Discussion Questions for Women in Film-Cleveland Gathering

Wednesday, April 13, 2016:

Focal Film: *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1996; U.S.; Screenplay by Richard LaGravanese (based on the film *Le Miroir a Deux Faces* (1958)); Cinematography by Dante Spinotti, Andrzej Bartkowiak; Music by Marvin Hamlisch; Directed by Barbra Streisand)

In *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, the primary characters are:
* Rose Morgan, a Columbia University professor of English literature (Barbra Streisand)
* Gregory Larkin, a Columbia University professor of mathematics, who via a personal ad seeks a platonic female companion (Jeff Bridges)
* Hannah Morgan, Rose and Claire’s mother (Lauren Bacall)
* Claire, Rose’s sister (Mimi Rogers)
* Alex, Claire’s husband (Pierce Brosnan)

Some notes:

One of the reasons we chose this film was to focus on Barbra Streisand as film director. *The Mirror Has Two Faces* was Streisand’s 16th film as actor, and her third film (of three, thus far) as director. She was one of the preeminent female film directors of the 1990s, to be sure—an era in which women’s opportunities for creative control behind the camera remained quite limited.

The situation has not changed much. In May of 2015, after collecting information from 50 female directors, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) requested that the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) investigate gender discrimination in Hollywood. In October of 2015, the EEOC began contacting female directors to schedule interviews on the issue. In figures cited by the ACLU, women made up just 7% of directors of the 250 top grossing films in 2014, two percentage points lower than in 1998, and only 16% of TV episodes were directed by women in 2014-15.

On November 24, 2015, Streisand was awarded the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama. Her award statement says: “Barbra Streisand is one of our Nation’s most gifted talents. Her body of work includes extraordinary singing, acting, directing, producing, songwriting, and she is one of the few performers to receive an Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and a Tony. Her performance in 1968’s *Funny Girl* endeared her to Americans for generations, and she won her first Academy Award for her role in that film. In 1984, she became the first woman to win a Golden Globe for Best Director, which she won for the motion picture *Yentl*. Streisand is also a recipient of four Peabody Awards, in addition to the National Medal of Arts and Kennedy Center Honors. In 2009, she endowed the Barbra Streisand Women’s Heart Center at Cedars-Sinai Heart Institute, which works to correct gender inequality in the research of a disease which each year kills more women than men.”

As always, I’ve researched the film in both popular and scholarly literature, and found it to be analyzed in a variety of ways. Most of the literature has focused on Streisand’s performance as actor in the film, rather than on her directing. *The Mirror Has Two Faces* has been viewed and studied:
AS A FILM DIRECTED BY A WOMAN

1. Clearly, Barbra Streisand’s original claim to fame was as a singer/recording artist (Mann, 2012), followed by a successful segue to film acting. But her film directing has been limited to three films to date. Do you think Streisand’s role as director of The Mirror Has Two Faces displays a particular sensibility of a female director? How does Streisand’s limited career as film director fit with the current ACLU/EEOC case, do you think? (What do you think might be the outcome of the ongoing EEOC investigation?)

AS PRESENTING IMAGES OF WOMEN (AND MEN) IN ACADEMIA

2. The characters of Rose and Gregory seem to conform neatly to movie stereotypes of female and male professors as identified by Dagaz and Harger (2011). Female academics are overwhelmingly found in the humanities, are shown as emotion-based, nurturing and caring, and are often sexualized. Male academics are shown in a wide array of disciplines, are notably shown as primarily researchers rather than teachers, and are portrayed as disinterested in teaching or not capable of fulfilling the nurturing role associated with teaching. And, Wilson and Latterell (2001), in their investigation of popular culture portrayals of mathematicians, find Gregory “socially inept” and “unable to relate to students.” How do Rose and Gregory fit these molds, exactly?

3. The classroom scenes may be described as, at best, unrealistic (“more unrealistic than those seen in any movie since, well, On a Clear Day...”; Santopietro, 2006). The presumed pedagogical behavior of Rose Morgan and the behaviors of her students are both unlikely and untenable in the world of academia. Why do you think these unrealistic behaviors are focused upon?

AS DEALING WITH ISSUES OF PHYSICAL BEAUTY

4. Our film was loosely based on the 1958 French film Le Miroir à Deux Faces. In the earlier film, the female protagonist underwent plastic surgery; Streisand’s version opted for an “attitude adjustment instead” (as noted in the Entertainment Weekly movie review). Although, as scholar Vivian Sobchack has noted (2009), Streisand’s transformation was not limited to attitude—it included weight loss, exercise, and enhanced makeup and hair. What do these different approaches to “self improvement” say about women and beauty?

5. Our film received a fair amount of negative critical review. For example, Tom Santopietro (2006) focuses on Streisand’s recurring motif: “The ugly duckling motif which has now run through Funny Girl, The Owl and the Pussycat, The Way We Were, and Funny Lady, has reached its ultimate and most unnecessary incarnation.” It’s been noted that while the character Gregory says to Rose, “I don’t care if you’re pretty—I love you anyway,” Rose still feels a need to prove her physical beauty. Your thoughts?

6. Other scholars and critics have focused on the character Rose’s age, noting that Hollywood is generally unkind to aging performers, especially females (Markson & Taylor, 2000). How is aging a factor in the film? And perhaps in Streisand’s own life at the time?
AS PRESENTING RELATIONAL ISSUES

7. Mack (n.d.) compares *The Mirror Has Two Faces* to Henry James’ *Washington Square*. From Mack: “Still, it is clear that both [Agnieszka] Holland [director of 1997’s *Washington Square*] and Streisand were attracted to the same essential character triangle: an ugly duckling daughter pushed and pulled by a controlling parent and an equally selfish lover. Each character, Catherine Sloper and Rose Morgan, redefine themselves as a result of their reevaluation of their relationships to these two would-be manipulators. In so doing, each acquires a kind of transfiguring beauty that Henry James called ‘force of soul’.” What do you think?

8. Analyze the interrelationships of the three related women—mother (Lauren Bacall) and two daughters (Mimi Rogers and Barbra Streisand). And, I am reminded of the mother/daughters/sisters relationships in Fellini’s *Juliet of the Spirits*. Your thoughts?

AS “SEXUALIZED PEDAGOGY”

9. Scholar Dale Bauer (1998) writes: “The erotics of the literature classroom in the Hollywood imagination comes as no surprise. Hollywood eventually misrepresents all professions, and all vocations are ultimately sexualized. Still, the college environment seems one of the few places left for exploring the boundaries of romance. . . The images of teaching may be either authoritarian (Morgan Freeman in *Lean on Me*) or ostensibly anti-authoritarian (Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*); idealistic (Michael Caine in *Educating Rita*) or seductive (Sally Kellerman in *Back to School*); hip (Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds*) or clueless (the PC English teacher in *Clueless*). Teaching, once represented as a profound calling (for instance, in *The Corn Is Green*), is now represented as a sexual proposition—a shift that should give us pause.” How does this analysis fit our current film, do you think?

10. Bauer goes on to provide a particular analysis of *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, thus: “Barbra Streisand’s portrayal of a Columbia English professor, whose initial lecture is on courtly love and whose last classroom scene announces Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* and Roland Barthes as its subjects, suggests that the classroom is the stage on which a female can play out her neuroses about her desirability, even her sexual availability.” Your thoughts?

AS BARBRA STREISAND, A JEWISH ROLE MODEL

11. Barbra Streisand has frequently been identified as a key Jewish “role model” (e.g., Kaufman, 2012; Schrank, 2007), one of the principal individuals responsible for the popular-culture-altering “Jewish Golden Age” of Hollywood (Herman, 2007). Herman: “Forty years after *The Graduate* and *Funny Girl* we accept that people can look Jewish and be stars. In the late Sixties this was still up for debate.” What are your thoughts on how has Barbra Streisand has helped negotiate this change, and how does our current film contribute?

12. Although some have noted that in our focal film, Streisand’s character is written as “ethnically neutral” (Sobchack, 2013), she is still identifiably Jewish. To quote Brook (2014): “In *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1996), she reprised, unsuccessfully on all counts, her two standard tropes: belated male recognition of her beauty and a shaygets romance—yet again, to a WASP hunk, Gregory Larkin (Jeff Bridges).” What is your assessment?
13. The film includes the song, “I Finally Found Someone,” written by Streisand, Marvin Hamlisch, J. R. Lange, and Barbra’s duet partner Bryan Adams. The song was performed by Streisand, although her role within the film itself was non-singing (a pattern for many of Streisand’s films). The song was nominated for an Academy Award, and gave Streisand her last (to date) top-ten single. How does this song contribute to the film and its themes of beauty, acceptance, and self-improvement?

14. How does this film fit into Barbra Streisand’s overall career trajectory, in terms of acting, directing, and music?

Discussion questions by Kim Neuendorf, Ph.D.: k.neuendorf@comcast.net
Archive of Women in Film-Cleveland discussion questions: http://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/womeninfilm
v. 11/24/15
References


