female interactions, for the sake of a well-defined cultural expectation and shift over time, were utilized. Likewise, only films set in the general time period of the years of production were eligible, as films attempting to accurately portray gender tropes and romantic interactions from prior decades would not be suitable for the study. This ruled out any film adaptations of plays or novels set or written in a different time period than the 21st century. The only accepted films were English language-based and American, as that narrows the scope of the investigation to shifts in American culture. Only films meant to portray real life, excluding the supernatural or the fantastic, were taken into account.

Now that parameters had been set, the selection of films began. Two films were randomly chosen using a random number generator from the pool of Oscar-nominated films for each year in the following significant set of years: 2000-2002, 2010-2012, and 2017-2019, spanning a total of 19 years and 18 films. These groupings are significant for their places in time relative to sexual assault awareness movements and fourth-wave feminist movements. The first group, 2000-2002, provides a baseline for the film industry entering the 21st century; the second group, 2010-2012, provides a closer example of how 21st century

feminism has impacted film; the third group, 2017-2019, looks at films that were produced or written after the beginning of large-scale sexual assault awareness movements, such as the “#MeToo” movement starting in 2017. Then, the order of viewing was randomized based on access to the films: the films were grouped into five categories: Free on Amazon Prime, Rent on Amazon Prime, Amazon Prime STARZ Subscription, Amazon Prime Cinemax Subscription, and HBO Subscription. Then, the films within each group were randomized, which resulted in the final order of films. This ensured that I only had to pay for one month’s subscription to each service, as every film available from a service was watched in succession. 2020 Oscar nominees would have been taken into account, but the nomination list was accessible only after data selection had begun, so adding films would have compromised the randomized design of this experiment. The year of release, year of Oscar nomination, category/ies of selection, whether awarded an Oscar were recorded; likewise, genre and ratings according to Rotten Tomatoes were noted. To analyze the impact of director bias, the gender, age, and nationality of directors and screenplay writers were all recorded after the selection of each film. Cultural factors in American society and individual gender and experience play a role in the perception and identification of sexual harassment and assault, which is why the gender, age, and nationality of directors, screenplay writers, and the researcher will be taken into account to differentiate from researcher bias and identify points of view. The genre and ratings were recorded in order to differentiate intended audiences, possible perspective shifts, and the implications of budget on cinematography.

I watched each film twice: once without note-taking to understand the plot and determine the location of relevant scenes, and a second time in which I took notes on specific criteria. Aspects of the “male gaze” were discerned through answering the following questions, as inspired by Ann Putnam’s study concerning the 1991 film *Thelma and Louise*: “[Is] the camera still or always moving? Does the camera remain fixed or does it seem to survey the female form? Does it seem to travel over the female body? Whose point of view is privileged? Through whose eyes do we see the story? Who is doing the beholding and who is

beheld?”¹⁵. Since the most common form of sexual assault is arguably gender bias and harassment¹⁶ (Deen 38), this study took into account gender slurs, such as “sweetheart” for females and “dumb jock” for males, to account for different aspects of power and gender relationships. Notes were taken on the following criteria for both males and females: relative heights of characters interacting, camera angles of different characters (to determine the “male gaze”¹⁷), relative aptitudes toward being violent (to discern stereotypes about relative male-female tempers and manners), symbolism in the form of closed versus open spaces¹⁸, if sexual interactions were portrayed as specifically romantic in nature or not (measured based on romanticism, or expressed sentiment, feeling, and closeness, to determine if intercourse has been desexualized and painted as more sensual over time), and whether or not prominent female characters fit specific literary tropes (i.e. the “fallen woman”, “virtuous heroine”, “amoral social climber”¹⁹, or helpless victim²⁰). For this study, the difference between tropes and stereotypes is defined as the overall pattern and aspects of a character versus a single aspect of a character. The symbolism of open versus closed spaces was used alongside female tropes to determine if female characters have been limited to only plot devices (for example: female characters used to further the development of male characters or introduced to move plot along without being given a background or significant role in the film) or if there is an increasing number of female characters who do not follow set patterns and roles in plot.

Each of these categories was written on a sheet of paper for each film, and individualized notes on specifics of each film were taken. These notes were then compiled into a spreadsheet. An analysis of possible

sources of bias for directors and screenplay writers as well as an understanding of the bias the researcher brings as a young American caucasian female were coupled with the notes from each film to form the data and analysis below. The notes taken for *In The Bedroom*, to serve as an example of the notes taken for each film, are recorded in the appendix of this paper.

Findings

In order to present the data collected in an organized fashion, I constructed scaled graphs of the notes on the 15 following divisions: development of male-female relationships (romantic and platonic) as seen in Figure 1, equal height camera angles (see Figure 3), portrayal of awareness of tropes on men and women (see Figure 2), broken stereotypes and tropes of men and women (see Figure 4), portrayal of dominant versus submissive female sexual interactions (see Figure 5), freedom imagery for women and men (see Figure 6), portrayal of male alcoholism (see Figure 7), prevalence of “male gaze” camera angles²¹ (see Figure 8), prevalence of tropes on men and women (see Figure 9), prevalence of stereotypes on men and women (see Figure 10), portrayal of physical and sexual assault on men and women (see Figure 11), prevalence of gender slurs against men and women (see Figure 12), portrayal of male aptitudes towards violence (see Figure 13), prevalence of sexual interactions before developed relationships (see Figure 14), and prevalence of “seductress” and “fallen woman” tropes (see Figure 15). Each of these categories was ranked on a 1-5 scale, described beneath the graphs.

15 Putnam, “The Bearer of the Gaze”, 292.

16 Lango Deen, “#Metoo”, *Women of Color Magazine*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2018): 38. www.jstor.org/stable/26580517.

17 Putnam, “The Bearer of the Gaze”, 292.

18 Putnam, “The Bearer of the Gaze”, 294.

19 Sharot, “Wealth and/or Love”, 89-90.

20 Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 67.

21 Putnam, “The Bearer of the Gaze”, 292.

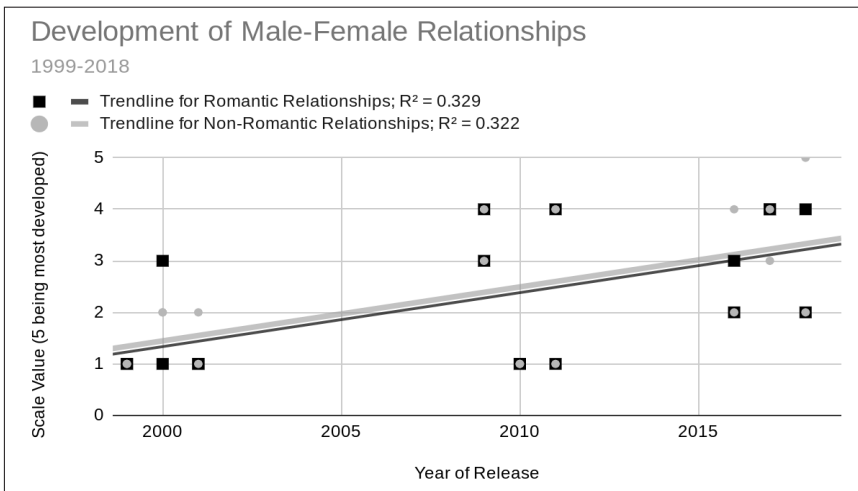


Figure 1. The scale for the development of male-female relationships is a 1-5 linear numeric scale, where 1 designates no developed relationships, 2 designates few, 3 designates a moderate number, 4 designates many, and 5 designates that all male-female relationships in the film were well-developed. Over the course of the past 20 years, there has been an increase in the depiction and prevalence of well-developed relationships between male and female characters, both romantically and platonically.

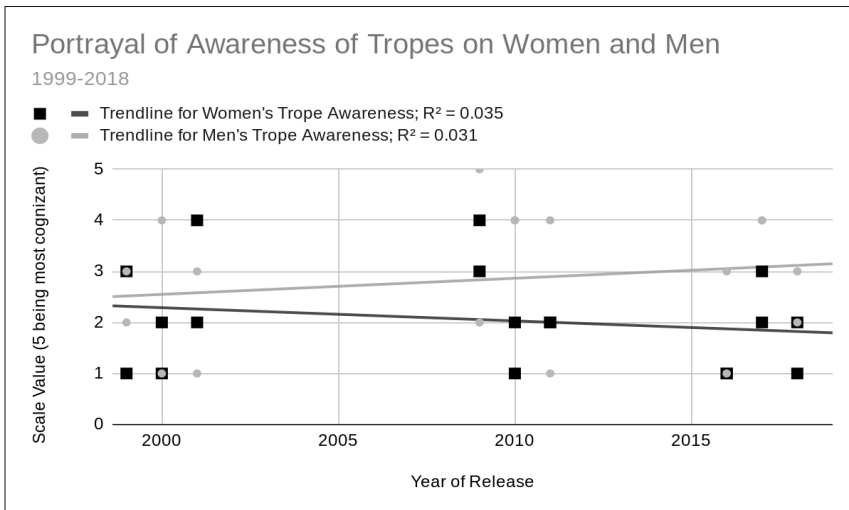


Figure 2. The scale set for the portrayal of awareness of tropes on women and men is a similar linear numeric scale, with 1 being oblivious and accepting of tropes and 5 being fully cognizant and not accepting. The only film meriting a 5 on this scale is *Up in the Air*, where a female character has a conversation with a male and a female and says, “sometimes it feels like, no matter how much success I have, it’s not gonna matter until I find the right guy”²², acknowledging the societal tropes imposed on her. There is no statistically significant shift in the portrayal of awareness of tropes on either men or women in this study.

22 Jason Reitman, dir. *Up in the Air*. (2009; Los Angeles, CA: Paramount, 2009.) *Amazon Prime Video*.

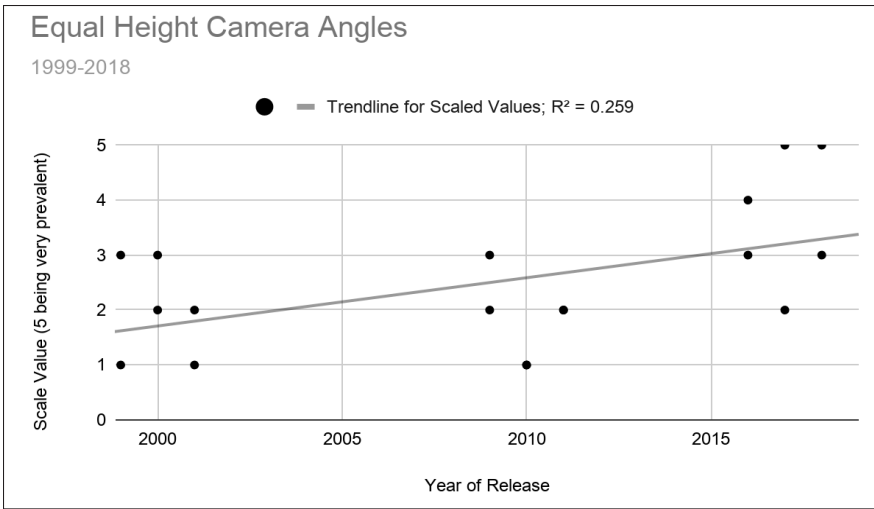


Figure 3. The scale for equal height camera angles is a 5-point frequency scale, with 1 being no male-female equal height camera shots, 2 being few, 3 being a moderate number, 4 being many, and 5 being overwhelmingly equal height shots as opposed to shots showing the relative heights of males and females. Over time, there has been an increase in the prevalence and importance of equal height camera angles in film.

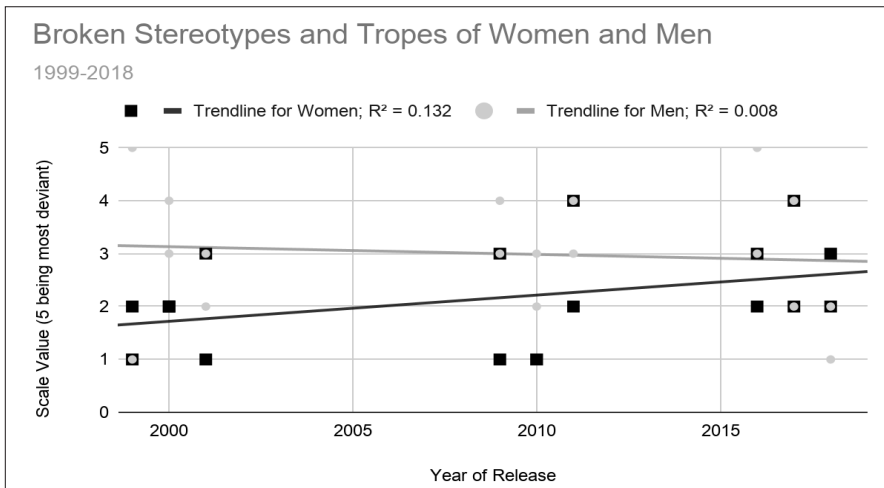


Figure 4. The scale for broken stereotypes of women and men is a similar frequency scale, with 1 being no broken stereotypes and 5 being almost no characters fitting gender stereotypes. *Ladybird* earned a 5 on this scale, as the film follows a young woman’s development and attempts to find herself, including trying drugs, being defiant, asserting her dominance, and her tendency to swear and yell.²³ While the trend for broken stereotypes and tropes on men is statistically insignificant, stereotypes and tropes have increasingly been broken in the portrayal of female characters in film over the past two decades.

23 Greta Gerwig, dir. *Ladybird*. (2017; Sacramento, CA: IAC Films, 2017.) *Amazon Prime Video*.

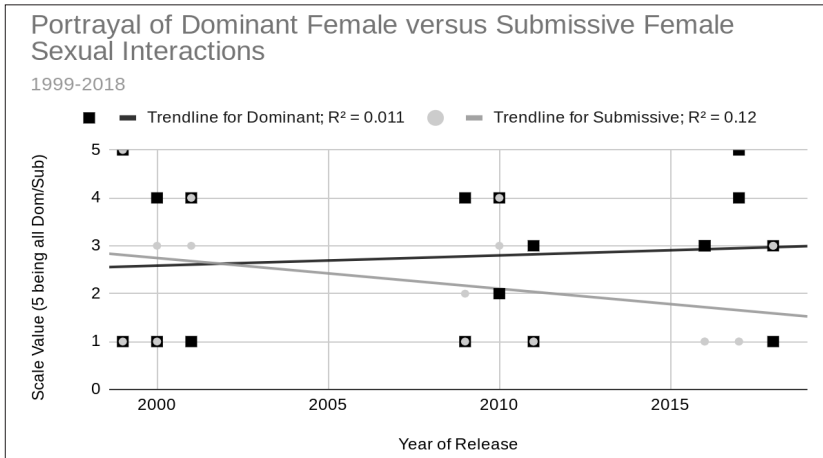


Figure 5. The scale for the portrayal of dominant female versus submissive female sexual interactions is a similar frequency scale, with 1 being completely the opposite of (dominant/submissive) and 5 being completely (dominant/submissive). For example, *Being John Malkovich* earned a 5 on dominant female sexual interactions and a 1 on submissive female sexual interactions because the main female character, the only one engaged in sexual interactions throughout the film, is always the instigator and dominatrix of her sexual encounters²⁴. While female-dominant sexual interactions have neither increased nor decreased substantially, the frequency of female-submissive sexual interactions has decreased.

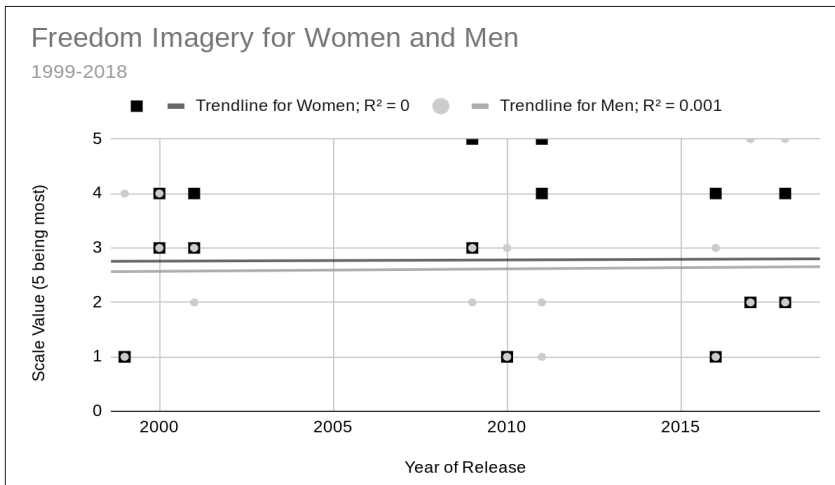


Figure 6. The scale for freedom imagery of men and women is a similar frequency scale, with 1 being no freedom imagery and 5 being vivid and impactful symbolism throughout the film. *Ladybird*, meriting a 5 on female freedom imagery, consistently used open spaces, light, and defiance of the main female character to convey the freedom of a teenage girl²⁵. There was no perceptible shift in the prevalence of freedom imagery for men or women.

24 Spike Jonze, dir. *Being John Malkovich*. (1999: USA Films, 1999.) *Amazon Prime Video*.

25 Greta Gerwig, dir. *Ladybird*. (2017; Sacramento, CA: IAC Films, 2017.) *Amazon Prime Video*.

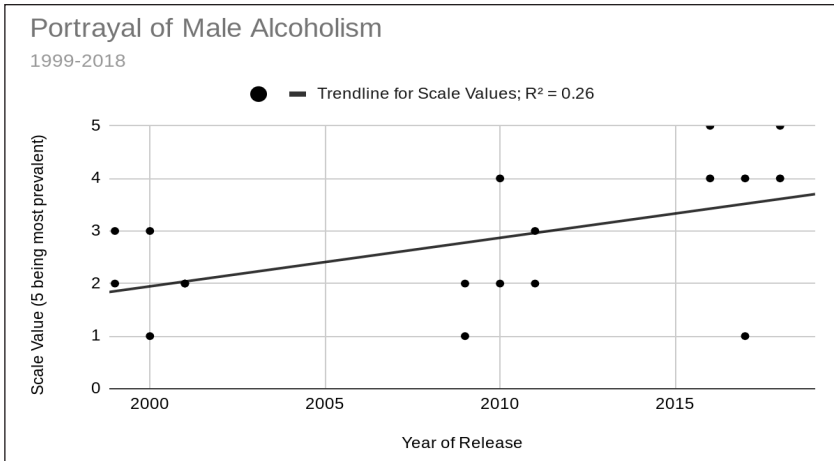


Figure 7. The scale used to determine the trends in the portrayal of male alcoholism is a similar frequency scale, with 1 being no male alcoholism and 5 being alcoholism portrayed as a defining trait in males. Since 1999, there has been a statistically significant increase in the portrayal of alcoholism in male characters.

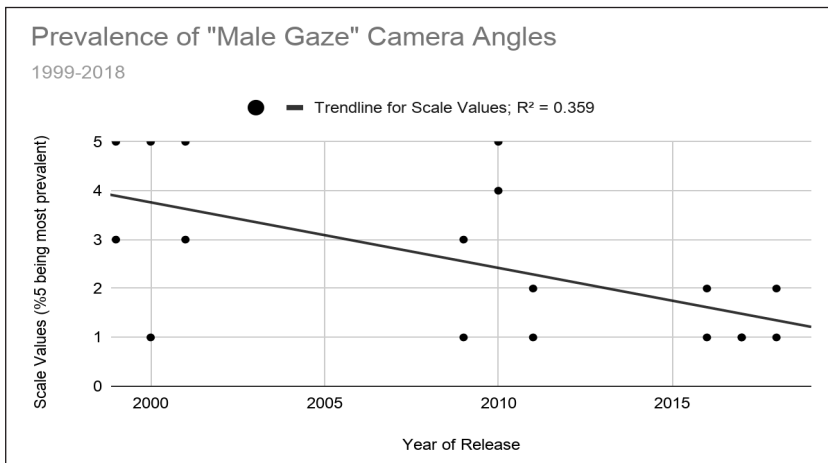


Figure 8. The scale used to show the prevalence of “male gaze” camera angles²⁶ is a similar frequency scale, with 1 being none and 5 being females predominantly shown through the lens of males’ eyes. For example, *Magnolia*, meriting a 5, first showed all women either in lingerie, naked, or raising camera angles that roam their bodies. *Magnolia* also had several shower scenes of only women, sexualized leg shots, and naked women shots throughout.²⁷ Over time, there is a significant decrease in the prevalence and importance of “male gaze” camera angles in Hollywood films.

²⁶ Putnam, “The Bearer of the Gaze”, 292.

²⁷ Paul Thomas Anderson, dir. *Magnolia*. (1999: New Line Cinema, 1999.) *Amazon Prime Video*.

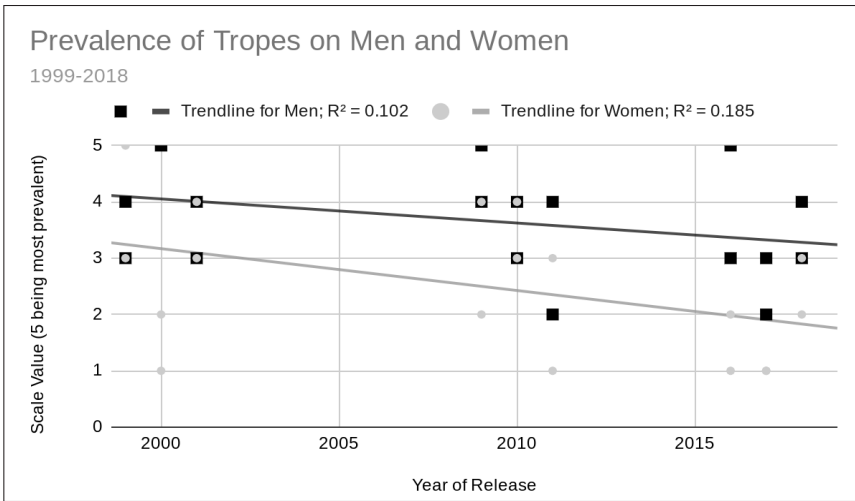


Figure 9. The scale used to show the prevalence of tropes on men versus women is a similar frequency scale, with 1 being almost no characters fitting tropes and 5 being all female/male characters ultimately displaying the traits of a certain trope. *Magnolia*, with its categorization of all men as inherently violent and disloyal and all women as addicts and “fallen women”, earned a 5 on this scale. The prevalence of tropes has decreased for both men and women over the past 20 years.

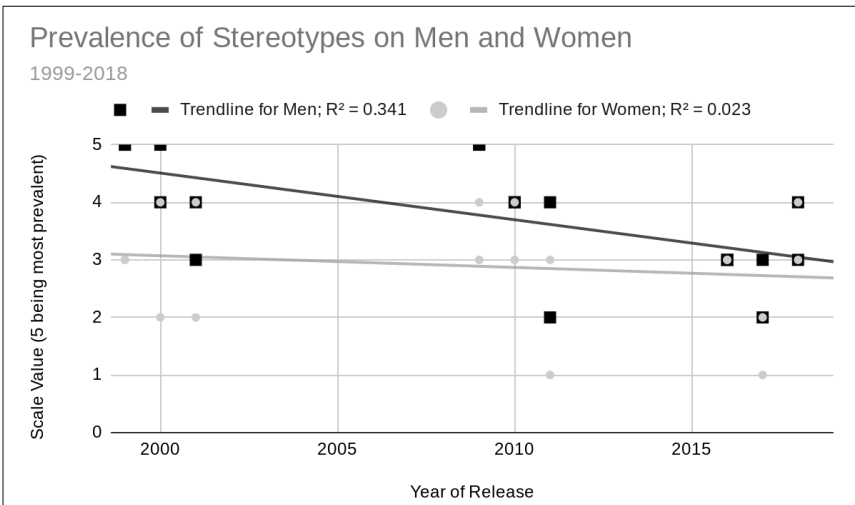


Figure 10. The scale used to show the prevalence of stereotypes on men versus women is a similar frequency scale, with 1 being almost no or very limited use of gender-specific stereotypes and 5 being almost ubiquitous use of and emphasis on gender stereotypes throughout the film, including but not limited to male cursing and violence, female submissiveness, male alcoholism, emotional females, and apathetic males. While the prevalence of stereotypes used on women has not changed significantly, there has been a perceptible decrease in the prevalence of stereotypes on male characters.

28 Paul Thomas Anderson, dir. *Magnolia*. (1999: New Line Cinema, 1999.) Amazon Prime Video.

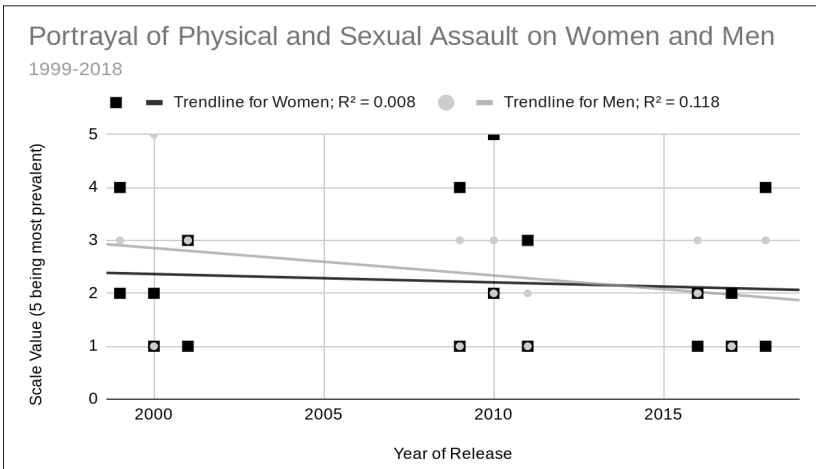


Figure 11. The scale used to describe trends in the portrayal of physical and sexual assault on men and women is a similar frequency scale, with 1 being no portrayal or descriptions of assault and 5 being a central focus on the depiction and description of assault against men/women. *Black Swan*, with its several sexual assault scenes, stabbing of a female, and emphasis on manipulation of women through sex, was the only film to merit a 5 on the scale for assault against females²⁹. Interestingly, the portrayal of physical and sexual assault on women has not changed significantly; however, there has been a decrease in the prevalence of physical and sexual assault against males in film.

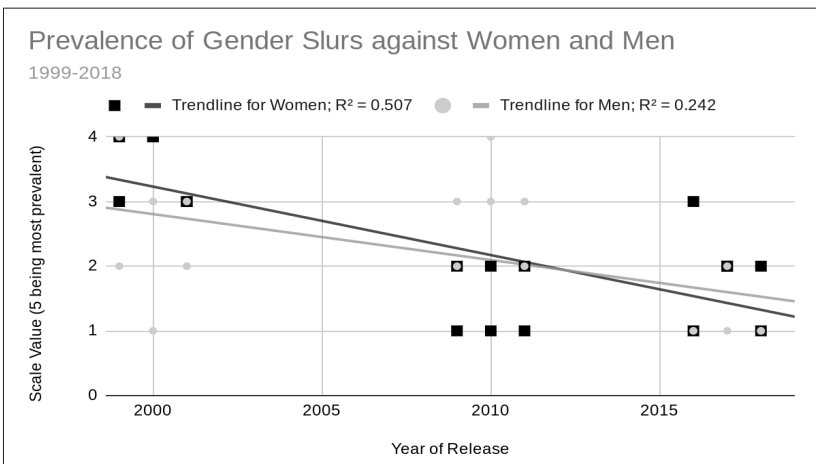


Figure 12. The scale used to show the prevalence of gender slurs, i.e. “slut”, “whore”, “dick”, “bastard”, etc., is a similar frequency scale, with 1 being no gender slurs against men/women and 5 being a constant use of gender slurs throughout male-female interactions. For both genders, there has been a statistically significant decrease in the prevalence of gender slurs over time.

²⁹ Darren Aronofsky, dir. *Black Swan*. (2010; Venice, Italy: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2010.) *Amazon Prime Video*.

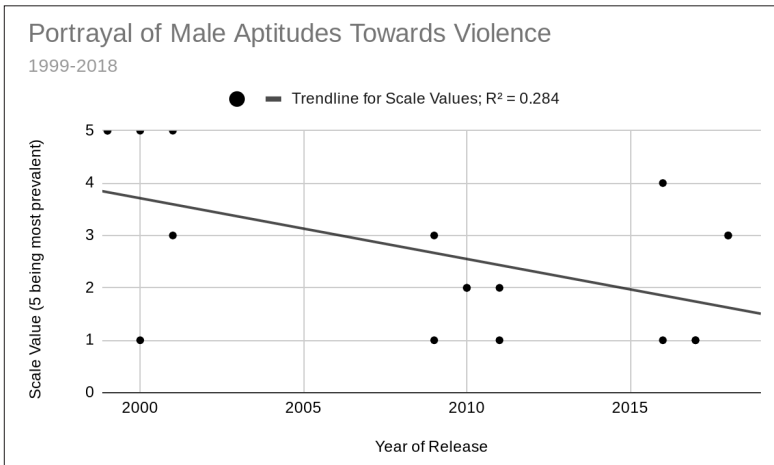


Figure 13. The scale used to describe the prevalence of male aptitudes towards violence is a similar frequency scale, with 1 being almost no male-perpetrated violence, or adamant male stances against violence, and 5 being widespread use of violence, or violent tendencies, by males, whether through one central character or through the tendencies of a cast of male characters. While there is a clear decrease in the portrayal of male aptitudes towards violence over time, there are some higher values from 2017-2019, suggesting the trend over a larger span of time may not be as obviously decreasing.

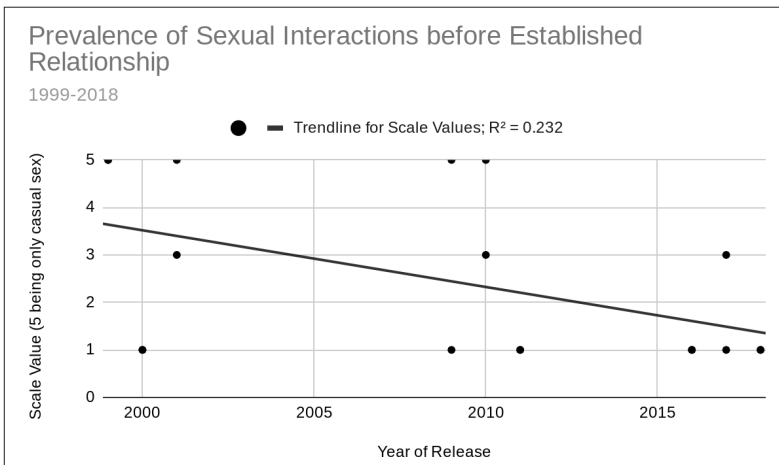


Figure 14. The scale used to show the prevalence of sexual interactions that occur before the relationship is established is a similar frequency scale, with 1 being no sexual interactions, or well-developed relationships occurring before sexual interactions, and 5 being all casual, non-relational sexual interactions, or no well-developed relationships forming before sexual interactions.

La La Land earned a 1 on this scale, as even after a plethora of scenes depicting quality bonding time between the main couple and after the relationship is very well developed, there is no sex scene, leading to an emphasis on the relationship emotionally rather than physically. The graph shows a clear decrease over time in the prevalence of sexual interactions before a relationship has developed.

30 Damien Chazelle, dir. *La La Land*. (2016; Venice, Italy: Summit Entertainment, 2016.) Amazon Prime Video.

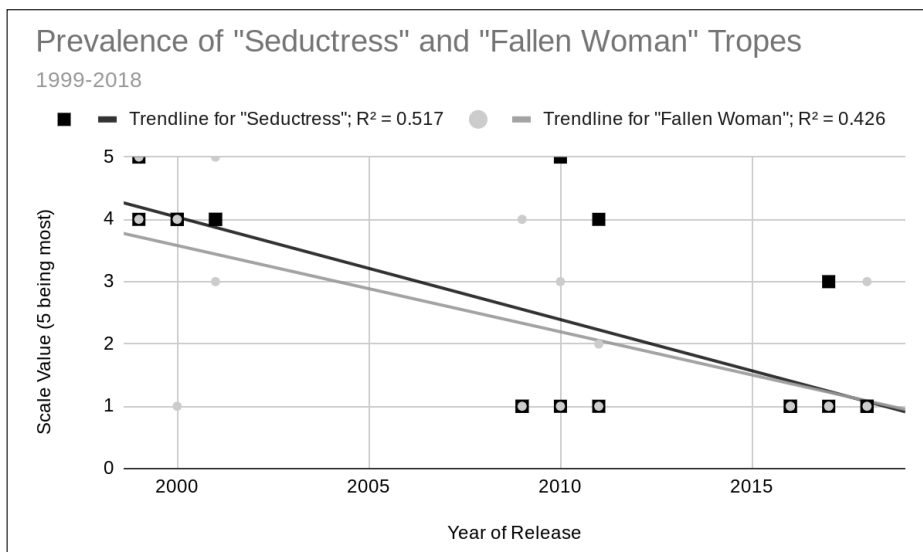


Figure 15. The scale used to show the prevalence of “seductress” and “fallen woman” tropes on female characters is a similar frequency scale, with 1 being neither trope depicted in any female character and 5 being the majority of female characters fitting one or both of the tropes. There are sharp declines noted in the prevalence of both “Seductress” and “Fallen Woman” tropes over time.

Analysis

To analyze changes in the portrayal of gender tropes and romantic interactions in Hollywood film pre- and post-sexual assault awareness movements, the graphs will be viewed first through the overall trend and then from the different time frames of films and their individual trend lines. This analysis will mainly utilize the trend lines plotted and will take special consideration of specific trends, such as camera angles and individual tropes, as the presence of these factors is more objective than the general trends in plot devices and thematic issues because of their clear presence or absence. General trope awareness or stereotype usage can mean different things to different viewers and vary depending on the background of the viewer. Definitions of rankings are as follows: correlation coefficients between 0.00 and 0.25 are considered

“weak” associations, constants between 0.25 and 0.50 are considered “moderate” associations, and constants between 0.50 and 1.00 are considered “strong”. Beginning with camera angles, in Figure 3, there is a clear moderate positive association between equal height camera angles and time, demonstrating an increase in shared power in relationships displayed through equal height shots. There is a similar trend in Figure 8, where there is a moderate decrease in male gaze camera angles over time, showing a general respect for women through decreasing sexualizing camera shots. Figure 5 shows a weak negative trend in submissive female sexual interactions and a weak positive trend in dominant female sexual interactions. These trends were skewed by outliers such as *Being John Malkovich*, a 1999 film in which a female character is blatantly dominant in sexual interactions³¹ and *A Star Is Born*, a 2018 film in which the female character is involved in only one sex scene, but is not dominant during

it³². In Figure 7, there is a moderate positive trend in the portrayal of male alcoholism over time. This is an interesting trend that deserves further study, as it goes against the general historical push for the abolition of gender stereotypes, but could be explained as an attempt to justify male violence, as the movies that scored higher on this scale tended to also score higher on the frequency scale of male violence. Figure 12 displays a strong negative trend for the use of gender slurs against women and a moderate negative trend for the use of gender slurs against men, furthering the previous trends in mutual respect in devices in film. In Figure 13, there is a moderate decrease in the prevalence of male violence and male aptitudes towards violence, a trend that contradicts the trend seen in male alcoholism in Figure 7, emphasizing the need for a more thorough exploration of this particular dynamic of male film depiction. Figure 14 shows a moderate negative trend in sexual interactions before developed relationships, a trend which seems directly related to Hollywood sexual assault scandals and their societal repercussions. This is especially evident by examining the distribution of data points from 1999-2001 to 2009-2011 versus from 2009-2011 to 2016-2018: there is a far larger spread and higher average value between the first group than the second group, and there is a visible decrease in values from 2009-2011 to 2016-2018. Figure 15 shows a similar pattern, with strong negative trends in both the “seductress” trope and the “fallen woman” trope.

Moving on to the more general observations (Figures 1, 2, 4, 9, and 10), and thus more subjective, Figure 1 shows moderate positive trends in the development of heteroromantic relationships and male-female platonic relationships over time. This echoes the pattern of change in specific device trends (Figures 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15) and, when paired with the decreasing portrayal of sexual interactions before established relationships in Figure 14, demonstrates correlation with the fallout from Hollywood sexual assault scandals. Figure 2 shows a weak negative trend for the awareness of tropes on women and a weak positive trend for the awareness of tropes on men,

which seems perplexing until compared with Figure 9, which shows a weak negative trend for the prevalence of male tropes, but a moderate negative trend for the prevalence of female tropes. Thus, although there seems to be a decreasing awareness of tropes on women, it is partially explained by the drop in overall tropes on women, as it is difficult for a film to be aware of its tropes when it employs few to none. Similarly, Figure 4 does not show any trend for the prevalence of broken tropes and stereotypes against men, but shows a weak positive trend for broken tropes and stereotypes against women, demonstrating fewer patterns of trope and stereotype use on female characters over time. Figure 6 displays the first truly null trend lines: freedom imagery for men and women does not appear to have shifted in any way, with an equal spread of data on either side of the center value. Freedom imagery often acts alongside plot, so if there had been a drastic shift in freedom imagery, it would likely correlate to a change in subject matter or broader plot devices, like widespread decreases in tropes and stereotypes, over the past two decades. In Figure 10, there is an interesting twist on the predicted impacts of fourth-wave feminism: while there is a moderate decrease in the portrayal of stereotypes on men, there is a very weak, almost negligible decrease in the portrayal of stereotypes on women. This negates one intended impact of modern feminism, the push to leave gender-based discrimination and assumptions behind, by failing to show a perceptible shift in the prevalence of gender stereotypes against women and, further, only shows a decrease in gender stereotypes towards men. Figure 11 displays a weak negative trend in the prevalence of sexual and physical assault against males but, interestingly, shows a negligible change in the prevalence of assault against females. However, this trend is skewed by outliers such as *Black Swan*, a 2010 film centered on abuse of power in the ballet industry and its impacts on young, impressionable females³³.

The following analysis will focus on Figures 1, 5, 8, 11, and 14, as they most closely relate to sexual assault awareness and its ramifications on the film industry. Beginning with Figure 1, the correlation coefficient

31 Spike Jonze, dir. *Being John Malkovich* (1999: USA Films, 1999), *Amazon Prime Video*.

32 Bradley Cooper, dir. *A Star Is Born* (2018; Venice, Italy: Warner Brothers, 2018), *Amazon Prime Video*.

33 Darren Aronofsky, dir. *Black Swan* (2010; Venice, Italy: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2010), *Amazon Prime Video*.

from the data points from 1999-2011 for romantic relationship development was calculated to be $r = 0.3796$, which indicates a moderate positive linear association between heteroromantic relationship development and time. The correlation coefficient from the data points from 2009-2018 was calculated to be $r = 0.3102$, indicating a similar moderate positive linear association between heteroromantic relationship development and time. Interestingly, the association from before the beginning of the “#MeToo” movement and corresponding sexual assault movements is greater than the association after these movements, indicating that this shift was more strongly correlated with fourth-wave feminism rather than sexual assault awareness movements. For Figure 5, the correlation coefficient from 1999-2011 for female-submissive sexual interactions was calculated to be $r = -0.2976$, indicating a moderate negative linear association between female-submissive sexual interactions and time. From 2009-2018, the correlation coefficient was calculated to be $r = -0.0869$, indicating a weak negative linear association. This is another interesting calculation, as it would imply that the decrease in the portrayal of female-submissive sexual interactions was influenced less by sexual assault awareness movements and more by fourth-wave feminism, although sexual assault awareness seems to apply more to this topic. In Figure 8, the correlation coefficient from 1999-2011 for the prevalence of male gaze camera angles was calculated to be $r = -0.3243$, indicating a moderate negative linear association between male gaze camera angles and time. The correlation coefficient for the data points from 2009-2018, $r = -0.5209$, indicates a strong negative linear association, which corroborates the correlation with sexual assault awareness movements and Hollywood sexual assault scandals occurring between 2009-2011 and 2016-2018, as there is a more significant negative trend from 2009-2018 than from 1999-2011. Because Hollywood sexual assault scandals have focused mainly on the abuse of women, the only correlation coefficient calculated for Figure 11 was for the association of the portrayal of sexual and physical assault on women. From 1999-2011, this was found to be $r = 0.1495$, indicating a moderate positive linear association, whereas the regression constant for 2009-2018 was calculated to be $r = -0.2810$,

indicating a moderate negative linear association over time. This again corroborates a correlation between the portrayal of assault against women in film and sexual assault awareness movements because of the drastic shift from 1999-2011 to 2009-2018 in correlation coefficients, showing a negative trend from 2009 to 2018, but a positive trend from 1999 to 2011. For Figure 14, the correlation coefficient for sexual interactions before developed relationships from 1999-2011 was calculated to be $r = -0.2342$, whereas the constant from 2009-2018 was found to be $r = -0.4857$. While these are both indicative of moderate negative linear associations over time, the second correlation coefficient from 2009-2018 is stronger than the prior value from 1999-2011, again corroborating correlation between Hollywood sexual assault scandals and awareness movements and the portrayal of romantic interactions in film.

Conclusions

The above analysis exemplifies broad change in several aspects of romantic interactions and gender tropes in Hollywood film over the past two decades. The detailing of trends in specific devices, namely male gaze camera angles, heteroromantic relationship development, female-submissive sexual interactions, portrayal of physical and sexual assault on women, and sexual interactions before development of relationships, shows a distinct reaction and shift in the 21st century corresponding to the development of technological fourth-wave feminism and sexual assault awareness movements. In particular, the shift shown in Figure 11 on the portrayal of assault on women shows a specific movement in the period between 2011 and 2016, when Hollywood sexual assault cases against renowned director Harvey Weinstein began to develop in the *New York Times*³⁴. Likewise, general negative trends in gender tropes and stereotypes exemplify a societal shift correlating with the rise of fourth-wave feminism, as stereotypes across all genders are under more scrutiny in the 21st century, which has impacted the portrayal of genders in film.

More specifically, these broad shifts in thematic elements and trope usage have resulted in perceptible dif-

34 Kantor and Twohey, *She Said*, 47.

ferences in films pre- and post-sexual assault awareness movements. For example, one of the biggest shifts seen between the periods of 1999-2001 and 2017-2019 is the difference in camera angles when introducing female characters. In *Magnolia* (1999), each female character is introduced either nude or with a camera shot that roams her body before settling on her face³⁵. This is also seen in *Being John Malkovich* (1999)³⁶ and *In The Bedroom* (2001)³⁷. However, in later films, female characters are introduced by dialogue, like *The Blind Side* (2009)³⁸, or by headshots, like in *La La Land* (2016)³⁹. The latter camera angles put the emphasis on the introduction of the female character as a human or individual with thoughts and motivations, rather than the introduction of the female character as a body, which suggests the influence of feminist movements.

Another instance of specific change in film over time is the decreasing prevalence of the “Fallen Woman” trope. While films pre-fourth wave feminism and sexual assault awareness movements had more prevalent stereotypes and tropes placed on women, such as the “Fallen Woman” trope, later films tended to break the mold, offering redemption arcs for female characters and situating their responses within the context of their complex lives. This is especially evident in the contrast between *Magnolia* (1999), where the women all fall to drugs, alcohol, and prostitution without hope of redemption or deeper contextualization surrounding their situations⁴⁰, and *A Star Is Born* (2018), where a woman falls to drugs and alcohol, but is followed as she heals and drags herself out of that situation⁴¹. The breaking of tropes imposed on women effectively humanizes their struggles and creates a narrative that is less patterned and predictable, imitating situations in real life and elevating the women’s experiences as real rather than plot-driven.

Although this study produced significant results and demonstrated very perceptible shifts in Holly-

wood film portrayal, it is limited mainly by the novelty of these sexual assault awareness movements and recent activism that may not have yet influenced the face of film. As the Harvey Weinstein scandal and the ensuing “#MeToo” movement began to gain traction only in 2017, the repercussions of these movements are likely still being worked through, meaning broader impacts could be seen from research conducted in the future. Thus, to further this development, research of this nature should be again conducted in the late 2020s, as enough time should have then elapsed to see the wider shift in portrayal of gender tropes and romantic interactions. Likewise, this study is limited by the inherent diversity of films; variables that are almost unable to be accounted for include the age, nationality, and gender of directors, setting, religious affiliation, budget of production, and experience of cinematography crew, as each of these could impact the quality and outcome of a film. With selecting only from the pool of Oscar Academy Award nominees comes a degree of misrepresentation of the vast majority of American film, although it was necessary for this study to ensure a set quality of production. As far as the analysis of the data collected, I recognize the limitations, mainly subjectivity, of ranking scales, which is why the conclusions drawn from the correlations shown between sexual assault awareness movements and the portrayal of sexual and romantic interactions rely mainly on trends in specific devices, such as camera angles and specific gender stereotypes, more objectively measured than general trends in the prevalence of tropes and stereotypes. Similarly, the regression lines and coefficients of correlation are slightly undermined by the low values of the ranking scale and the gaps between sections of years, but are still reliable to show linear association over time. Although this particular study is limited in scope, studies showing the impact of sexual assault awareness

35 Paul Thomas Anderson, dir. *Magnolia* (1999; New Line Cinema, 1999), *Amazon Prime Video*.

36 Spike Jonze, dir. *Being John Malkovich* (1999; USA Films, 1999), *Amazon Prime Video*.

37 Todd Field, dir. *In The Bedroom* (2001; 2001), *Amazon Prime Video*.

38 John Lee Hancock, dir. *The Blind Side* (2009; New York City, NY: Alcon Entertainment, 2009), *Amazon Prime Video*.

39 Damien Chazelle, dir. *La La Land* (2016; Venice, Italy: Summit Entertainment, 2016), *Amazon Prime Video*.

40 Paul Thomas Anderson, dir. *Magnolia* (1999; New Line Cinema, 1999), *Amazon Prime Video*.

41 Bradley Cooper, dir. *A Star Is Born* (2018; Venice, Italy: Warner Brothers, 2018), *Amazon Prime Video*.

movements on cultural markers, such as Hollywood film, are particularly important in this age of activism, as they demonstrate that raising awareness for a cause genuinely makes an impact on cultural expectations. As Hollywood films under the constraints of this study depict American culture, examples of romantic interactions and decreases in gender expectations shown in this study impact the societal norms over time and set a precedent of respect that is perpetuated on screens and in the minds of the next generation.

Appendix: *In The Bedroom* Notes

PRE-VIEWING NOTES:

Todd Field: Director and screenplay writer
 American middle-aged white male
 Robert Festinger: Screenplay writer
 American middle-aged white male
 Released in 2001; nominated for 2002 Best Picture
 Indie Film/Drama; 93%

VIEWING NOTES:

- Opening scene is male chasing female, but only her legs are showing (male is fully visible)
- Cuts to kissing scene where only lips are visible
- Female is older single mother and male is young college student
- She stays home while men go lobster fishing - only men are ever seen fishing
- Lobster analogy - females with eggs are dangerous (children) & the males get stuck in what's called a "bedroom"
- Males are all taller than females
- Older males sexualize female protag - "you could borrow hers [buns]"
- She is always seen wearing short or tight dresses - temptress? (as parents would say)
- Mother has a master's degree; parents seem to be in a loving relationship before it breaks down
- Violent and angry ex-husband - sees wife as an object & beats up boy multiple times
- Open air scenes with woman at first; transitions to inside house scenes after boy dies - trapped by

ex-husband & grief

- Father is very sexual at first - boy and mother caught having sex - boy says relationship isn't serious
- Ex uses intimidation and physicality to scare wife into letting him move back in - she doesn't but he tries
- "Sweetie" said three times: once platonically and twice towards women
- Ex says "bitch" when a woman won't go home with him
- Boy always protects woman, but she is not portrayed as helpless or clueless
- Father has a doctorate
- Father wants son to hit ex, but he never does
- Male crying scenes much more profound than women crying scenes
- "Wonderful girl" repetition
- Tension between father figure and his predatory tendencies

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