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The role of women in the United States of America in the 1980s

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1. INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the 20th century women in the United States seemed to have reached the goal they had so strongly worked for throughout history. Equality. All obstacles – were they political, social, or economic – seemed to have been removed. Similarly, all doors seemed to start opening up leaving women the architects of their own fortune. However, it appears that this feeling of equality was a treacherous one because the course of history showed that as soon as women had achieved some progress they were repeatedly pushed back into patriarchally inflected roles of mothers, wives, and homemakers.

The women's rights movement has come a long and rocky way including vital successes but more strikingly continuous backlashes¹. Historians, therefore, fittingly talk about waves of feminism indicating upward but just as many downward trends. The first wave of feminism was launched at the Seneca Falls women's rights convention in New York in 1848 where women pressed for equal treatment in voting, education, employment, property rights, health matters, and other areas in which they were discriminated against. Towards the end of the 19th century a backlash against women's advancements hitherto took over. The press, academic scholars, and doctors engaged themselves in a counteractive movement against the women's rights movement by strongly warning women of possible health risks and other perils that could endanger the American society as a whole (Faludi 63). Around 1910 the fight for suffrage was revived. Parades, picketing, speeches of feminists were no rarities and turned the suffrage movement into a nationwide political campaign. Finally, in 1920, the 19th Amendment was added to the Constitution of the United States granting women the right to vote. This achievement is usually associated with the end of the first wave of feminism. Another notable event of the early 1920s took place in 1923 with the introduction of the Equal Rights Amendment in Congress, which states "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." To this day, this amendment, however, has never been ratified.

In the 1920s women's advancements again deteriorated. For example, new

¹ For a more detailed overview of the women's rights history see, for example, William O'Neill, *Feminism in America: a history* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publ, 1994).

federal and state laws pushed professional women out of the workforce in the wake of the Great Depression. Moreover, newly passed wage regulations enacted lower pay rates for women (O'Neill 305, qtd. in Faludi 65). Not until the 1940s due to World War II did the women's movement pick up again. Women took over men's jobs while they were at war, thus millions of jobs in the high-paying industrial sector were given to women (Faludi 65). The hard working women were celebrated and were elevated to cultural icons, e.g. Rosie the Riveter or Wonder Woman. In the political realm, they began to flock to unions, demanded equal pay, equal seniority rights, and day care (Faludi 66). As soon as the war came to an end, women's progress once more experienced a backlash. Many women were laid off and the common consensus seemed to return to warnings that jobs and education would lead to unwomanly behavior precluding them from getting married and having children (Faludi 67)². In the 1960s and 1970s the tide turned once more heralding the start of second-wave feminism, which put issues such as sexuality, workplace, reproductive rights, and family on the agenda. The movement proved to be highly successful in their demands for equality. Among the most significant achievements are:

- the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which prohibited wage discrimination on the basis of sex
- the legalization of no-fault divorce, which allows for a divorce without having to prove that your partner has violated the marital contract
- Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlaws discrimination based on sex, race, color, religion, or national origin
- a ban on marital rape, i.e. non-consensual sex with your spouse

Another vital novelty which helped the advancement of women was the introduction of the birth-control pill in 1960, which offered women an unprecedented control over their fertility, i.e. their bodies. A similar effect had the legalization of abortion, a 1973 Supreme Court decision in the case *Roe vs. Wade*.

² Women's lay-off rate was 75 percent higher than that of men, in Cynthia Harrison, *On account of Sex: The Politics of Women's Issues, 1945-1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 5.

Second-wave feminism managed to change social attitudes towards issues of gender inequalities. Women were able to enter the 'boy's clubs' of military institutions, natural sciences, and even the Supreme Court. They were keen on promoting a positive image of women in popular culture leaving behind the archaic, patriarchal depictions that have dominated society for so long.

However, what history seems to have shown quite clearly is that every upswing in women's rights is followed by an adverse reaction. The most recent of these backlashes is said to have occurred in the 1980s, with the beginning of Ronald Reagan's terms in office as President of the United States³ (1981-1989). Therefore, this decade constitutes the center piece of this thesis. It will investigate whether and in how far there was an actual conservative backlash against women in American society at that particular time. Specifically, the following questions shall be addressed and resolved throughout this work:

1. Was there a conservative upsurge that influenced gender representations in the American society in the 1980s?
2. In what ways became antifeminism evident in the 1980s?
3. How were gender stereotypes displayed?

The hypothesis put forward in this thesis assumes that the 1980s under President Ronald Reagan did experience a conservative trend that was prominently reflected in the politics and the depiction of female roles in the American culture of that time. Women were pushed back into more conservative roles which they managed to escape a decade earlier in the 1960s and 1970s in the course of second-wave feminism.

1.1 METHODOLOGY

To provide a clear answer to the above posted research questions the school of *New Historicism* should serve as the epistemological basis, since it seems to be the most useful when analyzing a social trend. The term *New Historicism* was coined

³ See, for example, Faludi 1991.

by Stephen Greenblatt in the 1980s. He developed the idea that a piece of work can only be understood through its historical context. His main interest lies in the negotiations, circulation, and exchange of texts and contexts, i.e. texts and the cultural practices of a specific time⁴.

"New" Historicists differ from *"Old" Historicists* in their perception of the concept of history. According to *New Historicists*, history cannot be seen as a universal truth presenting pure facts. This is what Louis Montrose calls "historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (23):

By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing – not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them. By the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question– traces whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement; and secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the "documents" upon which historians ground their own texts, called "histories." (Montrose 20)

Dominick La Capra similarly asserts that "history can no longer be a single authoritative voice presenting exhaustive documentation as evidence of factuality" (La Capra 1985, qtd. in Palmer, *The Films* 3), because historical facts are social constructs themselves depending on who is reporting them and in what way. Consequently, in order to get a more objective view of history it is vital to analyze and interpret more than one perspective/voice/text. These so-called texts can be literary or non-literary: diaries, movies, presidential speeches, audio tapes etc. An analysis of such texts serves to "supplement or 'rework' reality" (La Capra 11). *New Historicists*, thereby, try to give a voice to underrepresented and underprivileged groups of people. Thus, they challenge depictions of a certain time as consensual

⁴ See Stephen, Greenblatt. *Renaissance Self-fashioning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

and critique “the accepted power relationships of the master texts of history” (Palmer, *Dickens* 13). In this regard, *New Historicism* differs fundamentally from the - until then - highly influential literary movement called *New Criticism*. *New Criticism* claims that literary texts must be read as self-contained entities without taking its context much into account. The *New Historicists*, on the other hand, try to link texts with other texts that were created at the same time in order to recontextualize these various texts.

This concept of *New Historicism* has been influenced by *Marxism* but most importantly by the works of Michel Foucault. Michel Foucault, a French poststructuralist, also questioned the traditional perception of historical truth. For him, truth is the product of power relations within a system. If the system changes (i.e. if power changes), truth changes. Truth and power are formed through discourses. Discourse as defined by Foucault refers to “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Hall 44). Power is constructed within such discourses. Truth, in turn, can be either created or restricted by whoever is in power. In other words, discourses define what is seen as true within a given context. If new forms of power emerge, issues such as sexuality, homosexuality, and feminism receive new definitions.

The meanings of such issues are connected to a larger overlapping web of knowledge in which everything is related to each other⁵. Every single historical event is linked to this web of economic, social, and political factors. Whereas Karl Marx perceived power as a merely repressive tool, Foucault viewed it as a more constructive force that creates what happens, i.e. truths. He argues that even a tyrant is part of this web of discourses because they put him/her in power (see Murfin & Ray).

In order to grasp a social trend one needs to understand that the social and cultural history of a specific time and place are only one part of this larger web. William Palmer uses the term “multi-layered constructs” (The Films 2) instead of ‘web’. The individual layers of this construct are of equal importance, there is no

⁵ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). For a guide to Foucault’s ideas on discourse and power see Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

hierarchical order. The structure of this thesis follows this concept of layering. Each chapter of this work is going to examine one particular layer with respect to the roles women played in the American society of the 1980s. Chapter one, i.e. the first layer, looks at the politics of the 1980s. It examines in detail three of Reagan's policies: social welfare cuts, abortion rights, and the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment. These three policies are analyzed with regard to the implications they had on women. Guiding questions were:

- Did these regulations impede advancements of women's rights?
- In how far did these regulations impede women's rights?
- Who opposed and supported these regulations, and why?

Chapter two deals with the depiction of women in visual media, specifically Hollywood blockbuster movies of the 1980s. Social history produces the material for filmic representation. However, as William Palmer argues in his anthology of 1980s Hollywood movies, "Hollywood has courted social credibility and even political power by supporting projects that portray, interpret, and, in some cases, even push debate upon major "trends" or "threads" of socio-cultural history" (Palmer, *The Films* 6). In other words, movies sometimes produce reality. Because of this reciprocal relationship between social history and filmic history, movies are of vital importance when analyzing a social trend of a particular time. Three movies are being discussed in this thesis: *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Tootsie* (1982), and *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982). These movies were picked due to their box office successes which guarantee a widespread circulation among the American society and thus prove to be highly representative when examining a social trend. All of them were in the top three of the box office list of the year in which they came out. The movies are analyzed with regard to their narrative structure and the spatial organization, or mise-en-scène. Here, two aspects will be particularly emphasized: the point of view of the camera and the shot distance. Guiding questions were:

- What is being shown?
- How is it shown? What's the effect?
- Where is the viewer's eye drawn to in the image, and why?
- Does this image's particular look at its subject disempower its subject?

- How are female characters represented (function, physical appearance, behavior)?
- Does it reinforce gender stereotypes?

The next chapter looks at the layer of print media. Specifically, self-help books are going to be the center of attention, because, on the one hand, they perfectly epitomize the individualistic, 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' attitude that celebrated a strong revival in the 1980s. On the other hand, self-help books published at a specific time also inform about the nature of that time itself, since the most successful books are clear indicators of what people considered the most pressing concerns or problems which they sought to overcome by obtaining instructions from these manuals. The books are examined by means of thematic analysis. This method shall identify any recurrent patterns, themes, or concepts that are sought to be conveyed by the authors. The texts used for this study are *Smart Women Foolish Choices* by Dr. Connell Cowan & Dr. Melvyn Kinder, *Being a Woman* by Dr. Toni Grant, and *Women Men Love, Women Men Leave* by Dr. Connell Cowan & Dr. Melvyn Kinder. The works were again selected with regard to their popularity. The books that were chosen all hit the bestselling list. Consequently, these texts have been widely distributed among the American society and are therefore representative for the purpose of this thesis. Guiding questions were:

- Who is the author?
- What is the purpose?
- How is this purpose achieved?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What are the main themes?
- Does it reinforce gender stereotypes?

New Historicists see texts and the analyses of these texts as products of a particular cultural moment. These texts are interlinked and form and codify meanings. They create power and truths. Therefore, as a final step in this paper, the individual cultural products that have been analyzed - policies, movies, and self-help books - are brought in relation to each other and are therefore recontextualized.

Thus, officially held consensuses or truths might be challenged and, ideally, a clearer picture of history can be composed.

The material that has been selected for this thesis is by no means the only one that can be studied for this purpose. Plenty of other texts would qualify as possible research material, e.g. magazines, TV shows, the emergence of charities etc.. The selection of the material used in this thesis was simply based on easy availability of resources and on providing a high diversity of texts/perspectives.

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Various scholars have examined the rise of the conservative *New Right* and the implications on women during its heyday in the 1980s. Probably the most famous account on the role of women during that time is Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. In her 1992 book she claims that the 1980s saw a serious attack on feminism and women's rights. She argues that the conservative culture of that time tried to blame feminism and the fight for equal rights for the discontent of American women. The main goal of this strategy was to push women back into their traditional roles of wives, mothers, and homemakers and to turn back the progress that had been made in the past. Faludi claims that politics, television, the movie industry, newspapers, and other forms of popular culture joined in to wage war on the American women, who have made significant progress in their fight for equal rights during the 1960s and 1970s.

Faludi examines a wide range of data to support her case. She starts out by refuting studies and statistics about a purported men shortage, infertility epidemics or a rising number of burnouts among single, professional women – studies which were happily picked up by the media despite them being severely flawed. Faludi continues to investigate the role of popular culture including Hollywood movies, TV shows, fashion, and advertizing. Popular psychology, reproductive rights, and the labor laws of professional woman receive great attention as well in her book. Susan Faludi concludes that all these aspects discussed in her work reveal a sexist and anti-feminist agenda trying to nullify the gains that were made by women activists in the previous decades.

The highly successful book was praised by many critics for its extensive scope of research. However, Faludi's work also received negative critique. In her review of *Backlash* Elayne Rapping, for example, criticizes Faludi for generalizing and oversimplifying complex cultural processes (cf. 3). She accuses her of misrepresenting information to fit her argument. Rapping argues that Faludi "chooses not to see contradictions. Her world is as black and white as that of her right-wing adversaries" (3). As an example, Rapping, mentions Faludi's readings of Hollywood movies that do not leave any room for differing interpretations. Alternative or contradictory readings are neglected (cf. 3).

Others accuse Faludi of engaging too much in personal attacks, something for which she strongly criticizes others in her book (cf. Cantor 315).

Bell hooks, an American feminist and social activist who tries to explore the relationship between race, capitalism, and gender in her works, critically observes that Faludi completely neglects the aspect of race in her study. Faludi talks about women as if being one homogenous class instead of factoring in different experiences among women especially made due to their race or ethnicity. The generalization with regard to women "erases any focus on the way in which race is a factor in determining degrees of backlash" (hooks 2).

Zillah Eisenstein is another scholar who explored the neoconservative politics of the 1980s and their effect on women in the United States. Among her publications is *The female body and the law*, in which she argues that the interaction between law and the insistence on the sex differences between men and women are responsible for the structural inequalities that exist in our society. She uses the theory of deconstruction in order to overcome the binary differences between male and female. Her aim is to establish a methodology that appreciates diversity instead of insisting on sexual differences.

In her review of Eisenstein's book, Victoria Kahn criticizes her for not being able to establish a consistent theoretical approach. Additionally, "her goal is not so much to deconstruct the sameness/difference opposition as to redefine equality so that it no longer assumes the privileged white heterosexual male as the norm" (24). She also questions Eisenstein's focus on the pregnant body which Eisenstein considers one of the main sources for female oppression. By emphasizing a

woman's reproductive capability one may infer that the legal inequalities between men and women are due to insurmountable biological differences and not due to "the socially constructed meaning we give to the body" (Kahn 24).

For Schulhofer, Eisenstein's attempt to reject the strict dualisms between men and women, male and female is commendable, but at the same time he argues that she is not able to present clear ideas how to go about this endeavor, "Though frustrated by the "sameness/difference debate, Eisenstein is unable to find a way out of it" (Schulhofer 749).

During the 1980s Zillah Eisenstein has published several other essays about the patriarchal American society during the Reagan presidency. Her essays *The patriarchal relations of the Reagan State* and *The Sexual Politics of the New Right: Understanding the "Crisis of Liberalism" for the 1980s* focus especially on the *New Right's* attack on liberalism and the consequential cutbacks in the welfare system which affected women in a very negative way. Critics argued that she sometimes engages too much in generalizations for Eisenstein makes the argument that all *New Right* advocates reject the idea of women in the workforce (cf. Kahn 739). Kahn, however, insists that the *New Right* "is no more unified a force than any other social movement" (740).

Joan Hoff-Wilson, a scholar who also puts her focus on the legal situation on women in the United States is the editor of a collection of essays dealing with the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Her book *Rights of Passage: The Past and Future of the ERA* presents the reader with a concise account of the history of the ERA. The main endeavor of these essays, however, lies in the attempt to find possible reasons why the amendment failed to get ratified in the 1980s.

Numerous scholars have dealt with the issue of gender representation in the 1980s. Many of them centered their attention on aspects of popular culture to reveal the conservative ideology of the 1980s. In his book *Movies And The Reagan Presidency: Success and Ethics* Chris Jordan, for example, examined not only the way in which the politics of Ronald Reagan influenced the cultural narratives presented in the movies of that time, but also how his politics changed the whole film industry creating media conglomerates and monopolization. Jordan's

multifaceted analysis certainly offers valuable insights into Ronald Reagan's America.

Alan Nadel is another author focusing on the interplay of movies and the American society during the Reagan presidency. His book *Flatlining on the field of dreams: cultural narratives in the films of President Reagan's America* also examines the dominant cultural narratives that were propagated in the 1980s including class, deregulation, gender, race and others. These narratives he argues defined "President Reagan's America" (4) and simultaneously show how politics, history, and popular culture are inseparably intertwined.

Susan Jeffords also makes gender the centerpiece of her research. However, instead of focusing on the depiction of women, her book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* critically discusses the issue of masculinity during the Reagan era. In analyzing action blockbuster movies such as *Rambo*, *Die Hard*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Indiana Jones* etc. she claims that the stereotypical masculine macho qualities such as power, toughness, and strength represented in those movies reflect and reinforce the politics of the Ronald Reagan era, since Reagan himself was characterized and characterized himself along these stereotypes. She furthermore argues that these highly popular movies purport the notion that only these "hard bodies" are able to successfully fight the domestic and international conflicts.

Camera Politica: The politics and ideology of contemporary Hollywood Film by Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner is yet another valuable work dealing with socio-cultural narratives in Hollywood movies. Ryan and Kellner include a vast amount of movies from the 1960s to the 1980s in order to formulate an assertion about the social, political and economic processes of that specific time period. Their main argument is that Hollywood films stand in direct relation to the demise of liberalism and the subsequent conservative upsurge in the 1980s. In other words, movies strongly contributed to creating a social environment that made conservative ideals seem appealing. Therefore, the movies' impact on society is crucial.

2. ANTIFEMINIST POLICIES UNDER RONALD REAGAN

In my examination of Ronald Reagan's policies Susan Faludi's *Backlash*, Zillah Eisenstein's works, and Joan Hoff-Wilson's (Ed.) collection of essays *Rights of Passage* serve as the main secondary sources. As for primary sources, I have looked at several speeches held by President Reagan and incorporated pertinent passages into my thesis which disclose his conservative attitudes. Most of his speeches are available online.⁶ Additionally, since policies are oftentimes based on court decisions (this is especially true for the section on abortion rights), I also researched relevant legislative texts and included several court cases and verdicts. In this regard, my main source was the website *FindLaw*, a database which provides resources about state and federal laws of the United States. In addition to the official verdicts and legal texts, the homepage also provides access to historical documents and background information on the U.S. courts and government.

On the grounds of these sources it can be argued that there was indeed an upsurge of conservative attitudes in the 1980s. This upsurge led to the appreciation of more traditional female roles in American society. In the following, three specific policies shall be analyzed which clearly reveal such a conservative trend.

2.1 RONALD REAGAN COMES TO OFFICE

The frustrations of the 1970s such as the Vietnam debacle, Nixon's Watergate scandal, and the deterioration of the economic situation led to a loss of confidence and hope among the American people. Many liberals were disillusioned and therefore gave rise to a revival of the political right, which seized considerable power after decades of progressive governing. The elections of 1980 brought about a landslide win for the Republican candidate and governor of California Ronald Reagan⁷.

⁶ His major speeches can be found under:

<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/major.html>

⁷ The Popular Vote with 41% for Carter and 51% for Reagan was not a landslide victory. However, when looking at the Electoral Votes, Reagan received 489 votes, whereas Carter only won 49 Electoral Votes (Jacobs & Zelizer 20).

In May 1981, Richard Nixon, former Republican president, said at a Republican Party fundraiser in Seattle that due to “‘the Reagan Revolution,’ the whole direction of the country is going to change” (in Jacobs & Zelizer 1). With the election of actor turned politician Ronald Reagan for president many people on the right hoped to see the beginning of a new conservative era of Republican dominance. In addition to controlling the Senate, Republicans, for the first time in more than twenty-five years, could chalk up major gains in the House of Representatives. This constituted a vital sign that an important political and cultural shift in American society was taking place. Since the New Deal had generated an era of liberal Democratic governance up until the 1960s, conservative forces tried to create opposition against this movement. Ronald Reagan happily accepted the role of the leader of this conservative upsurge. His economic program which has come to be known as Reagonomics encompassed a reduction in government spending, a tax reduction and a decrease in government regulations. Additionally, he was a strong advocate of defense spending and federal subsidies for industry (Jacob & Zelizer 1, 11, 17, 18). A return to traditional cultural values was another crucial point on the conservative agenda. In his ‘Presidential Nomination Acceptance’ speech, Ronald Reagan emphasized the principles he stood for: “family, work, neighborhood, peace and freedom” (Reagan 1980)⁸. Upholding the traditional family, which was considered the cornerstone of American society, has always been a top priority for the Republican Party who has promoted itself as the party of family values (Jacobs & Zelizer 38).

Ronald Reagan was part of the *New Right* movement which was comprised of politicians, Christian religious leaders, conservative business moguls claiming that federal market regulations would undermine the American economy’s competitiveness, and fringe political groups. The *New Right* sought to dismantle the welfare state, which was considered to be the cause for the demise of the American family (Eisenstein, *The Sexual Politics* 570). The movement took shape in 1964 after the defeat of Republican Barry Goldwater to the Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson in the presidential elections. Supporters of Goldwater mobilized like-minded people and

⁸ Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech, 17 July 1980
< <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/7.17.80.html>>

set up right-wing institutions such as conservative think tanks, consulting firms, lobbies, and foundations to aid future conservative political candidates' campaigns more successfully. Mostly due to these developments conservatives almost always had better funding at their disposal than their democratic opponents with the beginning of the 1970s (Brinkley 895). A major segment of the *New Right* was dominated by the Evangelical Right led by the *Moral Majority* and Jerry Falwell (Eisenstein, *The Sexual Politics* 570).

Beginning in the 1970s, some Christian evangelicals became politically active supporting the right-wing conservatives. They were worried about immorality and chaos spreading among the American society and infusing institutions such as family, schools and other communities. Christian evangelicals became more and more publicly visible in that they owned newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and television networks through which they could spread their messages (Brinkley 894). In 1979 Jerry Falwell, a fundamentalist Southern Baptist pastor and televangelist cofounded a political organization called *Moral Majority*, which was highly involved in the presidential election of Ronald Reagan (Allitt 152). The *Moral Majority* opposed abortion, divorce, feminism, and homosexuality and supported the free market system and a strong American military position on the world stage (Brinkley 895) – values which were propagated and upheld by President Reagan. Their ultimate goal was an America that unswervingly abode by Christian values.

To find out whether the 1980s actually saw a backlash in gender equality, an analysis of the politics of that decade might hold a possible clue to the answer to this question. Therefore, the rest of this chapter is going to focus on three specific policy issues that particularly mark a conservative attitude with respect to the liberation and equality of women. The first issue that is discussed deals with social welfare cuts during the Reagan era. Second on the list is the issue of abortion and reproductive rights, which has proved to be highly controversial. As a last point, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) is going to be analyzed.

2.2 SOCIAL WELFARE CUTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN WOMEN

Cutting federal welfare had been a top priority for the Reagan administration right from the beginning. Every single social program was affected (Friedman 146). The most draconian cutbacks already came in 1981 with the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, which allowed for sharp reductions in social services such as the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, subsidized housing, Medicaid, school lunches, legal services, to only mention a few (Power 124). The AFDC was cut by about \$1 billion, Medicaid, a federal program designed to provide medical aid for low-income people, was cut by approximately \$800 million, and the food stamp program received a \$700 million dollar cut, removing 875 000 needy from the program altogether (Power 124)⁹. Now, are these budget cuts antifeminist? Yes. Women have been the largest group of social welfare recipients. Three out of every five persons living in poverty were female. Two thirds of older people under the poverty level were women. Even though only 15 percent of all families were single female households, almost half of them lived in poverty. Women above the age of fourteen earned less than 50 percent of what males received. Thus, if a woman's economic reality was not mitigated through a husband, the state had to close this gap (in Eisenstein, *The sexual politics* 581)¹⁰. Consequently, cutting back on federal welfare programs can be considered an attack on women.

Starting in the 1960s the expansion of the welfare state led to a higher employment rate among middle-class, educated women. Martin Carnoy and Derek Shearer even argue that "[...] since the 1950s, increased public spending has been the single most important impetus behind the greater economic mobility of women and minorities" (Carnoy & Shearer 464, qtd in Eisenstein, *The patriarchal* 335). In 1976 21 percent of all women held a job in the governmental sector, due to the increase in government services (Eisenstein, *The patriarchal* 334). Since more

⁹ In *New York Times*, 21 September 1981

¹⁰ "Impact on Women of the Administration's Proposed Budget," prepared by the Women's Research and Education Institute for the Congresswomen's Caucus, April 1981, p. 5. Available from: WREI, 400 South Capitol Street S.E., Washington, D.C. 2003.

women than men were hired by the government (see Eisenstein, *The patriarchal* 334), professional women were much more affected when the administration started to cut back on social services because this meant cutting back on governmental personnel. Numerically speaking, the lay-off rate for female administrators was 150% higher than that of their male counterparts (Hawkins qtd. in Eisenstein, *The patriarchal* 334). According to the Reagan administration, the defense industry ought to pick up the lost jobs. However, this specific employment sector has never been known for having a good record when it comes to hiring female professionals.

It seems as if the dismantling of the welfare state did have some positive effects because the budget cuts during Reagan's presidency led many women, who were deprived of the federal welfare support, into the fast-growing service sector of the American economy. However, there are always two sides to every coin. According to Friedman, "[t]he enormous profitability of this sector is sustained by low labor costs, more specifically: low wages, few fringe benefits, little job security, poor working conditions, and a transient and unorganized workforce" (146). Women were banned to the low-productivity sector of the economy, and a pay equity between male and female workers was far from being achieved, even if their work was of equal value. (Eisenstein, *The sexual politics* 579). More and more women may have entered the workforce in order to maintain their families as single parents or as a supplement to their husband's income, but at the same time a patriarchal order in American society was ensured in that women were not perceived as being of equal worth than their male counterparts in the workplace.

Professional women have always been a thorn in the side of the *New Right*. One of the movement's major concerns lay in the attempt to reconstitute the traditional patriarchal white heterosexual family with the husband as the breadwinner and the woman as homemaker. Conservatives saw this ideal endangered because more and more women were entering the labor force abandoning the traditional gender role allocations. For them, the reason why women began to leave their homes as their workplace could be traced back to the establishment of the welfare state. According to the *New Right* ideology, the costs for social programs and services were partly responsible for the rise of taxes and

inflation which consequently forced women into the labor market because it became impossible for a family to survive on only one (male) income (Eisenstein, *The Sexual Politics* 575). This economic change impacted the cornerstone of the American society: the (patriarchal) family. Women leaving their natural sphere, i.e. the home, were said to destroy the base upon which America's moral order had been created (Eisenstein, *The Sexual Politics* 575). Thus, in cutting social welfare programs the weakened family was thought to resurge. But women who were excluded from welfare benefits did not simply get married instead and lived a happy life within a traditional patriarchal family. For many women, being eliminated from welfare rolls meant having to take on poorly paid jobs most likely in the service sector (Friedman 146).

Conservative forces did not seem to be much concerned about the deterioration of the family per se, but more about the loss of authority of the man in society that welfare programs seemed to have triggered. Jerry Falwell, the founder of the *Moral Majority* – an organization strongly linked to Ronald Reagan's administration – argues in his book *Listen America*, "[t]he progression of big government is amazing. A father's authority was lost first to the village, then to the city, next to the State, and finally to the empire" (26). Falwell also blames the high inflation for being responsible for the diminishing power of the father. For him, children should have the right "to have the love of a mother and a father who understand their different roles and fulfill their different responsibilities [...] to live in an economic system that makes it possible for husbands to support their wives as full time mothers in the home and that enables families to survive on one income instead of two" (148). This thought was further spun by George Gilder, a well-known antifeminist, Republican activist, consultant to Reagan's speechwriters, and founder of the Discovery Institute.¹¹ His work *Wealth and Poverty* strongly influenced the politics of Ronald Reagan. It served as the ideological underpinning of Reagan's supply-side economics and budget-cutting blueprint. The Reagan administration became a significant patron of Gilder's work. William Casey,

¹¹ The Discovery Institute is a conservative think tank based in Seattle, Washington, promoting the idea of intelligent design. Although the organization purports to be secular, many critics reproach it to be highly influenced by and keen on promoting Christian thought. (See, for example, Forrest, Barbara & Paul R. Gross. *Creationism's Trojan Horse*. Oxford University Press. 2007.)

Reagan's campaign chairman, financially supported George Gilder in the writing process and David Stockman, Reagan's budget director, widely promoted the book and even suggested to distribute it among the cabinet members in front of the press (Faludi 300). Several times Ronald Reagan himself quoted Gilder and his work in his speeches¹². In his book Gilder states that the welfare state was responsible for the stagnant economy because social programs for unemployed, disabled, and old people, among others, diminish work incentives, reduce American productivity and create poverty (Gilder 67). In other words, for Gilder, unemployment payments only lead to unemployment and The Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program only creates dependent and fatherless families (111, 127). In accordance with Jerry Falwell, Gilder maintains that the welfare state destroys the role of the father in a family. Through governmental welfare services money becomes "a right conferred on women by the state" (Gilder 114) and thus undermines the male role as the provider for his family and as the main force for upward mobility. For Gilder, the only way out of poverty is not the welfare state but "work, family, and faith" (68). An eroding of the traditional family leads to a decrease in economic prosperity because men cannot fully turn their sexual energies towards the economy if they are not restricted by familial duty. "A married man [...] is spurred by the claims of family to channel his otherwise disruptive male aggressions into his performance as a provider for wife and children" (69). On the other hand, "[f]ew women with children make earning money the top priority in their lives" (69). Gilder finally concludes that "[t]hese sexual differences alone [...] dictate that the first priority of any serious program against poverty is to strengthen the male role in poor families" (69) and to ensure to keep the man's dominant role in middle- and upper-class families and not to maintain and extend welfare programs.

In the United States a woman's economic status is mostly dependent on her marital status (Eisenstein, *The patriarchal* 336). This fact reveals the highly

¹² See, for example, Radio Address to the Nation on Small Business, May 14, 1983 or Radio Address to the Nation on Tax Reform, June 7, 1986.
< <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/satradio.php> >

patriarchal and capitalist nature of the United States of America. The priority lies in maintaining a male-dominated sexual order (patriarchy) and, at the same time, in maintaining the economic class system (capitalism) – two systems which interact and support each other – two systems which undermine women's position in society (Eisenstein, *The Sexual Politics* 578). Looking at it from this angle, the neoconservative's and *New Right's* opposition towards welfare services then implies that behind every economic decision lies a social policy governing the function of the family according to its patriarchal needs. Therefore, in pushing through his budget cuts, Reagan's attempt was to cut the state's responsibility in the welfare sector and to transfer this responsibility of well-being onto the families themselves, a measurement which would purportedly give the families more freedom (Eisenstein, *The patriarchal* 336), but, in fact, only increased the male authority and women's dependency on men.

This separation of family from the state (or private from public) also reveals the highly contradictory position of the *New Right*. On the one hand, they reject state involvement in the family, e.g. economic aid to needy families. On the other hand, they argue in favor of state intervention when it comes to issues of sexuality such as abortion rights, sex education, and teenage pregnancy, issues which, for sure, can be classified as family affairs (Eisenstein, *The sexual* 587). Thus, it seems that cutting social programs in order to fight inflation and in order to grant the American family more freedom from the state simply served as a pretext to establish antifeminist policies to ensure the continuation of a patriarchal order, which seemed to have suffered from a severe blow in previous years.

President Reagan aimed at reconstructing patriarchal control over the American society by destroying the welfare state. The word "reconstructing", however, implies that the male-dominated system is not indestructible but has already experienced some cracks. It shows that women do have the potential to change structural inequalities. Married, wage earning women who started to insist on their rights constituted a threat to male authority. Due to the fact that the welfare state strongly contributed to allowing women to stand on their own feet, conservative forces built a strong opposition against it. The welfare programs turned out to be a subversive force helping to destroy the patriarchal societal order.

Since the forces against the traditional order became stronger and stronger, the 1980s saw another backlash against women's rights, which perfectly conformed to the historical tradition of how social, economic, and political advancements of women are confronted: they are pushed back into traditional gender roles.

2.3 ABORTION RIGHTS

The discourse around abortion throughout the 1980s highlights yet another shift in the power relations between men and women in the United States. It was an issue that received great attention due to social and legal changes that have taken place a decade earlier. The liberal discourse of the 1960s and 1970s led to a whole new awareness of sex equality/sex difference. Consequently, in the wake of the sexual revolution, new attitudes toward sexuality and sexual practices have been formed. This novel and progressive disposition paved the way for the 1973 Supreme Court decision of legalizing abortion overturning the regulations of 30 states that prohibited abortion unless the mother's life is at risk. In *Roe vs. Wade* the Court concluded that a women's right to seek an abortion was protected by the right to privacy ensured in the 14th Amendment of the Constitution of the United States:

This right of privacy, whether it be founded in the Fourteenth Amendment's concept of personal liberty and restrictions upon state action, as we feel it is, or, as the District Court determined, in the Ninth Amendment's reservation of rights to the people, is broad enough to encompass a woman's decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy.¹³

This landmark decision significantly reduced the sex difference between men and women. First of all, women were now able to live out their sexuality more freely, since they were provided with an option to terminate their pregnancy in case they did not feel ready to bear a child. The legal option of abortion has rendered female

¹³ Retrieved from:

<<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?navby=CASE&court=US&vol=410&page=113>>

bodies less different from male bodies, because it has made “the pregnant body less definitive” (Eisenstein, *The female body* 153). Women were now able to be sexually more active and behave much more like men in this regard due to the fact that they were not forced to follow through with a potential pregnancy. This (hetero)sexual freedom has largely increased during the 1960s and 1970s and became a major concern in the 1980s among *New Right* groups.

The verdict in *Roe vs. Wade* furthermore gave women significantly more control over their own bodies and consequently more control over their lives because as Zillah Eisenstein argues “[a]bortion became a prerequisite for other choices in women’s lives” (Eisenstein, *The female body* 184). For women, pregnancy has oftentimes meant delays in or drop outs from college. Also they bear the danger of slipping into poverty if they cannot afford to raise the child. Therefore, legalized abortion opened up new pathways for many women. They could focus on finishing higher education and were able to pursue careers without dropping out due to an unwanted pregnancy. Thus, the 1973 Supreme Court decision proved to be a crucial step towards more equality between the two sexes.

What is more, the legalization of abortion was a powerful tool with respect to the desegregation of the labor market and the predefined gender roles (Luker, *Abortion and the politics* 120). It generated demands to reconsider the traditional role distribution among the female and male labor force. Thereby, the commonly held expectations of female responsibilities in life, and assumptions about which jobs women should take and how much they should be paid for it, were notably challenged. This was made possible because women refused to be seen as potential mothers only. Legal abortions “allowed women to argue (and symbolically demonstrate) that although childbearing was important, it was not the single most important thing in a woman’s life” (Luker, *Abortion and the politics* 120).

Towards the end of the 1970s neoconservative voices became stronger and the *New Right* movement gained more and more influence. Their emphasis on sex difference rather than sex equality became much more pronounced and regained ground among the American society. The *Roe vs. Wade* decision had a decisive impact in this regard because it sparked vigorous opposition among conservative forces in the United States that spilled well over into the 1980s. These forces are

commonly known as the pro-life movement, which constitutes a countermovement to the supporters of legalized abortion, also known as pro-choice advocates. The socio-political pro-life movement endorses government regulation prohibiting abortion because they hold that after fertilization an embryo is considered a human being and thus bestowed with the right to life. The pro-choice notion, on the other hand, embraces a woman's free decision to terminate the pregnancy and considers it as part of her reproductive rights.

One of the most prominent pro-life advocates was President Ronald Reagan, who openly supported a ban on legalized abortion on various occasions:

- More than a decade ago, a Supreme Court decision literally wiped off the books of fifty states statutes protecting the rights of unborn children. Abortion on demand now takes the lives of up to one and a half million unborn children a year. Human life legislation ending this tragedy will someday pass the Congress, and you and I must never rest until it does. (Ronald Reagan, Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, 8 March 1983, Orlando, Florida)¹⁴
- With regard to the freedom of the individual for choice with regard to abortion, there's one individual who's not being considered at all. That's the one who is being aborted. And I've noticed that everybody that is for abortion has already been born.

(Ronald Reagan, Presidential Debate in Baltimore, 21. September 1980)

15

Ronald Reagan's and the pro-life movement's attempts to push back the dominating pro-choice ideology were manifold, ranging from presidential essays to actual legislative changes. In 1983, shortly after the tenth anniversary of *Roe vs. Wade*, Ronald Reagan composed an essay with the title *Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation*. This essay was especially outstanding considering the fact that Reagan was the first president to have published while in office and thus has

¹⁴Retrieved from:

<<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=41023&st=Remarks+at+the+Annual+Convention+of+the+National+Association+of+Evangelicals&st1=#axzz1mIVzumV6>>

¹⁵Retrieved from:

<<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29407#axzz1mIVzumV6>>

played an even more influential role in the persuasion of American citizens. In this work he presents his anti-abortion attitude and makes clear that in his view abortion on demand leads to a moral decay of the American society. He urges the American people to protect the unborn and advocates that the Supreme Court may repeal its ruling from 1973. Reagan argues that due to the legalization of abortion “more than 15 million unborn children have had their lives snuffed out by legalized abortions. That is over ten times the number of Americans lost in all our nation’s wars” (Reagan 1). This argument clearly shows the propaganda with which pro-life advocates tried to manipulate the American society into believing that abortion had not existed before the Roe vs. Wade decision and that its legalization would lead to the end of American society. In reality, surveys show that the number of abortions has remained quite constant over the last 120 years.¹⁶ Even though the abortion rate did increase in the years after the Roe decision, it started to settle and even decline at the beginning of the 1980s (Haub & Kent 6). In the course of Reagan’s presidency, the number of abortions decreased by six percent (Lewin A14).

One of the most subtle and successful attempts to overturn the Roe vs. Wade decision was the systematic political change from inside. For this purpose, Reagan put his focus on the judiciary in order to strengthen his conservative governance and gain more support from the courts. When his second presidential term came to a close, Reagan had appointed three Justices to the Supreme Court, 83 judges to the United States Courts of Appeals, and 290 judges to the United States district courts. This constitutes more appointments than any other president had ever confirmed. It has been noted that President Reagan predominantly selected judges based on their conservative ideology and that candidates had to pass the neoconservative litmus test in order to be eligible (see, for example, Eisenstein, *The female body*, or Jacobs & Zelizer). One example would be Judge William Rehnquist, who was nominated as Chief Justice by President Reagan in 1986. Rehnquist, a staunch conservative favoring school prayer, capital punishment, and state-laws served as Associate Justice in the Roe vs. Wade decision. He was one of the two judges who cast a dissenting vote in the abortion case. Antonin Scalia,

¹⁶ See Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984: 19).

another of Reagan's appointees to the Supreme Court, is yet another well-known conservative, emphasizing that the Constitution of the United States shall be read as it was intended by its authors and not be treated as a "living document". Therefore, he strongly opposes the Roe vs. Wade decision and has repeatedly called upon his colleagues to repeal it because in his opinion "[t]he Constitution contains no right to abortion" (Scalia, in *Ohio v. Akron Center for Reproductive Health*)¹⁷. With Reagan's mostly conservative nominations a period of historic political transformation started, in which the conservative voices gradually began to establish a slim lead in the courts and eventually in people's minds.

Even though anti-abortionists were not able to overturn the Roe vs. Wade ruling several restrictions have been put in place following the 1973 court decision. Many states established laws that limited access to abortions, therefore, a woman's constitutional right to have an abortion has more and more become dependent on the state she lived in. By the end of Ronald Reagan's second presidential term, 35 states required parental consent or notification if the woman seeking an abortion is underage, and 30 states and the District of Columbia prohibited abortions funded by the state's Medicaid programs (Faludi 550). Biased information against the procedure and unnecessarily delayed medical care have been other methods of bypassing Roe vs. Wade (Planned Parenthood). Other factors that led to a decline in access to abortions were the constant harassments and violence against pro-choice advocates and abortion clinics, which had a very discouraging effect on the medical establishment. Between 1977 and 1988 the number of doctors and clinics offering abortion services had dropped by half. Additionally, the number of doctors who had the training and knowledge to perform abortions decreased significantly (Faludi 424). In various cases these measures did not lead to a change in women's or young girls' behavior. Instead, these legislations forced them to seek abortions in less safe environments with sometimes fatal outcomes for both, mother and child.

In addition, it became increasingly difficult to obtain information about abortion services since the enactment of the Adolescent Family Life Act of 1981, which funded abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in the United States (cf.

¹⁷ Retrieved from:

< <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=497&invol=502>>

Faludi 425). This act prohibited federally funded sex education classes to provide information about abortion. Similarly, in 1988 the Secretary of Health and Human Services introduced new regulations putting a ban on federally funding clinics that not only provided abortion services, but promoted the idea or even counseled women in that matter (cf. Faludi 421). After legal doubts about these regulations which were said to be violating the First, Fourth, and Fifth Amendment of the Constitution, the Supreme Court (under Chief Justice William Rehnquist) ruled in *Rust vs. Sullivan* that these laws were not in violation of the Constitution of the United States¹⁸. In 1989 the *Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services* decision posed another challenge to the legalization of abortion (cf. Faludi 421). In 1986 the state of Missouri passed a law which put restrictions on abortions as the legislation stated that "[t]he life of each human being begins at conception" (*Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*)¹⁹. It prohibited the use of state funds to support facilities performing, promoting or counseling on abortions. A lower court deemed this legislation unconstitutional after which the case was brought to the Supreme Court in 1989. The Court, however, struck down the previous ruling and considered the Missouri law to be in accordance with the Constitution providing the states with legislative power to overturn the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision.²⁰

A further move of antiabortion advocates was the significant cutbacks on public funding for birth control research and family planning services – not including abortion. Financial support dropped by 50 million dollars during Ronald Reagan's eight years of presidency (Faludi 426). Also private companies, such as the second largest telephony provider AT&T, reduced their contributions for such services giving in to pressure from religious groups. These cutbacks in birth control research and the restrictions on abortions achieved quite the opposite of what these conservative interest groups intended, namely an increase of teenage pregnancies and consequently a rise in abortion numbers (Faludi 427).

¹⁸ Retrieved from:

< <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=500&invol=173>>

¹⁹ Retrieved from:

<<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=492&invol=490>>

²⁰ Information retrieved from:

< <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=492&invol=490>>

All these attempts to ban abortion beg one question: Why was this issue of such importance to the *New Right*? Ehrenreich et. al. remark in their book that “[t]he fear of women’s sexual independence has become a major theme of the 80s, one that indicates not only the growing strength of the Christian right, but the powerful, lingering influence of sexism in American culture” (160). Abortion is central to the *New Right* because it is inevitably linked to their concepts of womanhood and motherhood – two concepts which for them naturally highlight the fundamental difference between men and women (Eisenstein, *The Female* 153). Therefore, the option of terminating a pregnancy has sparked enormous opposition among these groups, since abortion visibly reduces this sex difference and thus offers women greater sexual as well as social freedom, such as more options in the labor market. The increase in female sexual activity has led to much disdain from the *New Right*. Also Ronald Reagan joined this chorus and called for an end of such promiscuous lifestyles which in his opinion seem to have become “stylish” (Reagan, qtd. in Eisenstein, *The female* 155). However, by opposing the so-perceived promiscuity and the option of abortion, conservative *New Right* promoters in fact attack women’s sexual freedom.

A further reason why the issue of abortion and reproductive rights has experienced harsh criticism can be linked to a male anxiety of losing control over the traditional patriarchal order. Granting women the right to abortion, i.e. granting them more sexual freedom, dramatically reduces the central role of the man. In his book *Men and Marriage* George Gilder criticizes the female reproductive freedom because “it shifts the balance of sexual power further in favor of women” because women nowadays have to be “fully and deliberately agreeable” to procreate (107). According to Gilder, this reduces the once highly potent male sexual organs, which were a “weapon of procreation” to “an empty plaything” (107).

Men became frightened because due to female reproductive rights women – for the first time in history – entered a completely male dominated sphere: the bedroom. Since it proved almost impossible to reverse this trend of women becoming sexually more active and confident, the only way out of this was to make these sexual adventures more dangerous for women. And this could be achieved by limiting female reproductive rights, i.e. putting a ban on abortion (Faludi 413).

For the *New Right* and neoconservatives men and women are determined by nature which equips them with innate qualities which are not subject to change. Nevertheless, they constantly see the urge to protect this so-called “natural order”. This results from the fact that the categories ‘female’ and ‘male’ with their stereotypically ascribed qualities are indeed not natural but culturally acquired.²¹

As has been mentioned earlier, controlling ones fertility is the key to other gains in life, be they personal or work-related. Consequently, it must not be too surprising that reproductive rights are the most important target for conservative groups, because these rights form the basis in order to achieve sex equality.

2.4 EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

Another issue that sheds light on the political culture of that time is the failed ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), an amendment to abolish gender-based laws. After women finally gained the right to vote in 1920, some of them realized that the vote did not guarantee them full equal rights under the American law. Others considered the ERA redundant since the 14th Amendment of the Constitution (adopted 1868) guarantees all citizens equal protection under the law. However, it has hardly ever been applied in cases of sex discrimination and even constitutional experts disagree on the actual interpretation of the 14th Amendment leading to ambiguous and inconsistent jurisdiction in cases regarding equal rights between the sexes. Therefore, the struggle continued and in 1923 a first attempt to introduce the Equal Rights Amendment in Congress was made. Alice Paul, suffragist and founder of the National Women’s Party, drafted the first proposal for the Equal Rights Amendment. After several rewritings, the final version read:

1. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

²¹ For further information on this matter see, for example, Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.
3. This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.

The amendment was introduced in every session of Congress since 1923 until it finally passed in 1972. It passed both Chambers with a landslide majority (354 to 23 votes in the House of Representatives and 84 to 8 in the Senate) and thereafter was sent to the states for ratification. The clear victory in Congress led to the assumption that the ratification process with a seven year deadline would be quick and smooth. However, even after a three year deadline extension only 35 of the 38 (three-fourths) required states had ratified the Equal Rights Amendment leading to the defeat of the proposed bill in 1982.

The (his)story and evolution of the Equal Rights Amendment reveals three major shifts with regard to its appeal (cf. McBride & Stetson 38). In the beginning, the ERA was rejected by liberals and feminists who were members of the suffragist movement. They feared that this “blanket” equality for women would endanger the protective laws which these women had so strongly fought for. Protective legislation consists of certain labor regulations, such as shorter working hours, which seek to ‘protect’ women’s health (cf McBride & Stetson 235). The main arguments introducing such legislation were:

- the physical organization of women [i.e. women are weaker than men]
- her maternal functions
- the rearing and education of children
- the maintenance of the home

(Muller v Oregon, 208 U.S. 412 (1908))²²

Promoters of the ERA, however, considered protective labor laws as an impediment to the employment of women. Alice Paul strongly opposed protective legislation because she believed that “the first step for economic transformation of women’s oppression should be constitutional protection against legalized

²² Retrieved from
<<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=208&invol=412>>

inequality” and that “women should be treated as individuals under the law just as men were, not as a class subject to mass governmental regulation” (Fry 17). Protective legislation therefore puts the social role of the mother and the continued existence of a nation over women’s individual rights.

The second shift in which attitudes towards the ERA changed took place in the 1960s in the wake of the civil rights movement. In addition to fighting race discrimination, the civil rights movement also embraced the advancement of women’s rights. Thus, the ERA was seen as an issue of equal justice, which was endorsed by liberals and conservatives alike. General political support for the ERA had begun even earlier, in the 1940, when both the Democratic and Republican party included the bill in their party platforms. Since Dwight Eisenhower (1953-1961) every president spoke out in favor of the ERA except for Ronald Reagan, who opposed the amendment.

Towards the end of the 1970s and in the beginning of the 1980s the political and social climate experienced another shift and pivoted again towards opposing equal rights between the sexes. The *New Right* and neoconservatives sealed the fate of the Equal Rights Amendment with full force. The political right capitalized on the fears of homemakers and successfully used rhetorical strategies such as scare tactics and righteous rhetoric to help eliminating the proposed ERA. The status quo of women in American society was presented as privileged and special and the protective labor laws were seen as most advantageous to women.

The opposition of the ERA in the 1970s and 1980s was based on the preservation of traditional values typical for the *New Right* ideology. Opposition rhetoric focused on the destruction of the traditional family, the role of women in society, femininity, and the nature of womanhood (Mayo & Frye 86). Based on these traditional values various charges were directed against the Equal Rights Amendment. The possibility of military draft for women was crucial in this regard. The image of women in combat and the fear that young mothers would be subject to the draft once the ERA was passed were widespread though highly unlikely in reality, since the draft was discontinued in 1973.²³ Women participating in wars and

²³ Information retrieved from <http://www.equalrightsamendment.org/faq.htm>

killing people was simply deemed unnatural due to the woman being a life-giver not a life-taker (Mayo & Frye 83).

Another argument against the ERA held that the amendment would force the courts to allow abortion on demand, meaning no signatures of parents, not having to prove a special circumstance such as rape, not having to cross state boundaries or even leaving the country to get an abortion, no burden of extra costs etc.. After *Roe vs. Wade* has triggered severe opposition towards the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s, the ERA presented opponents of abortion with an even more extreme reality. Like military conscription for women, abortion also had no place in a society with traditional family values. Aborting a baby implied that a woman did not want to be a mother. This constituted an anomaly within the traditional conservative framework and endangered the American family because refusing to be a mother equals refusing to be a woman.

ERA advocates agreed that it would be impossible to predict how courts may rule when it came to reproductive rights. However, on the federal level the principles of equal rights have not been applied so far by the courts with regard to the issue of abortion. As mentioned above, *Roe vs. Wade* was based on the right to privacy and not on the right to equality. In addition, some states have passed ERAs on the state level. The implementation of such state ERAs is no predictor for the jurisdiction concerning reproductive rights, as can be seen in various cases where the restrictions on the funding of abortions are upheld (e.g.: Pennsylvania²⁴).

Similar arguments were made with regard to same-sex marriages. Opponents of the ERA feared that the amendment would require courts to permit same-sex marriages. However, as with abortion the jurisdiction is not correlated to the existence of an Equal Rights Amendment. Lawsuits have been filed without such an amendment. States without ERAs have legalized same-sex marriage (e.g.: Vermont), and states with ERAs still have laws that prohibit homosexual couples from getting married (e.g.: Maryland, Florida) (see equalrightsamendment.org).

Other charges rested on traditional legal benefits for wives, widows, and mothers. Opponents claimed that the ERA would bereave these women of financial support from their husbands who were obliged to provide support under the

²⁴ See for example *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, 1992

protective legislation. If the ERA was ratified, such benefits, however, would not necessarily be unconstitutional, depending on whether they are applied based on function or stereotypical sex roles (equalrightsamendment.org).

In addition to these scare tactics, anti-ERA activists employed aggressive rhetoric directed against feminists who were promoting equal rights. Phyllis Schlafly, a political conservative, *New Right* advocate and spokeswoman of the ERA opposition, called ERA advocates “a bunch of women seeking a constitutional cure for their personal problems” (qtd. in Mayo and Frye 85). She considered feminists’ struggle for equality as “sharp tongued, high-pitched whining complaints of unmarried women” (85) and labeled ERA proponents lesbians, radicals, and socialists (85). In her view, husband, home, and children are the most important elements in a woman’s life. A woman rejecting this way of living is considered unnatural and a danger to the whole society.

Even though conservative voices were on the rise in the 1980s, public support for the ERA was still strong. A Gallup poll taken in July 1981 revealed that 63 percent of the population approved of such an amendment (qtd. in Pleck 107). Indeed, popular support for the ERA dropped from 74 to 62 percent between 1974 and 1982 (qtd in Pleck 114), a decline that indicates that the anti-ERA rhetoric did achieve some success – at least in fuelling uncertainty among the population. However, it is still remarkable that general support did never fall below 50 percent.

The decisive reasons for the failure of the ERA are still unclear. Was it the scare tactics and rhetoric of the anti-ERA activists that kept state legislators from ratifying the amendment? Was it the fear of the individual states that the amendment would give too much power to the federal government? One can only assume. Nevertheless, opinion polls offer yet another possible explanation for the defeat of the ERA. The polling results show that there seem to be irregularities between what people want and what elected representatives do (Baer 57). How else is it possible that a proposed amendment is struck down, even if more than half of the population is in favor of it? In this regard, it is striking that the majority of state legislators, who eventually vote for or against the ratification, are male. One can only speculate about the possibility that for those men the anti-ERA rhetoric of women being happier as mothers, wives, and homemakers, seemed a more

comfortable and reassuring reality, which they were pleased to hear and pleased to vote for. After all, behind every successful man is a woman managing household and family without which men would not be able to triumph.

During the rise of the *New Right* movement, sexual equality – and thus feminism promoting sexual equality – was pictured as evil and dangerous. The concepts of feminism and liberalism were fused together and constituted the scapegoats and targets for the perceived moral decay and the destruction of the traditional American family. Many ERA opponents viewed women's rights activists as the enemy because in their mind these women wanted to act like men and therefore undermine the naturally (at least in their view) dictated sex roles. Phyllis Schlafly also argued along these lines and concluded that the ERA was "a total assault on the family, marriage, and children" (qtd. in Mayo and Frye 85).

In fact, the rejection of the Equal Rights Amendment was a rejection of the feminist idea of how and what a woman was supposed to be. Equal Rights advocates failed to successfully convey their message of equality. They did not manage to communicate to the American women and men that the ERA was not about making the sexes identical in nature but equal under the law. Furthermore, they failed to make clear that it was not the concept of family which they rejected, rather they opposed the traditional patriarchal form of it with the father as the head of the family and provider, and the mother as care-giver and homemaker (Dehart-Mathews & Mathews 51).

The struggle over the Equal Rights Amendment has proved that the American society still lacks genuine commitment to equality between men and women. The evolution of the ERA has also shown that success or failure strongly depends on the social and political climate of a specific time. The rise of conservatism towards the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s certainly contributed to a renaissance of sexual stereotyping which defeated feminist ideas of woman- and manhood and finally led to the end of the ERA in 1982. Judith Baer argues that it is exactly these traditional family roles of women that constitute the "stumbling bloc" (Baer 61) in the fight for equality, because there is clear doubt about whether or to what extent these roles are "compatible with "equal rights"?" (Baer 61).

3. THE DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN FILM

Film is a cultural product that reflects and reinforces the dominant ideology of a specific time. Due to its worldwide distribution and large audiences, Hollywood blockbuster movies are especially powerful in spreading a certain message. Many scholars argued that in the 1980s the main role of the Hollywood movie industry was to symbolically restore conservative values which should bring about reassurance and patriarchal order that was threatened by the previous decades dominated by social movements and liberalism (see Ryan & Kellner, 7, Jordan, Nadel, Faludi). Common themes in the movies of the eighties are the worship of the nuclear family, the preservation of traditional gender roles, and the demonization of feminism (see Jordan). The perpetuation of such patriarchal ideology prompted feminists to critically engage with these movies and lay bare their underlying meanings.

3.1 FEMINIST FILM THEORY – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

With its pervasiveness and dominance, film constitutes a powerful medium in our society forming and perpetuating cultural practices. Also the feminist movement realized the importance this medium played in conveying and thereby fostering and reinforcing patriarchal messages to a mass audience. Thus, feminists started to look at films from a female point of view to examine how women are portrayed in movies.

Early feminist film critics focused on stereotypical female roles, which reflected unrealistic and wishful images of women. Marjorie Rosen's work *Popcorn Venus* was the first book about the portrayal of women in film. She argues that the film industry merely produces myths through which the patriarchal society exerts its authority over women (Thornham 13). Similarly, Molly Haskell concludes in her 1974 book *From Reverence to Rape* that the movie theater presents an ideologically distorted image of femininity which is propagated by a media reality which needs to be understood as a male construct.

In the beginnings of feminist film theory movies were considered a reflection of reality. This assumption started to be challenged in the mid 1970s when a theoretical turn occurred. Film was no longer seen as merely mirroring reality, but as a practice which produced signs – such as the codes of the camera, montage, light – which construct reality. Feminist film critics therefore shifted their attention away from the content towards the language of filmic representation. This theoretical turn was mostly influenced by Laura Mulvey and her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.

Mulvey's essay brought about a paradigm shift in the discussion about gender and film. She not only saw the narrative of a movie, but also the formal film language as being gendered. Mulvey's theory is based on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and centers around the act of looking. Looking is never neutral, she holds. It means to have power, knowledge, and authority, qualities which – in a patriarchal society – women should abandon. Mulvey assumes that movies are the cultural product of a patriarchal unconscious. This means that on all of its levels, a movie implies a male perspective or a male look. Consequently, the audience regardless of their sex is addressed as male (Mulvey, qtd. in Trischak).

Mulvey furthermore argues that the spectator is deliberately made to identify with the male character because male roles are usually represented as "the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ego" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 838), whereas women are most often portrayed as weak, passive, and powerless. Since nobody wants to associate themselves with the latter qualities, the male as well as female audience will inevitably identify with the male protagonist who reflects ideal attributes. This line of thought is based on Jaques Lanca's ideas of ego formation and the mirror stage, in which an infant enjoys him/herself by identifying with a perfect image that he/she sees when looking in the mirror. The child eventually grounds his ideal ego on this mirror image. These identifications are, however, imaginary and based on misrecognition (*'méconnaissance'*) because "they are blinded by the very narcissistic forces that structure them in the first place" (Smelik 491).

Another central theme in Mulvey's approach is scopophilia (the desire to see), which also plays an important role in Freud's theories. Through scopophilia – or *Schaulust* – other people become objects:

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 837)

The image of the woman on screen constitutes on the one hand, the object for the male protagonist of the film and on the other hand, the object for the spectator (Mulvey, *Visuelle Lust* 37). Through close-ups of body parts, the female body becomes fragmented and consequently sexualized. The camera directs the look of the spectator, whereby the woman is constructed as the image and the man as the beholder. The woman is therefore the passive object of the male gaze, whereas the man acquires the active role of observing which makes it impossible for the man to function as the object.

Mulvey identifies three looks which occur in the movie theater: the look of the camera which is usually directed by a man, the look of the protagonists in the movie, and the look of the spectator which is highly manipulated by the previous two looks. These three looks view women as the passive object which is gazed at by the active male spectator.

Psychoanalysis sees the female as highly problematic because it represents the lack of a penis and the fear of castration. There are two possible solutions to this predicament: One, punishment/salvation, i.e. death/marriage. The other way is to fetishize the woman because this serves as a deflection from the danger she poses and focuses on the flawless feminine beauty.

Semiotics was another approach along with psychoanalysis that highly influenced feminist film critics. Whereas both concepts focus on the symbolic, psychoanalysis puts its emphasis on the filmic meanings for the spectator. Semiotics, on the other hand, sees films as texts which consist of various elements that follow certain rules, create certain structures and eventually produce meaning. Similar to a language, film is composed of individual sequences and structured

through codes. Some of these codes are socio-cultural like clothing or facial expressions (see Metz). Others, such as 'long shots', 'close-ups', or editing techniques are film specific. These codes or textual systems again create meaning. Feminist film critics adopted these methods for their own purpose to reveal patriarchal hierarchies that are conveyed with the help of these 'codes'.

Even though film is encoded it still purports the idea of being real, or of mirroring reality.

With its emphasis on the production and circulation of social meanings through cinema's process of signification, ideological film criticism's key topos is the nature of the relationship between representations and the real world of which they are part. This relationship assumes special significance with regard to cinema, because film appears to possess a peculiar capacity to present itself as uncoded, as transparent in its (re)presentation of the 'real world'. (Kuhn, *Alien Zone* 147)

This can be explained through Althusser's concept of 'ideology' (Trischak). The film manages to make a realistic impression because film conforms to the way reality is understood. The way in which we understand reality is according to Althusser the product of ideology because ideology presents its meaning as natural. The semiotic analysis of cultural texts and practices, however, is able to reveal that these texts and practices only reinforce and spread a certain ideology (i.e. also ideology is constructed). Every film is therefore political, since every film is determined by a certain ideology which produces it (Thornham 26). Cinema seems to produce reality, but it only represents the world of the dominant ideology. To preserve an ideology in a film, many aspects are left out or repressed, which creates holes. These holes need to be addressed by film critics. Annette Kuhn considers feminism as the most significant political motivation to lay bare the effects of patriarchal ideology that are manifested in cultural texts, especially in the medium of film (see Kuhn, *Alien Zone* 148).

In the following, three Hollywood blockbuster movies released in the 1980s are going to be analyzed with regard to how women are portrayed. Each of these films could be found in the top three of the box office hit list of the year in which it

came out. Consequently, these were extremely successful movies with high viewer ratings and therefore serve as representative examples for that specific time period. To find out which messages and how these messages are conveyed, a narrative analysis as well as a formal analysis of the film language will be performed.

3.2 FILM ANALYSIS

3.2.1 Fatal Attraction

The thriller *Fatal Attraction*, directed by Adrian Lyne, is a 1987 film production starring Michael Douglas, Glenn Close and Anne Archer in the leading roles. With a box office success of \$156,645,693, *Fatal Attraction* was the second highest grossing film of 1987²⁵. It was highly appraised by critics and won six Oscars including Best Picture, Best Actress in a Leading Role (Glenn Close), and Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Anne Archer).

The movie tells the story of Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas), an attorney in New York, who is happily married to Beth Gallagher (Anne Archer) and the father of a six-year-old girl named Ellen (Ellen Hamilton Latzen). While his wife and child are gone for the weekend to look at a new house in the suburbs of New York, Dan has a fiery affair with a woman called Alex Forrest (Glenn Close). Alex is 36 years old, unmarried, and a successful editor at a publishing company. While Dan thought this sexual encounter to be just a fling, Alex becomes obsessed with their relationship and is not willing to end it because she fell in love with Dan. As a consequence, she uses phone terror, emotional blackmail, stalking, kidnapping, and a suicide attempt as a means of making Dan stay with her. In addition, Alex finds out that she is pregnant and wants to keep the child, putting Dan in an even more desperate situation. Alex turns into a psychotic, unpredictable person who is willing to do everything to make Dan stay with her. Dan finally tells his wife, Beth (Anne Archer), about his affair, because the lives of his wife and daughter are at serious risk due to Alex's hysterical and lunatic behavior. In the end, Alex secretly enters the

²⁵ Retrieved from
< <http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1987&p=.htm> >

Gallagher's house determined to kill Beth. In a final fight set in the bathroom, Beth kills Alex with a shot in the chest.

After its release *Fatal Attraction* was widely discussed among scholars, feminists, religious groups etc. It has been referred to as slasher movie (cf. Corliss qtd. in Berland & Wechter), or morality play that blatantly shows the risks of committing adultery and cherishes the traditional family "in an age of AIDS, Reagan reactionism and religious fundamentalism" (Berland & Wechter 36). Different readings have been performed by looking at the genre of the movie. *Fatal Attraction* is said to have established a completely new genre, namely the "erotic thriller" with its combination of sex and violence (cf. Leonard 34). However, the movie is also very often treated as a horror film focusing on the creation of suspense and on Alex as the monster (cf. Leonard 46).

Other critics such as James Conlon reject this reading of Alex as the monster or Alex as the villain. Instead he argues that Alex simply reflects the missing passion in Dan's life. Thus, the character of Alex Forest must not be vilified for she only represents a desire that is merely natural. Conlon states, "[w]ith Alex there is no casual undressing, no neat folding of clothes, no practical prioritizing about what should be done before what. There is just the total urgency of passion, of flesh desperate for the closest avenue to flesh" (405). He furthermore, argues that "it is not Alex whom [Dan] hates and wants so violently dead; it is his own passion" (410).

Yet another reading of the movie centers on the depiction of sex as being dangerous (cf. Williams, Hirsch, Leonard). This danger is portrayed to manifest itself in various ways. Extramarital sexual affairs, for example, may have unexpected consequences, i.e. loved ones get hurt (emotionally or physically), loved ones are lost etc. Another danger of sex that is presented in *Fatal Attraction* lies in the risk of unwanted pregnancies. Alex getting pregnant only complicates the whole situation in the movie. Another risk taken by engaging in casual sex and renouncing the sacred institution of marriage is posed by AIDS. Foster Hirsch postulates that "[e]rotic thrillers of the 1980s and 1990s are metaphors for the dangers of sex in a time of AIDS." (qtd. in Leonard 99). In this regard, the movie can be read as a lesson which not only Dan has to learn but also the spectators of the movie. They are

remembered, even admonished to be faithful and to refrain from sexual adventures – a position that is typical for a “postsexual revolutionary period” (Leonard 94).

A great number of critics have interpreted *Fatal Attraction* as portraying misogynist attitudes contributing and reinforcing a backlash against women’s advancements (Bromley & Hewitt 17). Bromley & Hewitt even argue that “almost uniformly, reviewers have interpreted the filmic message of *Fatal Attraction* to be the vilification of the single career woman and the sanctification of motherhood and the traditional family structure” (17). It is this perspective that I would like to seize on in the following analysis.

According to Laura Mulvey’s point of view, Hollywood movies assert the nature of the male psyche. Hence, the narrative of a movie is defined by male fears and unconscious desires (Mulvey, qtd. in Jacobsson 7). These fears and desires have one underlying driving force: power. The ultimate goal of patriarchy is therefore to maintain its position of dominance. In *Fatal Attraction*, the concept of patriarchal power is revealed in several different ways.

One would be the appreciation of traditional marriage and the traditional family in which the man is the powerful and the woman the subservient catering to the man’s needs. Dan and Beth lead a happy storybook marriage. Beth is a full-time mum and homemaker who does not have any urge to strive for a career because she finds fulfillment in caring for her child and her husband and looking after their home. Dan, a lawyer, is the provider of the family. Even though he works long hours and on weekends, the wife never complains because these are the naturally allocated roles for husband and wife. Dan is also the one who makes the final decisions. He decides about whether or not they will move away from New York City and buy a house in the suburbs (which Beth desperately wants, but she is dependent on him since he has the money to realize her dream). He is the one who decides whether or not to buy a rabbit for their daughter and he even decides that his wife wears a womanly dress instead of a manly suit to the business party they attend. Dan talking to Beth’s friend on the phone:

DAN: She's in the bathroom [talking to the friend on the phone]. She wants to know what you're wearing [talking to Beth].

BETH: My black suit.

DAN: She's gonna wear her black dress.

When looking at their marriage it becomes clear who is in power. Dan takes up the active role of providing for the family, making the decisions and driving the narrative forward. Beth, on the other hand, is the beautiful housewife and mother who is reduced to a rather peripheral character with no meaning in herself. She is socially and economically defined by her husband and serves as a mere ornament or supporting role for Dan.

The patriarchal power, furthermore, manifests itself in the juxtaposition of the two female protagonists in the movie, Beth and Alex. Whereas Beth is portrayed as a passive, kind, and caring character, which are all stereotypically female traits, Alex is depicted as being the opposite. She is 36 years old, single, and a career woman who works as an editor at a New York publishing company. When Dan and Alex have lunch after their meeting she is pictured as very assertive, forward, and courageous – somebody who knows exactly what she wants and eventually always gets what she desires (these are all rather male characteristics). Her ambiguous name, Alex, which can also be a man's name, adds to the manly characterization of her.

At first, the movie seems to be following a storyline, which attempts to propagate a feminist perspective and offer new female images (cf. Berland & Wechter 39). The movie presents two different types of women which are equally valued. Beth is depicted as the sexy wife and mother and Alex is portrayed as independent and passionate career woman. Berland and Wechter argue that the movie seems to break with traditional stereotypes in that Beth, the mother of a six year old girl, does not bare the image of an asexual being and Alex is able to be successful at work without being portrayed as "mannish; to own and act on her own sexual desire; to have brains and beauty" (39). Thus, their main argument is that at the beginning, *Fatal Attraction* challenges "traditional cultural scripts that have limited women by placing them in either/or constructions (39).

However, it soon becomes clear that Alex's personality and her qualities go against the natural order, thus she has to die. The pronounced juxtaposition of

these two female characters clearly discloses which type is being preferred. Naturally, the passive and subservient wife and mother is preferred because she constitutes the benign, and harmless supporter of the male provider, whereas the determined, strong-willed, career woman poses a threat to the establishment in that she wants to destroy the traditional family Beth and Dan have built. Strikingly, it is Beth who kills Alex at the end of the movie to protect herself and her family. In doing so, she simultaneously endorses and ensures the continuation of the patriarchal order. The fact that Beth eventually is responsible for the killing of Alex could also be read as a scarce scene in which Beth is empowered. She is the one who saves Dan and her daughter, thus for a fleeting moment she is in control. In her essay *Patriarchal Politics in Fatal Attraction* Liahna Babener presents another possible reading of Beth shooting Alex. She suggests that this scene exempts Dan “from the liability for Alex’s death, since Beth, rallying as the long-suffering wife, shoots the other woman through the heart, thus absolving him of his homicidal intent and validating the ever-present patriarchal myth of female enmity” (32).

The most subtle form of patriarchal power lies in the objectification of the woman in the movie. In the beginning of this chapter Laura Mulvey’s theory which employs psychoanalysis to expose the so-called ‘male gaze’ of the movie industry which objectifies the female body was introduced. In her essay *A Female Gaze?* Eva-Maria Jacobsson argues that *Fatal Attraction* does not completely adhere to Mulvey’s theory of the all dominating male gaze. Looking at the parts of the movie when Alex and Dan first meet, when they have lunch together, and when they spend the night together it is Dan who becomes the object of female desire/of the female gaze. Alex gains total control over him.

In her essay Jacobsson describes the scene when Dan and Alex first meet at a business party (13). There they engage in a brief small-talk conversation (see fig. 1). This moment sparked Alex’s desire which is underlined by her gazing after him (see fig. 2) when he leaves the party, a sequence which lasts for about 20 seconds.



Fig. 1: Dan becomes the desired object for Alex.



Fig. 2: Alex gazes after Dan.



Fig. 3: Put into Alex's position, the camera, and the spectator gaze at Dan.



Fig. 4: Alex still gazes after Dan.

In fig. 3 the camera puts the spectator into the perspective of Alex making the audience adopt a voyeuristic gaze as well. For the next shot the camera swings back to Alex who still has her eyes on Dan emphasizing her deep desire for this man (see fig. 4).

Another scene that fits Jacobsson's argument occurs when Dan and Alex meet again in a weekend business meeting while Beth and Ellen are out of town. When the joint meeting is over Dan and Alex grab a drink in a restaurant. There, it is evident that Alex has complete power over Dan. She is the one who takes action and who drives the narrative forward in that she seduces him to the point where he demands the check to get out of the restaurant to have sex with her. Throughout this restaurant scene the camera, the audience, and Alex view Dan as the object of their desire. Alex acts and Dan reacts in that he completely surrenders to her.

This female gaze – according to Jacobsson – is not maintained until the end of the movie. There is a turning point where the female gaze is turned into a male

gaze again. This switch signifies that the female gaze and the abandonment of the traditional patriarchal structures, i.e. a strong and independent woman, are unnatural. Thus, the 'normal' order is reinstalled by making women the objects again. Jacobsson argues that this turning point does not mean that Alex becomes Dan's object, rather Beth, his wife, becomes the center of objectification (15). After Alex tried to commit suicide and Dan realized that his affair is out of his control, the male gaze is reinstated. One scene particularly emphasizes this shift (Jacobsson 16): a scene in which Beth sits in front of a mirror, putting on some make-up and lotion. Dan is observing her from the door, desiring his beautiful wife making the spectator identify with Dan. Moreover, the camera objectifies and sexualizes her by shooting close-ups of her body parts. The shots are taken top down. At first the audience sees a close-up of Beth's face while she is sensually putting on lipstick (see fig. 5). In the next shot we see Dan sitting on the floor observing his wife putting on make-up and getting ready for the party (fig. 6). Fig. 7 puts the audience in Dan's position and thus becomes the bearer of the look observing Beth caressing her upper body. Finally, the camera and thus the spectator move on to Beth's legs bringing the sexualization of her to a climax.



Fig. 5: Close-up of Beth putting on lipstick



Fig. 6: Dan gazing at Beth



Fig. 7: Close-up of Beth's upper body



Fig. 8: Close up of Beth's belly and legs

The female gaze is taken away from Alex by portraying her as psychotic and rendering her a woman with stereotypically female qualities: irrationality, hysteria, jealousy. Her apartment resembles a psychiatric clinic. Everything is kept in white: the white walls, the white linen, the white furniture. She even wears a white night gown looking like a hospitalized patient (see fig. 9).



Fig. 9: Alex looks like a patient in a psychiatric clinic

Jacobsson explains this as follows:

This can perhaps be seen as a defence mechanism on behalf of masculinity and male desires, a defence of the male gaze and the patriarchal ideology. No woman is allowed to attain power over the men. No woman is allowed to be the definer and constructor of a female gaze. To rescue the male gaze, Alex is turned into a monstrous creature. (20)

Alex is a threat to the status quo. Psychoanalysis sees women as generally dangerous due to their lack of a penis. Therefore, as has been mentioned earlier

there are only two ways to control this danger: punishment/salvation or fetishism. In the case of *Fatal Attraction*, Alex, who poses a great threat to manhood and the natural patriarchal order, has to die. In one of the final scenes Alex sneaks into the Gallagher's newly bought suburban home in order to kill Beth, who is an obstacle for her in winning over Dan. While Dan engages in a fierce fight with Alex, it is Beth, the kind wife and mother, who – for a short moment – gains the ultimate power and kills Alex with a gun. Her powerful moment vanishes quickly and only serves to confirm and substantiate the patriarchal order which Beth happily accepts.

Alex's death can be seen as a direct assault on feminism, because the movie demonizes successful career women and praises the passive mother/housewife type of woman. This perfectly underscores the conservative ideology that dominated the politics of the 1980s. This anti-feminist position not only could be found in the politics of that time but also in the movie production industry. Interestingly, the ending of the movie was initially different. Alex was supposed to commit suicide, but a test audience did not respond well to it. They argued that some sort of revenge was needed. It was simply "not cathartic" as one viewer put it (Faludi 135). So they changed the script and included the final killing scene.

Also the disposition of the director of the movie, Adrian Lyne, bears similarities with the dominating anti-feminist attitudes of the 1980s. His opinion on emancipated women is the following:

You hear feminists talk, and the last ten, twenty years you hear women talking about fucking men rather than being fucked, to be crass about it. It's kind of unattractive, however liberated and emancipated it is. It kind of fights the whole wife role, the whole childbearing role. Sure you got your career and your success, but you are not fulfilled as a woman. (Faludi 134)

He further comments:

My wife has never worked. She's the least ambitious person I've ever met. She's a terrific wife. She hasn't the slightest interest in doing a career. She kind of lives this with me, and it's a terrific felling. I come home and she's there. (Faludi 134)

His anti-feminist ideology is very well mirrored and reinforced in *Fatal Attraction*. It becomes obvious that a seemingly innocent and truth-reflecting medium of film serves a special purpose. In the case of *Fatal Attraction* the purpose is to perpetuate the ideology of the dominant social group (i.e. men) and to preserve the patriarchal apparatus.

3.2.2 Tootsie

The comedy directed by Sydney Pollack was released in 1982. *Tootsie* became a big box office success grossing \$ 177,200,000 making it number two of the 1982 box office hit list²⁶. The movie was nominated for ten Academy Awards, but was able to win only one of them in the category Best Actress in a Supporting Role for Jessica Lange's performance of Julie.

The movie follows the life of Michael Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman), an unsuccessful actor who cannot find a job because due to his reputation of being obstinate he is deemed as unemployable by most film studios. From his friend Sandy, (Teri Garr), he learns about a job opening on a TV Soap called *Southwest General*. While Sandy did not get the job, Michael secretly dresses up as a woman and auditions for the main female role in a TV Soap Opera as 'Dorothy Michaels'. He lands the job and the show becomes highly successful because of his convincing performance. At the same time he falls in love with another actress from the set named Julie (Jessica Lange), who is in a relationship with the director of the Soap and womanizer, Ron Carlisle (Dabney Coleman). Michael finds it to become increasingly harder to manage his double life, especially his love for Julie, because his female alter ego Dorothy attracts a lot of men; among those men is Julie's widowed dad. In an unscheduled live-broadcast of the Soap Dorothy/Michael exposes her/his real identity as a man before a TV audience of millions. Even though Michael loses his job after the coming-out, he is finally able to be with Julie.

²⁶ Retrieved from
<http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1982&view=releasedate&view2=domestic&sort=gross&order=DESC&p=.htm>

As with *Fatal Attraction* *Tootsie* was widely reviewed and was the subject of readings that provided different perspectives in their interpretations. In her analysis Elizabeth Abele puts forward the argument that *Tootsie* deals with the crisis of American masculinity. This crisis – according to her essay – has its roots in the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and in the Watergate affair (1). This anxiety about the male identity is revealed in that the male protagonist cross-dresses as a woman and thus becomes more feminine. Resorting to femininity seems to be a coping method, or a solution to the crisis of manhood (2). Michael's experiences as a woman renders him much more emphatic towards his own needs and that of others. Or as Abele puts it, "the fantasy of transgender occurred frequently in Hollywood films as a positive path for men toward emotional wholeness" (3). In the case of *Tootsie*, Michael is able to learn more about himself and the limitations of masculinity. Thus, "femininity augments and enriches traditional masculinity" (15).

Tootsie was the first Hollywood movie that introduced this "postfeminist desire to reform a heterosexual man" through the technique of cross-dressing (Abele 6). However, the success of *Tootsie*'s attempt to challenge traditional gender roles must be seriously questioned. Adrienne Auslander Munich, for example, attacks the movie's good intentions because he sees in *Tootsie* a reassertion of old gender roles mentioning homophobia and the stereotypical depiction of women as used in the movie to prove his argument (qtd. in Abele 6). Also, Abele concludes that even though *Tootsie* superficially tries to convey a liberal message its real endeavor is to lift the male crisis and reinforce the power of the white heterosexual man instead of presenting new ways of performing gender (5). Consequently, in the final scene of the movie only traditional gender constructions survive in the form of Michael and Julie forming a heterosexual love relationship. What is more, in performing Dorothy, Michael adopts very stereotypical female features, most prominently that of the "fiesty [sic] spinster" (Abele 15). Questioning the sincere effort to create new forms of gender, Elizabeth Abele also offers the possible reading of femininity being simply a "last frontier for the white male to colonize" Thus, the suppression of women and the ultimate male dominance would be ensured (6).

In his review Martin L. Abbott argues that *Tootsie* attempts to show that gender is a mere “facade, a “filter” through which people interpret other people and by which we construct the meaning of others in everyday life” (135). According to him, Michael becomes a much more sensitive man in the end and also the female characters have developed into assertive characters (135) – a reading that will be challenged later on in the analysis which looks at the movie from a purely feminist perspective. Abbott admits though that the movie displays certain ambivalences in its attempt to deal with the issue of gender (136). As an example he mentions the fact that it takes a man dressed as a woman to encourage and show other women how to be successful (136).

Although the various readings of *Tootsie* may follow different paths, most of them agree that the movie does not truly challenge traditional gender roles. This is also the argument which will be put forward in the following feminist reading of the movie *Tootsie*.

On first glance, *Tootsie* seems to embrace a feminist point of view criticizing the condescending treatment and stereotypical worldview propagated by a male dominated society. Performing a woman, Michael Dorsy speaks up against the macho attitude on several occasions and is not willing to accept any male behavior that degrades women. However, when analyzing the film more closely, it becomes evident that this endeavor to challenge the status quo is just a half-hearted, superficial attempt which in the end reinforces the seemingly rejected patriarchal dominance.

The movie fails to achieve its feminist intentions on various levels. Most strikingly, it completely flouts the significance of formal shooting and editing conventions which are in essence male and therefore perpetuate a patriarchal structure (see Laura Mulvey, Waller). In her essay *Academic Tootsie: The Denial of Difference and the Difference it Makes* Marguerite Waller argues that filmic elements such as camera movement, focus, and make-up employed in *Tootsie* render women the object of male desire (2). The female protagonists Sandy, Julie, and Dorothy are always well made-up, and nicely styled. Most often female characters – when shot together with a man – are found on the right-hand side of the frame, because this side tends to attract the gaze more strongly than the left-

hand side (Waller 3). While men are most often seen in a profile view or from the back, women tend to be shot full-face showing a frontal view of the woman's body (Waller 3). This kind of mise-en-scène inevitably draws the spectator's gaze towards the female character, since the male protagonists cannot be seen very well and thus the viewer's attention is turned away from them and almost exclusively focused on the women. That way, women are objectified and the spectator is put into a male perspective.

In my view, the male gaze is ubiquitous in *Tootsie* undermining the attempted feminist messages the movie tries to convey. One example would be when Michael alias Dorothy meets Julie on the set for the very first time. Michael/Dorothy instantly is attracted to the blonde beauty making her the object of his gazing and thus his desire (see fig. 10/11). He does this very prominently – even exaggeratingly – by looking over his glasses (see fig. 12). Since the spectator knows that it is Michael who is hidden underneath that female masquerade, it is the male gaze and not the seemingly female gaze which is adopted.



Fig. 10: Julie immediately becomes Dorothy's/Michael's object of desire.



Fig. 11: Put into Dorothy's/Michael's position, the camera and spectator gaze after Julie.



Fig. 12: Dorothy/Michael gazes after Julie

Another instance that blatantly reveals the male gaze occurs at Phil Weintraub's party. Michael is at the bar ordering something to drink when Julie and Ron come in. He is immediately drawn to her and cannot keep his eyes off her (see fig. 13).



Fig. 13: Michael staring at Julie

In the next shot (see fig. 14), the spectator – put into Michael's perspective – sees Julie wearing a blue dress and looking stunningly.



Fig. 14: Put into Michael's perspective, the camera and spectator stare at Julie, who looks on the floor.

What is noticeable about this shot is her look. The camera, Michael, and the spectator gaze at her. Julie reacts in that she shyly plays with her ear, but most importantly looks down on the floor. Here, Julie perfectly exemplifies what Laura Mulvey means by the concept of *to-be-looked-at-ness*. The spectator is put into the male perspective, i.e. the bearer of the look. The woman who constitutes the object of this gaze is not allowed to look; rather she fully submits herself to the male look that dwells on her.

One other example is when Dorothy and Julie spend the weekend at her Dad's farm. One evening the two women cook dinner. In this scene Julie is shot in a close-up being caressed and followed by the camera and by Michael's (and the spectator's) looks at her. Thus, the viewer is again put into a position which idealizes and sexualizes Julie. Julie is being idealized as a loving mother who would make a good housewife. At the same time she is depicted as a sexual object when she tastes the cake dough by licking it off her finger and also letting Michael lick it off her finger (see fig. 15).



Fig.15: Julie licking dough off her finger.

The sexualization of the female body, another form of objectification, is best depicted in Geena Davis' character playing a minor part in the TV Soap *Southwest General*. In the movie she is merely a peripheral character performing the role of the sexy actress who sleeps with the director of the soap. In most of her appearances she is half naked presenting her body to the audience.



Fig. 16: Geena Davis half naked in a three-quarter shot



Fig. 17: Geena Davis half naked in a medium shot.

In these two scenes (fig. 16 and fig. 17), which are supposed to happen on two different days (note the different clothes Dorothy is wearing), Geena Davis' half-naked body is presented straight on in a medium shot displaying her charms. In both scenes Dorothy stands or sits next to her as a stark contrast because Dorothy's character always wears clothes that cover as much of her body as possible. Thus, Dorothy is not the object of desire, which according to Mulvey is not possible anyway, because even though she is dressed and behaves like a woman, Dorothy is actually a man, and a man cannot be the object of the gaze. Instead, the look is again projected onto the 'real' woman in the scene, Geena Davis.

Tootsie purports the notion of being a modern feminist production which puts the patriarchal structures in the pillory. However, looking at the portrayal of the female characters in this movie, a completely different picture presents itself.

The two main female protagonists, Julie and Sandy, are portrayed in an extremely stereotypical way. Sandy is an unsuccessful actress who is emotional, weak, naïve, subservient, unsettled, and insecure. She seems overwhelmed with her life and needs Michael to boost her self-confidence, to accompany her to castings, and to comfort her when she experiences yet another blow in her life. Michael seems to care for her but in fact treats her as badly as Ron treats Julie. Sandy falls for Michael because he sleeps with her just to protect his alter ego Dorothy from being exposed. Of course, Sandy hopes for the two of them to become a couple which would give her some stability in life. Instead, Michael lies to her, forgets about their dates, and causes her additional pain which she can hardly bear. At one point, after the failed try out for a new role, she wants to give up acting and desperately says, "I'm 34 years old, [...] I wanna be a waitress, I'll do anything, I'll be a wife" (*Tootsie*, 15:20). For her, even marriage seems to be a reasonable option due to her unsuccessful life up to now.

Also Julie does not represent the emancipated woman who can manage family and a career at the same time. Julie's character also is weak and unhappy. She's a fairly heavy drinker because this is what makes her help bearing her losses she has faced in life. Julie is a single mother who has lost her own mother much too early in life. Dorothy, therefore, becomes a sort of substitute mother figure for her. Julie sees Dorothy as a role model; she admires her toughness and that she does not settle for anything less than she deserves. Julie does not have such self-esteem. She feels that – as a career woman she has to take what she can get of a man. So she has to put up with a man like Ron, a man who cheats on her, because she thinks no man would accept her the way she is, "[y]ou know a guy who wants a woman who eats at four, is unconscious by nine and works at dawn?" (*Tootsie*, 48:45). Even though she likes to be as assertive as Dorothy, who is not willing to compromise, Julie eventually has to admit to herself, "since I met you [Dorothy], I'm so grateful to have you as a friend. And yet, at the same time, I've never felt lonelier in my whole life" (*Tootsie*, 1:22:06).

In my opinion both female characters impersonate the typical 1980s backlash myths: You need to decide between family and career, you cannot have it all. And if you prefer a career over family you are going to end up alone and

unhappy like Sandy or Julie (see Faludi). The message that seems to be conveyed by their roles is that a woman is only going to be miserable if her main goal is not to get married and have children. This is their natural profession and whoever strays from this path is going to end up being miserable because a woman's natural qualities simply do not allow or enable her to live an independent, happy life.

The female alter ego of Michael is depicted in a completely different light – assertive, strong-willed, and independent. This is highly problematic because he is not successful by promoting female qualities, but by displaying masculine qualities. Whenever Dorothy is treated in a discriminatory way she becomes aggressive and fights back. When trying to call a taxi on the street Dorothy has to use her deep and loud male voice in order to bring one to a halt. Thus, the movie tries to convey that one can only be effective and successful by using male features.

What is more, the film narrative tries to communicate that the feminist endeavor of challenging social inequalities between men and women can only be done by men (cf. Holdstein). The only woman who criticizes the male macho attitudes is Dorothy. But Dorothy in reality is a man; a man who treats women as badly as all the other patriarchs in the movie. Also it is a man (Michael dressed as Dorothy) who tells the women in the story to stand up for themselves and to become more assertive. However, mere verbal encouragement is not enough. A woman needs a man to make her life meaningful. While Sandy is completely erased from the movie towards the end, Julie is finally able to overcome her disorientation and lack of direction in life, because she is about to start a new and fulfilled life with a loving man (Michael) on her side.

Even though *Tootsie* seems to advocate feminist ideas, the movie essentially caters to patriarchal needs and reinstates the dominant order. Women are portrayed in stereotypical ways and objectified by the male gaze. Thus, *Tootsie* can be classified as yet another movie propagating a patriarchal ideology.

3.2.3 An Officer and a Gentleman

The 1982 drama film directed by Taylor Hackford follows the life of Zack Mayo (Richard Gere). After having experienced a tough childhood, he joins the Navy

to become an aviation officer. His lack of motivation and lone wolf character push him into several conflicts with his superior (Louis Gossett Jr.). Mayo and his fellow recruit Sid (David Keith) fall in love with two girls, Paula and Lynette, who work in a factory and who dream of getting married to a Navy pilot to escape their dismal lives. Sid falls in love with Lynette (Lisa Blount), who only loves him for his military career and thus dumps him when he tells her that he quit the program. Sid cannot handle her rejection and commits suicide. The relationship between Mayo and Paula (Debra Winger) experiences its ups and downs due to Mayo's emotional difficulties to commit himself fully, but in the end he overcomes this fear and wants to spend the rest of his life with Paula.

An Officer and a Gentleman was the third highest grossing film in 1982 with a box office success of \$129,795,554²⁷. It won two of the six Oscar nominations: Best Actor in a Supporting Role for Louis Gossett Jr.'s performance of the drill sergeant, and Best Music.

An Officer and a Gentleman is a coming of age story tracing the personal development of the protagonist Zack Mayo from childhood to adulthood. In the very first part the audience learns about his traumatizing childhood experiences and difficult upbringing. After his mother committed suicide (he was the one who found her dead body) he was raised by his alcoholic dad, a Navy officer, on several Navy bases in the Asia-Pacific region where his father introduced Zack to alcohol and prostitutes. His childhood made him become a rough loner who has never learned anything about responsibility or good relationships. His decision to leave his father to enroll in military training was his chance to finally make something out of his miserable life.

Undisciplined and solitary as Mayo was, he often ran into trouble at first. However, the military, most prominently his drill sergeant who becomes somewhat of a substitute father for him (Sharpe 5), taught him the social skills he was lacking turning him not only into an officer but also into a gentleman. Throughout his maturity process Mayo learns what it means to be part of a team, to be respectful, to care for friends, to love and to be loved.

²⁷ Retrieved from
<http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1982&view=releasedate&view2=domestic&sort=gross&order=DESC&p=.htm>

There are several scenes which highlight his passage into manhood. The pivotal scene, however, occurs when Mayo is punished for breaking the honor code. Foley, the drill sergeant, wants him to quit, but Mayo breaks out in tears shouting that he has nowhere else to go. This scene constitutes the major turning point in Mayo's rite of passage because he suddenly realizes that the military is the only family he got and that he needs the support of this group in order to become a better person than his father (cf. Lewis). Therefore, in a later scene he even sacrifices winning the training contest in favor of helping Seeger (the only female officer candidate) to manage to climb over an obstacle, something he did not even think about doing in the previous contest at the beginning of the movie.

The coming of age interpretation is one of the most prominent readings of *An Officer and a Gentleman*. Another possible reading deals with the formation of masculinity in the movie as Jon Lewis tries to show in his analysis *An Officer and a Gentleman: Male bonding and self abuse*. He identifies drinking, physical fitness, physical fights, and enduring punishment as male qualities and male-bonding elements. He furthermore argues that Mayo's "fitness becomes part of his signification as male sex symbol." Thus, not only the female body is objectified (which will be discussed later on), but also the male body. Several scenes depict the male protagonists half or even completely naked as can be seen in fig. 18, 19, 20 and 21.



Fig. 18: Mayo sitting naked on the motel bed.



Fig. 19: Mayo with naked upper body



Fig. 20: Sid displaying his naked torso after having sex with Lynette.



Fig. 21: Mayo displaying his naked torso in a fight with Foley.

The male protagonists are not only objectified by displaying their athletically trained bodies but they also become the female object of desire due to their social standing, prestige and power they resonate by being Navy officers (cf. Lewis).

However, since the goal of this thesis is to gain insights about the depiction of women in the American society, I would now like to shift the focus to a feminist perspective of this movie.

In my opinion, *An Officer and a Gentleman* clearly represents patriarchal values and desires. Most strikingly, it celebrates traditional gender roles. The two main female characters, Paula and Lynette, are 22 years old and work in a factory. Whenever they get time off, they take a ferry to a nearby military station where the Navy trains its officer candidates. Paula's and Lynette's main goal in life is to marry one of these officers and become Navy wives who move with their husbands from military base to military base, care for their children and wait for their men to come home from their missions. The two girls make it their priority to escape the dismal life they lead in that small town where they are forced to work due to their low economic status. Paula once says, "My mum's 39 years old. She still works over at that factory. Every time I look at her, I know exactly what I don't want" (1:08:50). Having a job and thus being able to afford a living is not what these girls desire. Their dream is to quit work, have a husband and a family. They do not want to realize their own potential or be independent; instead they simply want to tie themselves to a man, preferably a Navy pilot, who provides for them and thus elevates their social and economic status. It does not even occur to either of the girls that there is something besides getting married and having children.

The movie reinforces stereotypical gender roles by sharply distinguishing between male and female characteristics. Whereas the male protagonists are best described as rational, powerful, strong, assertive, independent, and adventurous, the women in the film play the roles of the emotional, dependent, supportive caretaker and homemaker. Paula, for example, cries when Mayo has to leave again after she had him over for family dinner. She wants to know where he stands with regard to marriage and children, but he tells her that he does not think about these things at all. Mayo enjoys his independence and without any emotions drives off on his motorcycle. In another scene Paula makes breakfast for Mayo in a motel where they spent the night together. She takes care of him, makes sure he has something to eat and puts flowers on the motel table to make it more homelike and to provide a glimpse into her desired future (see fig. 22).



Fig. 22: Mayo and Paula sitting at the table in a motel room

Paula, furthermore, wants Mayo to open up to her, to talk about his feelings, which is also a stereotypically female quality. On various occasions she confronts him with his emotions, and thus perfectly plays the role of the supporter and caretaker.

The movie not only juxtaposes male with female qualities, but also clearly establishes a contrast between good versus bad. In this regard, men play the good guys who are willing to put their lives at risk (cf. Lewis). Women, on the other hand, are portrayed as dangerous and as the enemy of the elitist male bond. The drill sergeant warns the officer candidates about the local girls who come to the military base on weekends to find a husband:

Let me tell you something about the local girls. Ever since there's been a base here, there's been what you'd call the Puget Sound Debs. The poor girls come across the sound on the ferry every weekend with just one thing in mind, and that's to marry themselves a naval aviator. A Puget Deb will tell you, "Don't you worry about contraceptives. I've got that all taken care of." Don't believe it, sweet pea. A Puget Deb will do anything and say anything to trap you. I know this sounds silly, especially in this so-called modern age, but you scuzzy college pukes should watch out, because they're out there, and you, sweet peas, are the answer to their dream! (Foley 16:41)

Sergeant Foley considers these women to be a threat that destroys the men's lives. It is a fear that is ubiquitous, a fear of a reality that constrains men's independence and patriotic duty for their country. In the end, Foley's prophecy about the girls comes true. Sid, Mayo's friend and fellow recruit, falls victim to Lynette, who dumps him because he quit the officer's training to move back to Oklahoma with her and start a family. Sid cannot endure her rejection and commits suicide. Thus, Lynette becomes the ultimate evil who destroys the male bond between Mayo and Sid (cf. Lewis).

The movie establishes yet another juxtaposition: good woman versus bad woman. Right from the beginning Lynette is portrayed as idle and work-shy who just works because she is forced to in order to afford a living. In the factory, she counts the minutes and seconds until the whistle blows which means that she is free to go 'officer-hunting' for the weekend. When the whistle finally blows she shouts for joy, throws a pack of cardboards in the air and runs out of the factory. Paula, on the other hand, is much more moderate and responsible and makes sure that she leaves her workplace in order.

At a ballroom dance the two girls are officially introduced to Mayo and Sid (see fig. 23).



Fig. 23: Paula and Lynette are introduced to Mayo and Sid at the ball.



Fig. 24: Lynette as femme fatal

As I see it, Lynette represents the archetypal role of the femme fatal. Her blonde hair, red lip stick, red nails, and purple eye shadow are meant to allure a potential husband (see fig. 24). She seduces and manipulates Sid until he completely falls for her. To trap him, Lynette stops using contraceptives and makes Sid believe that she is pregnant. Sid quits the Navy program and plans to propose to Lynette, move back to Oklahoma and become the floor manager at JCPenny. However, Lynette determined to marry a pilot is disappointed by him and rejects his marriage proposal. In doing so, Lynette literally becomes a femme fatal in that she essentially kills Sid because he cannot bear being turned down by the woman he was ready to spend the rest of his life with.

Paula, in contrast – through the witty dialogue she has with Mayo at the ballroom dance – is depicted as more prudent and intelligent than her friend Lynette, who is mostly reduced to her body. Being the illegitimate child of an officer's candidate Paula would never go as far to trap a man by getting pregnant because looking at her mother (married to a man she does not really love and thus leading an unhappy life) she knows about the consequences this might entail. Due to her sincerity and willingness to be subservient to Mayo and his military position Paula not only rises in the character hierarchy of the movie (cf. Lewis), but she is also rewarded for her behavior because as the wife of an officer a woman with working-class origins achieves significant social and economic progress.

The two main female characters perform roles which are purely based on the male protagonists. While the men in the movie are equipped with stories and sub-stories which are independent from the female sex, Paula and Lynette are only depicted in relation to men. About Lynette the audience merely gets to know that she had a brother who died in Vietnam. Other than that her character's story revolves around finding a husband. The spectator learns a bit more about Paula's background and family. But essentially also her background story is exclusively built on a man, namely her real father who was an officer's candidate as well and left her mother who had unsuccessfully tried to trap him with a baby.

In my view, *An Officer and a Gentleman* makes women the subservient objects of desire. There are various scenes in which the spectator's voyeuristic thirst is quenched. Mayo's and Sid's first encounter with the two local girls occurs when they were penalized to do fifty push-ups. In a close-up, the camera captures only the ladies' legs wearing sexy high heels. In the background we see Mayo and Sid staring at the attractive women passing by. Through the close-up and due to the fact that Paula's and Lynette's legs are placed in the foreground, the spectator is put into a voyeuristic male perspective (see fig. 25).



Fig. 25: Paula's and Lynette's legs in high heels

Other scenes that objectify and sexualize the female body occur after the ballroom dance when Sid and Lynette have sex in her car. She slowly unbuttons her dress while Sid is gazing at her doing so (see fig. 26/27). The male gaze once more is projected onto the spectator putting him in a male perspective.



Fig. 26: Lynette unbuttoning her dress – becoming the object of desire



Fig. 27: Sid staring at Lynette unbuttoning her dress

A scene that has exactly the same form and purpose happens later in the movie. Sid and Lynette meet in a motel room to have sex. While the audience sees Sid lying on the bed displaying his naked upper body (see fig. 28), Lynette is put in the foreground and portrayed in sexy red underwear (see fig. 29). Even though both characters reveal their bodies, the spectator – as is Sid – is drawn to look at Lynette, thereby sexualizing her.



Fig. 28: Sid gazing at Lynette



Fig. 29: Lynette being the object of desire

The movie features one other type of woman in the character of Casey Seeger (Lisa Eilbacher), the woman with military career aspirations. Her goal is to become the first female fighter pilot in combat. She shows absolutely no interest in men or marriage. She does not display any stereotypically female qualities; instead she constitutes a rather asexual character. However, the message of the movie insists of the commonly held attitudes that women are not strong enough to keep up with men in the military and that the military is not the right place for a woman. When Seeger is not able to accomplish the obstacle course, Foley verbally attacks her and reveals a highly anti-feminist attitude:

You really want to be a man, Seeger? You one of those girls didn't get enough of daddy's attention 'cos he really wanted a son, Seeger? That's it. That's what'll beat you every time, Seeger – your mental attitude is that of a female. Deep down under all that bullshit you're still thinking like a second-class citizen, aren't you? You can never give orders to men! (27:39).

Later on in the movie they have to do another obstacle course. This time Seeger manages to climb over the wall, but only with the help of Mayo who spurs her on and thus sacrifices his own victory. As I see it, this scene bears two messages: first, women are physically simply not as good as men. Second, one might infer that women impair and diminish men's accomplishments at least when it comes to the military realm. Even though Seeger is depicted in a different light than Lynette and Paula, her portrayal nevertheless fits the typical anti-feminist rhetoric about women in the military.

An Officer and a Gentleman worships the nuclear family and traditional gender roles. Throughout the movie it is evident that women are to adopt the role of the wife and homemaker supporting the male head of the family. The movie presents these roles as natural and as naturally accepted by men and women. Consequently, it does not even offer the slightest glance at a different reality. The movie depicts women as dangerous even deadly when they pursue their own dreams and won't settle for anything less as in the case of Lynette whose dream it is to marry a pilot and who does not compromise on that. Only the woman following the man's lead – as in the case of Paula – is rewarded. Thus, *An Officer and a Gentleman* displays male fears and desires and tries to protect the status quo of a dominant patriarchal order.

4. SELF-HELP LITERATURE

So far, two layers of the social and cultural construct in the United States during the 1980s have been discussed with regard to the roles of women: politics and visual culture. The following chapter is now going to deal with yet another layer that sheds light on the socio-cultural trend of that time. The materials analyzed in this chapter are self-help books that were published in the 1980s.

Self-help literature has received very little consideration in the realm of academics. With a few exceptions such as Starker (1989), Anker (1999), McGee (2005) few scholars have treated the self-help book as a cultural product that offers insights into the desires and needs of a society. In his book *Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books* Steven Starker examines the development of the self-help book from colonial America to the 1980s. In doing so he has reviewed a number of advice manuals and discusses in how far various movements and events such as the Great Depression or the sexual revolution influenced the nature of the self-help book.

Roy Anker explores in *Self-Help and Popular Religion in Early American Culture: An Interpretive Guide* the relationship between religion and the self-help tradition in the United States. In his book spanning from Romanticism, the Gilded Age to the history of Christian Science, he presents notable self-help personalities

(e.g.: Max Weber and the protestant ethic, Benjamin Franklin) and provides insight into various self-help movements that are rooted in religion. Another scholar who has dealt with self-help literature is Micki McGee. In *Self-Help Inc. Makeover Culture in American Life* McGee relates the popularity of the self-help genre to economic anxieties, such as employment uncertainties, stagnant wages etc. The self is more and more placed into the realm of economics in that people are advised to work harder and to improve themselves in order to overcome economic anxieties. She argues that capitalism has entered the most private sphere, the self, which has now more or less become a site of production.

Often ridiculed and dismissed as unworthy of attention, self-help books bear significant power and influence. With their easy accessibility, low prices, and popular subject matters they are very appealing to a mass audience. Self-help manuals can be found in bookstores, as well as on racks next to the check-out at the supermarket. They offer advice on almost any concern, be it money, health, or relationships. Privacy is yet another factor that makes these books so successful. Many people shy away from publicly admitting in therapy that they are having a problem. Therefore, self-help books seem to be an easy and discreet fix.

What is most remarkable and at the same time dangerous about this popular phenomenon is that there are hardly any limitations or regulations as to who is allowed to publish what kind of advice book. The apparent expertise that is presented in such manuals remains unverified and unchecked while entering millions of American households. Steven Starker clearly articulated this predicament in his book *Oracle at the Supermarket*. He states that the self-help book

regularly addresses a mass audience, offers exact directions for solving problems, claims competence in virtually all aspects of human concern, and is relatively free of external evaluation and regulation. It does not seem wise to ignore an agency with characteristics such as these. (Starker 5)

Like the motion picture industry self-help manuals reflect and reinforce social concerns and trends. Bestsellers in this genre seem to point to the most pressing worries in a society. These concerns are then multiplied and hyped by the bestseller marketing machine, because according to the rules of logic, the more

copies an advice manual sells the more significant and real the problem must be. As a consequence, the societal concerns are not only reflected but reinforced or even created in those books.

Americans seem to be highly susceptible to self-help works. But where does this preoccupation with this genre come from? With the foundation of the United States of America a new form of society emerged. The fixed class systems of the 'Old World', i.e. Europe, was abandoned in favor of a more open one where everyone was able to achieve their goals based on their abilities. Poverty and class boundaries could be overcome if one showed ambition, courage, and self-reliance. Thus, the American ideal of the self-made man was created. Calvinist ideals such as preordination or the corruption of the individual were dismissed and forms of Protestantism offering a more positive worldview took shape. The belief that every person was bestowed with a free will with which one could improve his/her own life came to dominate American society. Individualism and the idea of the free will are values that are deeply entrenched in the hearts and minds of the American people. The ability to shape one's own life is a belief shared by millions of Americans, "[h]ence the urging of American popular literature, both early and late, that readers improve, advance, actualize, become better and more successful human beings. It is an essential part of the American Dream" (Starker 170).

The self-help book is deeply rooted in this pronounced American individualism. It creates a feeling of optimism, of having power and being in control. Self-help manuals cushion the perception of feeling helpless and depressed, thus also revealing a religious quality (cf. Starker 170). Religion is meant to alleviate pain and lack of direction by providing inspirational messages. In times where the legitimacy of religion diminishes and people are hesitant to accept advice in a religious context, the "scientific (or pseudoscientific) framework [...] can provide a highly acceptable source of inspiration" (Starker 170).

4.1 HISTORY OF THE SELF-HELP BOOK

The self-help book finds its roots in the realm of religion.²⁸ Its original purpose was to help people attain salvation by providing appropriate advice. These books could be seen as extensions of the church which could be kept at home as a reference book which prescribed the guidelines for a pious life (Starker 37). After the self-help book gained popularity in more secular matters, more and more lay people turned to seek advice from these manuals on issues such as wealth and success. The authors of these books were initially clergymen, but soon more worldly ‘experts’ – people who have already accomplished what other people were striving for – felt the need to share their insights.

During the late nineteenth century – in the midst of pivotal social changes – a new movement called the *New Thought* began to dominate the self-help genre. The philosophy of *New Thought* is based upon the idea of “wish-fulfillment” (Starker 39). Its main message is that if a person strongly desires something, his/her wish will be granted (comparable to positive thinking or self-fulfilling prophecies). In the last decades of the nineteenth century *New Thought* self-help books triumphed over traditional ones because they were simply considered to be more timely and more adequate for the new urban, industrial culture. The defeat of the traditional religious self-help manual is evidence that this literary genre reflects the socio-cultural realities of a specific time displaying people’s desires, concerns, and anxieties (Starker 38).

The advent of scientific psychology and psychoanalysis at the turn of the century reshaped the self-help genre once again and rendered it in format quite similar to those that can be found today (Starker 56). The Great Depression led some people to turn to religion again which accounted for a moderate revival of spiritual guidance books. There was a visible tension between the two dominant philosophies, theology and psychology, a struggle which was mirrored in the self-help books of that time. While the ideas of *New Thought* remained fairly popular, mainstream books which were pushed by new mass marketing attracted yet another mass readership (Starker 56).

²⁸ For a more detailed account on the history of self-help books see Steven Starker’s *Oracle at the Supermarket*.

After the depression had hit the United States, religious self-help authors and advice manuals progressively became more psychological and psychoanalytic. *Peace of Mind* (1946) by Rabbi Joshua L. Liebman can be considered an early “blockbuster” self-help book which was the first religious work to endorse the theories of Sigmund Freud (Heinze 31). His notion of self-acceptance heralded a new cultural concern with the “self” (Starker 73). In times of financial distress, Americans, however, were more preoccupied with matters such as wealth and success. Dale Carnegie, one of the most famous self-help authors, seemed to know exactly what the American people needed to hear at that time. Focusing on the technique of public speaking he provided popular advice to the business community to achieve progress. His book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1937) managed to become one of the all-time bestseller with an estimated sold copies of 6.5 million (Starker 63).

After World War II the baby boom set in, and with that new advice books on how to rear children started to proliferate. Notable in this regard are the works of Dr. Benjamin Spock, pediatrician and psychiatrist. In 1946 he published an advice manual with the title *Baby and Child Care*, which became the number two all-time bestseller after the Bible (Brody 1). Carnegie and Spock both benefitted from the advent of the paperback publication which was responsible for a massive rise in readership figures (Starker 74).

In the 1950s sex became a prevalent issue of the self-help literature. Public debates and media attention on sexuality replaced the traditional family/marriage manuals, which were deemed unsuccessful in their attempts to save the traditional American family. In the 1960s, family, marriage, and especially the housewife were devalued even further. Instead, the single woman enjoying her sexual freedom emerged as an ideal. Independence and self-reliance were considered desirable goals for women. Sexual self-help books were most successful in the 1970s pointing to a significant social change towards more liberal attitudes in the United States. *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex but were Afraid to Ask* (1969) by David Reuben, *The Sensuous Woman* (1969) by “J,” *The Sensuous Man* (1971) by “M,” *Open Marriage* (1972) by Nena and George O’Neill are only a few of the bestselling sexual self-help books of that time. Sexual education was now available

to a wide audience. Sex was promoted in relation to improving one's 'self' not in relation to family or marriage. Thus, the 1970s was a decade celebrating the "supremacy of the 'self'" (Starker 111).

The 1980s revealed yet another turn in the evolution of the self-help book. The preoccupation with the 'self' diminished and economic and physical fitness became paramount. Publications on diets, appearance, and successful careers mushroomed.

Self-help books were greatly responsible for these social transformations that happened throughout history. People who were confused by these radical changes could now resort to inexpensive advice manuals that offered answers to their questions. New movements such as the sexual revolution or feminism were stimulated by the omnipresent self-help book that could be found in supermarkets, chain bookstores, drugstores etc. As a consequence, the self-help genre serves as a great wellspring of insights when studying a social and cultural history.

So far the importance of self-help books reflecting and reinforcing social trends has been established. Since the main goal of this thesis is to find out whether and in how far there has been a backlash against women's rights during the 1980s, I have decided to put my focus on relationship manuals in order to see whether the 1970s' ideal of selfishness has been swept over into the 1980s or whether the notion of the independent strong woman has been diminished. I consider self-help books dealing with relationships/marriage and love a very enlightening source to find out how women in the 1980s were depicted and which roles they were supposed and advised to fulfill. The method that will be employed in the following examination is thematic analysis. This approach involves identifying and analyzing recurrent and common themes/messages that are being conveyed in these self-help manuals. The findings shall then provide information about whether the perfect woman was advised to be more conservative or whether feminist attitudes were cherished and propagated. In the end, this analysis shall paint a clearer picture of how the ideal woman looked like in the 1980s. The following three self-help books are going to be analyzed:

- **Smart Women/Foolish Choices: Finding the Right Men Avoiding the Wrong Ones (1986)**

by Dr. Connell Cowan & Dr. Melvyn Kinder

- **Being a Woman: Fulfilling Your Femininity and Finding Love** (1988)
by Dr. Toni Grant
- **Women Men Love, Women Men Leave: What Makes Him Want to Commit?** (1988)
by Dr. Connell Cowan & Dr. Melvyn Kinder

4.2 ANALYSIS

Since very little academic work has been done on self-help books, the following observations are purely based on my own analysis that I have conducted. Since there may be other perspectives on this matter, my reading does not claim universal validity but only serves as one possible way of looking at this issue.

All three self-help manuals under examination deal with the question of how women eventually succeed in finding a (heterosexual) relationship that lasts. The authors of these books are clinical psychologists who try to give those women appropriate advice to find a fulfilling and lasting love relationship. *Smart Women Foolish Choices* and *Women Men Love, Women Men leave* are both written by male psychologists Dr. Connell Cowan and Dr. Melvyn Kinder, who both ran private practices in Los Angeles, California²⁹. Their aim is to make women understand the male point of view when it comes to love. The third book *Being a Woman* was written by Dr. Toni Grant. In 1975 she hosted a radio show called “Dr. Toni Grant Program” on ABC Radio, a psychology call-in show. Her program attracted many followers but was discontinued in 1988. Since then she had several other appearances on radio shows throughout the United States.

The target audience of these manuals is women, a fact which can already be inferred from the titles and especially the subtitles of the books: *Women Men Love, Women Men Leave: What Makes **Him** Want to Commit?* and *Smart Woman Foolish Choices: Finding the Right **Men** Avoiding the Wrong Ones*. In both cases it is obvious that the book addresses women who are trying to find men. A similar inference can be made with the third book *Being A Woman: Fulfilling Your Femininity and Finding*

²⁹ It is unknown if they are still practicing.

Love. Also this title paired with its subtitle is clearly meant to attract women to buy this book. It again deals with the issue of finding the right man and it already hints at the very conservative advice that is presented in this book, since it already implies that a woman can only find love if she embraces her (stereotypically) female qualities. Also the introductions of *Smart Women Foolish Choices* and *Being a Woman* explicitly mention the target audience of their books. In *Smart Women* the authors write “Who is the “smart women” to whom we address this book?” (Cowan & Kinder, xv). Toni Grant, author of *Being a Woman*, also reveals to whom the book is addressed in that she speaks of her work as a book for women, “This is a book about love, as are many women’s books” (ix).

Having clarified the basics of authorship and audience the thematic analysis can be conducted. After having studied the books, four major themes could be identified as being consistent in all three advice manuals.

1. Marriage as the ultimate goal
2. Women as the problem
3. Blaming feminism
4. Independence and self-reliance as obstacles for women in their search for love/happiness.

MARRIAGE AS THE ULTIMATE GOAL

The self-help books under examination all base their advice on one assumption: women desire to find a husband. After more than a decade of selfishness and self-reliance women finally return to more traditional attitudes and start to make love a priority again, for they realized that a career and independence is not fulfilling enough. “Success in career without success in the personal realm can feel like a shallow victory” (Grant 139). From their therapy sessions the psychologists conclude that marriage has become the number one goal for most women. This assumption, however, must be seriously questioned because

according to several studies conducted in the 1980s a majority of women claimed to be very happy without getting married.³⁰

According to the advice manuals, few women consider being single and autonomous a worthwhile goal in the 1980s. Rather, single women are seen as pitiful and incomplete (cf. Grant 65). In *Being a Woman*, the single woman is depicted as an insecure and scared little girl yearning for a man to protect her, “Frequently, in the dead of night, she awakens in a panic, the frightened little girl within crying out for comfort and reassurance” (Grant 67).

Despite significant social changes that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, women still have the unconscious desire to be taken care of – according to the self-help books. Even though the feminist movement has trained women to insist on independence and self-reliance, “[m]any women, no matter how strong or competent, have a secret need to be rescued” (Cowan & Kinder, *Smart Women* 37). Independence oftentimes unconsciously triggers anxieties in women. Thus, they seek for a man in order to mitigate these fears.

In their books, the three psychologists present opinions and wishes which are frequently revealed and articulated in their sessions. These most prominently include desires of quitting jobs, getting married and having children:

- “I’d like to fall in love, get married, and have babies...all those things that sounded so cowardly and provincial a couple of years ago” (Cowan & Kinder, *Smart Women* 14).
- “Mary began to have a persistent and delightful fantasy about quitting work and really being a full-time mother” (14).
- “I’m confused. I spent five years getting my master’s and I’d like to continue to pursue my career. But I’m 34 now and I realize I haven’t had a decent relationship with a man in six years. [...] It’s not that I don’t like my work but there has got to be something more” (14).

These comments suggest that what women really want is marriage and children, not being successful at work or pursuing a career.

³⁰ The 1985 Virginia Slims poll found that 70% of women claimed to be happy without getting married (cf. Faludi 31). A 1986 national survey revealed that more and more women preferred to be single: 90% of the never-married women stated “the reason they haven’t [married] is that they haven’t wanted to yet” (Faludi 31).

The self-help books furthermore communicate that women only work due to economic necessity not because they enjoy it. Thus, many women conceive the desire to stop working once they have met the right man. While being on their own, women experience that work is exhausting and burdensome. Therefore, they enjoy the feeling of being able to ease the pressure and relax when living with a man who is able to provide financial security (cf. Cowan & Kinder, *Smart Women* 51, 55). Cowan and Kinder argue that feminist ideals of autonomy and independence oftentimes result in economic and personal misery. Thus, marriage is seen as providing a financial safety net for the woman (17). According to Cowan and Kinder, women want their ideal partner to be superior to them, especially with regard to income, since no matter how emancipated women are they secretly count on their men to provide for them (148). Thus, the two psychologists imply that all the feminist talk of self-reliance and independence is mere superficial and that deep within, i.e. naturally, women select their partner based on very traditional values and qualities. In other words, they suggest that nature cannot be beat by nurture (i.e. feminism).

In *Women Men Love, Women Men Leave* traditional values such as marriage are defended and cherished:

Traditional values were developed for sound reasons. They were not constructed simply to sanctify the marriage or as moralistic dos and don'ts to limit personal freedoms. Rather, they were created empirically over time and reflect behaviors that are love-sustaining, not love-depleting. (284)

Marriage is portrayed as a desirable goal that seems to be the only path to happiness for women. More and more women are said to realize this reality and therefore strive to find a man to get married. In *Being a Woman* Toni Grant urges that the American society must return to the time when marriage was considered a career for women, "a type of work worthy of her time, attention, and energy" (148). In fact, she advises her female readers to abandon any career aspirations in order to put their undivided focus on their relationships and the home.

WOMEN AS THE PROBLEM

It seems to be a common pattern in all three self-help books that if a woman cannot find or is dumped by a man it is her own fault. The books thereby suggest that something must be wrong with these women otherwise they would not have any difficulties in that matter. They are therefore advised to improve their relationships and their own personalities by constantly scrutinizing themselves. The self-help books identify several relationship issues for women and subsequently put the blame on these very women for having maneuvered themselves into these awful situations. Women are being told that they act against their best interests. The authors of the self-help books in question call this “self-defeating” behavior – a buzz word that is frequently used in these manuals:

- “In this way it is possible for a woman to see her own fears with greater perspective and see how self-defeating some of her behavior may be” (Cowan & Kinder, *Smart Women* 186).
- “We find, so often, that the more intelligent and sophisticated the woman, *the more self-defeating and foolish her choices and her patterns of behavior with romantic partners* (Cowan & Kinder, *Smart Women* 6).
- “[...] avoid self-defeating illusions or behaviors” (Cowan & Kinder, *Women Men Love* 202)

This so-called self-defeating behavior – according to the psychologists – most prominently involves holding much too high expectations when it comes to men. The women are charged with having an unrealistic ideal of a man in mind, which they desire. As a consequence it is the women’s fault if she does not find a fulfilling relationship when nothing is good enough for her: “Instead of concluding that our wishes may be unrealistic, we start to generate more expectations or complain more vocally about the ones we had” (Cowan & Kinder, *Women Men Love* 60). Woman who expect too much from their male partners will eventually be abandoned by them because the men will start to resent these women. “Repeated criticism will make him feel he’s “not enough”, and will erode his feelings of being

valued and accepted” (Cowan & Kinder, *Women Men Love* 77). In the self-help manuals it is not specified what exaggerated expectations indeed are. The message that comes across, however, is that women who are looking for a relationship ideally should not have *any* demands or standards at best because then their self-defeating behavior may not come to the fore. The psychologists’ advice is since “[e]xpectation is the enemy of intimacy” (Cowan & Kinder, *Smart Women* 201) women should rather let “go of romantic fantasies” (Cowan & Kinder, *Women Men Love* 65) entirely, i.e. they are advised to settle for something less than what they want. According to Cowan and Kinder it is not that there are too few men out there, but the problem are women who rule out most of the available men by being too critical when it comes to selecting the right one. This strict selection process leaves only a few possible matches left which are, of course, very hard to find (cf. Cowan & Kinder, *Smart Women* 147).

Not only do women have too high expectations, they also put too much pressure on their partners. Men experience enough pressure in their workplace, thus women who are sensitive to this and do not add to this already existing external demands are preferred by men. On the other hand, women who do not respect this reality run the risk of alienating their partners and oftentimes end up being alone (cf. Cowan & Kinder, *Women Men Love* 73). The advice books purport that it is unnatural for women to have great demands or at least it is against their best interests, as mentioned before. Men’s demands and wishes, on the other hand, are natural and should be respected, not changed, because women’s demands on men can seriously damage the male self-esteem (cf. Cowan & Kinder, *Women Men Love* 63).

Another important issue that is critical in relationships is a couple’s sex life. Here, it is again the woman who is most often blamed if something does not go as planned. Either the relationship is endangered because the woman is sexually too aggressive or because she lacks passion. If a woman has had several sexual experiences before, her current partner might be put off by that ‘promiscuity’ (cf. Cowan & Kinder, *Woman Men Love* 144). Similarly, if a women is

overly graphic and explicit in describing what she wants sexually or who too aggressively initiates sexual contact with a man may run the risk of arousing

anxiety, not passion. Men are drawn to women who express interest and receptivity, yet men still feel some need to be in control. (Cowan & Kinder, *Women Men Love* 227)

If the sex life has become rather unsatisfying, Toni Grant suggests that the woman would be well advised to scrutinize herself and question her recent behavior. “Has there been undue bickering and nagging? Have you remembered to compliment and admire him? Does he still feel *appreciated* by you as a man, as your hero?” (Grant 153). These psychologists state that it is of utmost importance to let the men be in control of the relationship. The woman shall contribute to this state by boosting his self-esteem and making him feel like a champion.

The self-help books try to communicate to women that they can only find a man if they cater to the male needs and neglect their own needs and desires. The causes for unsuccessful relationships are most often attributed to a women’s ‘wrong’ and ‘off-putting’ behavior – be it having demands, expectations, or certain wishes that they articulate to their partners. Women, therefore, are portrayed as (unconsciously) sabotaging their own relationships because they do not seem to know the tools how to build a love relationship that lasts.

The book furthermore manifests that a failed relationship is hardly ever the man’s fault because men simply cannot fulfill all those demands women have because of their biological or culturally acquired disposition. For example, men are naturally unromantic. Forcing him to show more romantic gestures will only push him away. The smart thing to do is to “[i]nterpret his diminished need to be romantic as a compliment” (Cowan & Kinder, *Smart Women* 251). This means that men cannot help their behavior whereas women can and must adapt to the men’s nature. Consequently, it is the women’s fault if they do not abide by nature’s rule.

BLAMING FEMINISM

All three self-help books consider the feminist movement to be the root of all problems. Instead of making the lives of women easier, they argue, feminism has created unexpected negative side effects and made promises that could not be fulfilled. In *Being a Woman* Toni Grant is especially harsh in her criticism by

exposing ten “big lies” that were propagated by the feminist movement (Grant 2 et seq):

1. **Having it all:** According to Grant it is impossible for a woman to have a career and a family at the same time. “[T]he woman who focuses her energy into shaping a brilliant career has that much less left over to improve her relationships, to support her man, and to raise her children” (2).
2. **Androgyny:** For Grant the belief that there is no fundamental difference between women and men is yet another lie that feminism has tried to manifest in women’s minds. The dichotomization of women and men is generally a common feature in all three self-help books (cf. Cowan & Kinder, *Women Men Love* 19, Cowan & Kinder, *Smart Women* 13). Women are often depicted as having a much more complex personality and opposing needs to those of men (cf. Grant xvii).
3. **Desirability is enhanced by accomplishment:** According to Grant, feminism made women believe that the more they achieve the more attractive they become to men. Such a mindset, however, leads to “competition with men – competition that was appropriate in the business world, but inappropriate in the realm of the personal relationships” (Grant 3). American women did not expect that being educated may constitute an obstacle for finding love (cf. Grant 3). Thus, *Being a Woman* advises women not to pursue higher education or a career.
4. **The myth of one’s “unrealized potential”:** In Grant’s opinion, feminism has created the misbelief that everybody is endowed with high potential that needs to be fully exploited (cf. Grant 4). From this statement, one can infer that women oftentimes simply do not have any potential to achieve higher aspirations. Therefore, they should not strive for anything outside the marriage/family.
5. **Sexual sameness:** the erroneous belief that men and women have sexual equality. This deceit resulted in increased promiscuity on the part of women, which led to a loss of true femininity (cf. Grant 5). Grant basically calls for a more conservative sexual behavior on the part of women, not on the part of men, though.

6. **The denial of maternity:** In Grant's view, the concept of motherhood has been significantly devalued by feminism.
7. **To be "feminine" is to be weak:** Grant argues that stereotypically feminine qualities such as softness, kindness, empathy, or vulnerability are perceived as weak and deficient by feminists. However, these feelings, she claims, successfully attract men for they spark men's instincts to protect their women (5).
8. **Doing is better than being:** Feminism holds that women need to be more active. They need to be more expressive instead of receptive, i.e. women need to stop listening and be more articulate and express their desires. According to Grant, this behavior is likely to destroy a relationship because women thereby ignore their traditional feminine qualities of silence and receptivity. This scares off men and pushes them away (cf. 6).
9. **The myth of self-sufficiency:** Feminism manipulates women into thinking they do not need men for finding happiness. This, however, is yet another misbelief for which women have to pay, if they follow this feminist advice (cf. Grant 6).
10. **Women would enjoy the feminization of men:** Grant insists that women certainly do not desire such a thing. Most women want a strong man who they can rely on, so the women can "surrender into being a woman" (7) again. After all, this "posture [...] requires less energy and less control" (7) and less energy and less control is exactly what a true woman wants deep within.

Being a Woman asserts that these "ten lies" seriously mislead the American woman. Grant considers these myths as delusional ideas which have had profoundly negative effects on women.

Feminism promoted self-sufficiency and independence for women. These values, however, pose a serious threat to finding a relationship, because the more independent a woman is the less she is willing to compromise (Grant 22). As a consequence men became the scapegoats for everything. Liberated women started to engage themselves in "male-bashing" as Toni Grant calls it (37), an activity which

became women's favorite pastime throughout the feminist movement. Men were held responsible for suffocating women and limiting their potential. This anger and outrage again serves as an obstacle when trying to find a relationship, because men are afraid of angry women (Cowan and Kinder, *Smart Women* 85). "Because of the deep, nurturing connection men crave, anger is even more frightening coming from a woman than from another man" (85). Therefore, men are put off and avoid women with such qualities.

In *Being a Woman* Grant argues that feminist women simply "deny the reality of their gender" (76). They hold the belief that contraception and the possibility of having an abortion liberated them from the constraints of biology. However, many women soon came to realize that this denial of reality bore even greater difficulties resulting in the loss of love and happiness. Women – encouraged by feminist ideas – started to ignore their true desires and acted against their own nature.

In *Smart Women Foolish Choices* women are portrayed as victims of the feminist movement (cf. 12). They were tricked into believing that they can have it all and that the perfect Prince Charming is only waiting somewhere to support her in achieving a happy life (cf. 7).

Autonomy and independence are furthermore considered to be not as fulfilling as promised by feminism:

An unfortunate consequence of feminism was, in our opinion, that it created a myth among women that the apex of self-realization could be achieved only through autonomy, independence, and career. Finding a mate and having a family were secondary goals. In recent years, many women have discovered that, with few exceptions, work is hard, stressful, and not totally fulfilling over the long haul. (Cowan & Kinder, *Smart Women* 16)

Achieving success and independence is oftentimes followed by loneliness, financial problems, and remorse (cf. Cowan & Kinder, *Smart Women* 17). A woman valuing education and striving for these qualities again displays this so-called self-defeating behavior mentioned earlier. Deluded by the feminist promises she abandons traditional values of partnership and family while aiming for power and control.

Thus, all three self-help books trace back the root for such self-defeating behavior and the eventual unhappiness to feminism because it is responsible for developing a fear of interdependencies in relationships among women. Among feminists, having to rely on a man is seen as weakness or manipulation to trap women (cf. Cowan and Kinder, *Women Men Love* 94).

What is more, the feminist movement is charged with creating insecurity among men. The sexual aggressiveness on the part of women has threatened many men for they increasingly experience performance anxiety (cf. Cowan and Kinder, *Smart Women* 70). Furthermore, feminism required men to open up emotionally and thus previous suppressed and hidden male anxieties came to the fore (cf. 70). These male fears and insecurities, of course, affect women because men become increasingly cautious of and alienated by the female sex for women have made them more vulnerable (cf. 70).

There is an additional hardship that arose for men due to the feminist movement. Since women basically entered all previously exclusively male work and personal areas, men have come to find it increasingly difficult to maintain their identities in this era of social change (cf. Cowan and Kinder, *Men Women Love* 189). Thus, the message these self-help books try to convey is that feminism is responsible not only for the misery of many American women, but also for the growing male anxieties and insecurities. In other words, feminism is charged with threatening the well-being of the American society.

INDEPENDENCE AND SELF-RELIANCE AS OBSTACLES FOR WOMEN IN THEIR SEARCH FOR LOVE/HAPPINESS.

The self-help books assert that independence or self-reliance makes women unhappy. In their pursuit of a career, they are depicted as being under constant pressure and overworked. In *Being a Woman* it is argued that the modern woman “is so performance-oriented that she is in a perpetual state of tension and exhaustion” (15). Her life equals a battlefield which does not leave any space for true love. Now that women have managed to escape the restraints of home and family, their lives did not see any improvements because now they are chained to

their work or career goals instead, which seem to have far more severe consequences than their former 'careers' as housewives and mothers, "The suppression of natural feminine feeling and serenity has taken its toll on modern woman, who is today feeling the pressure as never before and who yearns for release from this new oppression" (Grant 52). The repercussions for these career women are manifold including the obvious loss of love but also drug or food addictions are common consequences (cf. Grant 52). The self-help manuals thus hold that professional women are likely to fall not only psychologically but also physiologically ill when making their career a priority.

Power and control are paramount to the modern American woman according to the psychologists. These, however, are qualities that contribute to a woman's ever growing unhappiness. Her developed competitiveness which she successfully employs in her business life violates her love interests for it pushes away potential partners, because men are drawn to receptive women, who are sensitive to their needs instead of trying to control them (cf. Grant 39). "Men hate feeling controlled" and besides that "[n]o woman wants to really control, for when a man ends up becoming too easily dominated, she feels anxious and alone" (Cowan & Kinder, *Women Men Love* 112). The books try to convey that the emphasis on independence and career development has sparked anxieties among women including performance anxieties and fears of dependency. The liberated woman fears being dependent on a man, but at the same time the ways to avoid such dependency, i.e. affording her own living by pursuing a career, make her even more unhappy because it excludes her from finding love, which is of utmost importance to women, or as Toni Grant puts it in *Being a Woman*, "[i]t is second nature to women to put love first" (11). Since it is love and not success in the business world women desire according to these self-help manuals, the psychologists advise women to let go of these exaggerated and unnatural career aspirations and let the man be in control, for this is the only way to achieve happiness for women. By letting the man take the lead, women can let go of their recently acquired competitiveness and unnatural addiction for power and concentrate on their femininity once again because

without genuine feminine composure, receptivity, or serenity, these women conjure up images of a devouring, consuming monster, a Lady Macbeth completely divorced from her feminine feeling, a woman for whom power is more important than love. Not a very pretty picture. (Grant 40)

Having entered the business world women developed manly qualities that proved unfavorable when seeking a relationship (cf. Grant). Lusting after power is one of them. Traditionally, it was the man who craved for power and control. Nowadays, women have adopted these qualities and not only apply them at work but also in their personal love lives, which has created great difficulties for those women. Feeling the need to exert power over their men, women pose demands and hold high expectations – something that alienates the male sex because they see their self-esteem endangered (cf. Grant).

Most importantly men see their self-esteem crumbling in the bedroom. The sexual revolution has brought about many changes towards sexual attitudes among women. Women have come to be much more explicit and aggressive with regard to sex. They have taken over yet another previously exclusively male area. Thereby, women oftentimes intimidate men for they are afraid they might not be able to live up to the women's sexual expectations (cf. Cowan & Kinder, *Women Men Love* 95, Grant 70). This performance anxiety is heightened when a woman is very experienced in the sexual realm. Thus, men predominantly prefer women with little experience. Women, furthermore, should not be too explicit and too forward when it comes to her sexual wishes. Since it has always been the man's duty to perform, women are not to initiate sex but let the man lead and be in control. Men have oftentimes been portrayed as enjoying sexually aggressive women. However, "when men say they want a woman who is sexually aggressive, what they usually mean is that they want a woman who will be exquisitely responsive and passionate when they make known their desire to make love" (Cowan & Kinder, *Smart Woman* 76). This 'insight' into the male psyche provided by the self-help manuals can be considered as a call to sexual conservatism. The woman should not enjoy her sexual freedom for this means intruding too much into the male sphere. Men's role with regard to sexuality is too vital to be jeopardized by the liberated woman, because oftentimes a man's identity is based upon his sexual performance. In other words,

having sex serves as the “validation of masculinity or manhood” (Cowan & Kinder, *Smart Women* 71). Women are depicted as naturally being much more adaptable in matters of sex. Therefore, it is their duty to reassert their men and be sensitive and receptive to male sexual needs instead of taking care of their own desires which is considered to be too manly and repellent.

Women are said to have lost their femininity. They began cherishing values such as aggressiveness and assertiveness and completely “overlooked feminine values of relatedness and morality” (Grant 42). If women are serious about finding love, they need to rediscover their suppressed femininity. In order to do so, they need to relinquish other aspects which they have recently developed in the course of the feminist movement. But since these newly acquired and – above all – manly qualities are said to be unnatural for women, it does not require much effort on the part of women to get rid of them (cf. Grant 48). Grant provides ample advice for how to regain one’s femininity and what to avoid in this process. One of her recommendations for women is to refrain from being too expressive in a relationship. For instance, a true woman must not show her anger because this makes her unattractive to men:

Fighting with men should be avoided not just to preserve male pride, but also to preserve female dignity. There is nothing less attractive or uninviting than the frenzied or crazed woman, the proverbial fishwife who uses the power of her tongue instead of the power of her femininity. Fighting makes a woman ugly to men, and ugly to herself. (Grant 151)

The woman is furthermore advised to generally “suppress her newfound capacity for verbal expression” (Grant 57) while having a relationship. In other words, a woman should not speak but remain silent when being with a man. In case she really has to express herself, she does that in a soft and appealing way (Grant 57). Grant considers it crucial for women to maintain their own private world. They should not share every single thought with their male partners because men prefer areas of privacy and silence in a woman (cf. 57, 71, 255) for “in her silence [men] experience no barrier to her femininity, to the part of her that is quintessential woman” (57).

If a woman wants to find a man she must emphasize the differences between him and her. *Being a Woman* suggests that this is best done by displaying a woman's femininity which stands in contrast to his masculinity and thereby a woman is able to reinforce a man's feelings of potency (cf. Grant 65). When highlighting her femininity a woman "does not attempt to demonstrate her self-sufficiency [...] by picking up checks, opening her own doors, or "making arrangements" of any kind. "All you have to do is show up and look beautiful" (Grant 65). In this regard, all three psychologists advise women to put on make-up and pay attention to her clothing for these aspects underline a women's sensuality:

[H]er clothing is oriented toward form, not function, and is designed to show off her softness and fragility as opposed to man's hardness and strength. Skirts and dresses, soft fabric, lace pastel colors, bows, ribbons, and other female paraphernalia are useful in creating this contrast between men and women. (Grant 65)

Similarly, in *Smart Women Foolish Choices* Cowen and Kinder lament the demise of courtship, because elements such as outward appearance or feminine behavior are still of vital importance in order to arouse a man's passion (240).

By employing her femininity women encourage their men to "channel their sexual energies, and inspire them to greatness (Grant 45). In this respect, Toni Grant's advice strongly reminds of George Gilder whose work served as the ideological basis for Ronald Reagan's presidency. Gilder similarly claims that a men's sexual energy must be restrained by familial duty (see chapter 2.2). *Being a Woman* therefore sees a woman's main responsibilities in increasing the man's self esteem and sense of masculinity. Women furthermore are encouraged to "adapt herself to a man in such a way as to fulfill his view and expectation of her" (Grant 63). A true women's goal is not to be independent, self-sufficient or to have a career, according to Grant. A true woman's goal is to eventually become the man's woman.

Considering the themes that have just been analyzed it becomes evident that the purpose of these self-help books is to push women back into highly conservative roles that were prevalent prior to the feminist movement. The manuals' main message is that the greatest desire for women is to find a husband. If

they fail to do so, it is the woman who must be blamed. The roots for her failing and subsequent unhappiness lie in the feminist movement which inspired women to develop qualities that are highly counterproductive and self-defeating when it comes to seeking a relationship (e.g. striving for a career, developing a manly behavior). Women are advised to be silent and look pretty in order to successfully maintain their relationship. They must not stand up for themselves, or pursue their own desires. If they want to find love they must act as mere accessories. Essentially, the self-help books argue for a patriarchal renaissance in which men play the leading roles and women the supporting cast.

5. CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this thesis three questions have been posed:

1. Was there a conservative upsurge that influenced gender representations in the American society in the 1980s?
2. In what ways became antifeminism evident in the 1980s?
3. How were gender stereotypes displayed?

In order to answer these questions I have tried to incorporate various perspectives in order to be able to provide a more substantive picture. These perspectives included politics, visual culture, and print media. With regard to politics three specific policies have been analyzed from a female perspective: social welfare cuts, abortion rights, and the Equal Rights Amendment. The analysis showed that during the presidency of Ronald Reagan the social welfare sector has experienced dramatic cutbacks. Since women benefitted from the expansion of government services in the previous decades in terms of employment opportunities, and since the majority of welfare recipients are female, women bore the brunt of these cutbacks. After the rise of the *New Right*, the professional woman was seen as the enemy trying to destroy the foundation of the American society: the traditional patriarchal family. In this respect, the welfare state was considered by conservatives as the cause for why so many women aspired to work outside the home. The welfare programs allowed women to stand on their own feet. Consequently, they were able to make

independent and free decisions about having a family or pursuing a career. Until then the economic status of a woman was mostly dependent on her marital status. *New Right* advocates saw the role of the father as the head of the household and breadwinner endangered. Thus, conservative forces tried to reverse the recent feminist developments in that they bereaved women of governmental aid without which women were much more dependent on men.

A similar conservative reversal could be observed with regard to abortion and reproductive rights. The liberal discourse of the 1960s and 1970s culminating in the legalization of abortion in the Supreme Court ruling of *Roe vs. Wade* steadily lost ground in the 1980s. A fierce opposition – among them President Reagan and *New Right* advocates – was formed determined to repeal this legalization. Even though this goal has not been achieved Reagan's government put in place several legislative obstacles that limited access to legal abortions. The conservative forces in the United States were once more threatened by the growing independence of women. In this regard, reproductive rights are crucial because being able to control women's reproductive rights means being in control of their lives as a whole because a woman's fertility is the key to other life-decisions, be they personal or work-related.

The defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment was yet another major sign for a conservative upsurge in the 1980s. After enjoying great support in the 1960s and 1970s the ratification deadline had not been met by 1982. The reasons are unclear, but sexual stereotyping, aggressive rhetoric against feminism, and the exploitation of some well-nourished fears among women certainly contributed to the defeat. The failure of the ERA can be seen as the rejection of the core feminist idea that men and women shall be equal in all matters.

The second perspective which I incorporated in my thesis was that of visual media. My analysis of the movies *Fatal Attraction*, *Tootsie*, and *An Officer and a Gentleman* unmistakably revealed a conservative agenda on the part of Hollywood and its filmmakers. The movies establish a strong juxtaposition between the good woman and the bad woman. The ideal woman puts the home and family above everything else and, most importantly, lets the man be in control. The bad woman, on the other hand, is depicted as independent, selfish, even posing a threat to

individuals but also to the American society as a whole. The movies, furthermore, employ and reinforce gender stereotypes. Women are oftentimes portrayed as emotional, weak, naïve and passive. These qualities render them mere accessories for the male protagonists who drive the narrative forward whereas the female roles remain marginal.

The patriarchal power of the film making industry becomes evident when looking at the formal shooting and editing techniques. Most of the time, women are objectified by the three cinematic looks proposed by Laura Mulvey: the camera, the spectator, and the character in the movie. Their physical appearance of the female characters and their positioning in shots contribute to this objectification.

At first *Fatal Attraction* and *Tootsie* appear to adopt a feminist point of view in that they display a strong female character or they address female issues. In this respect it can be argued that these movies can be considered to be *New Historicist* because they try to present the perspective of an underrepresented group, i.e. women (cf. Waller). However, this endeavor to break with old conventions proved to be insincere. In *Fatal Attraction* the strong female character is turned into a psychotic who needs to be killed in the end. This turning point also reintroduces the objectification of the female body which was interrupted in the first half of the movie. In *Tootsie*, the *New Historicist* perspective was similarly superficial. From the beginning it was strongly undermined by the male shooting and editing techniques employed to objectify the female characters. These seeming attempts to give a voice to disenfranchised groups makes these movies even more patriarchal in my mind. The movies propagate that it is impossible to change the existing societal order for it is too dominant (or too natural?) to overcome. Therefore, these two movies abandon the *New Historicist* approach and powerfully reinforce the patriarchal order.

The last layer or perspective that has been included in this thesis was self-help literature. The examination of three relationship advice manuals again proved my hypothesis that the 1980s experienced a backlash which promoted conservative female values. Women are depicted as unhappy because even though they are successful in their careers it is not fulfilling enough for them in the long run. What a woman secretly desires is a man on whom she can lean and who is able to provide

for her. They argue in favor of a more conservative female behavior because the modern ideas spread by the feminist movement only made women miserable. The advice that is provided by these manuals is similarly conservative. Women need to become more feminine to attract men. They should put on make-up, wear dresses, and speak softly. Putting pressure on the man or having expectations of him must be avoided under all circumstances as well as displaying a behavior that is too manly, i.e. being (sexually) aggressive, competitive, self-reliant, expressive. Women need to let the man be in control and encourage him so he can achieve his goals in the business world. With millions of sold copies these books had an extraordinary large (female) readership that was advised to abandon the feminist ideas of independence and self-sufficiency in favor of rediscovering their femininity and traditional feminine values.

The findings of the various analyses conducted in this thesis clearly reveal a conservative upsurge in the 1980s which had a tremendous impact on the role of women in the United States. The legislature as well as the media industry jumped on the bandwagon promoting a return to traditional values. Feminism and the independent woman became the scapegoats for all social and economic problems. In the political realm women's advances were fended off by legislative measures such as the cutbacks of the federal welfare programs or the stark opposition towards abortion and reproductive rights. The media industry, i.e. Hollywood, and the popular psychology sector contributed to the backlash in that it propagated a strong dichotomization between the good woman versus the bad woman. Mothers and housewives abandoning all career aspirations were regarded as the ideal, for they showed their true femininity and were successfully able to support the continuation of the American family and the well-being of the American economy, because it is the devoted wife who can inspire her husband to greatness. Emancipated women, on the other hand, were depicted as embittered and unhappy, but above all, they were perceived as a great threat to the traditional patriarchal family and thus a threat to society in general. This thesis therefore concludes that the United States of the 1980s indeed experienced a backlash in women's rights.

5.1 LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This thesis has a number of limitations that need to be mentioned here. The greatest limitation constitutes the vast amount of material that could be used for research. My thesis only incorporates a very small number of existing data. In order to investigate this topic more deeply it would be necessary to look at a greater number of policies, films, and literature. However, this would have gone beyond the scope of this thesis. What is more, the work at hand could have employed various other materials besides policies, movies, and popular psychology books. Possible texts would have been magazines, TV-shows, or the establishments of charities, which would provide additional insight into the matter. The fact that there is such a multitude of cultural texts suitable for such an analysis leaves much room for further investigation.

An area for further research would be to look at the role of women since the 1980s. It would be interesting whether there is evidence of a more recent backlash or whether the tide has turned once again in favor of women's progress.

Another alternative approach may focus on the role of women in different countries. Are these backlashes a purely American phenomenon? Is it a western phenomenon? Are there similarities to other countries? Did backlashes occur at the same time in other countries?

Yet another possibility would be to apply a similar approach to other underrepresented minorities. It would be interesting to see whether or not these wave-like developments can be identified among African-Americans or Native Americans, for example.

This thesis has provided valuable information about the societal processes that are used to advance or constrain women's rights. Especially with its integrative approach, the work at hand highlights the complex relations of cultural products and their impact on our society. In this regard, I think, my thesis has contributed to offer new perspectives and to stimulate new research possibilities.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ERA Equal Rights Amendment

Fig. Figure

AFDC Aid to Families with Dependent Children

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ABSTRACT

Looking at the history of women's rights in the United States of America it becomes evident that every step forward was followed by a serious backlash. The most recent backlash was said to have happened in the 1980s during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. This thesis investigates whether and in how far there was an actual conservative backlash against women in American society at that particular time. For this purpose, three different cultural texts, the Reagan administration's policies, Hollywood blockbuster movies, and self-help books, are analyzed in order to shed light on the social trend of the 1980s. The analysis showed that women were pushed back into more traditional roles such as homemakers and mothers. Reagan's policies directly attacked women's economic well-being by cutting back on welfare programs. This made women more dependent on men and their incomes. The movie industry and the popular psychology branch both reinforced stereotypical and traditional depictions of women and demonized the independent career-oriented woman. Thus, this thesis concludes that the 1980s indeed did experience a significant backlash to women's advancement.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Betrachtet man die Geschichte der Frauenrechte in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika, stellt sich heraus, dass jedem Schritt vorwärts ein bedeutender Rückschlag folgte. Wissenschaftler argumentieren, dass sich der jüngste dieser Rückschläge in den 1980ern während der Präsidentschaft Ronald Reagans ereignet hätte. In dieser Diplomarbeit wird untersucht, ob es zu dieser Zeit tatsächlich einen konservativen Rückschlag für Frauen in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft gab, und wie stark dessen Auswirkung war. Zu diesem Zweck werden drei unterschiedliche *kulturelle Produkte* analysiert, um über den sozialen Trend in den 1980ern Aufschluss zu geben: Die Politik der Reagan-Regierung, Hollywood Blockbusterfilme und Selbsthilfebücher. Die Analyse zeigt, dass Frauen in traditionellere Rollen wie etwa in die der Hausfrau und Mutter gedrängt wurden. Die Politik Reagans attackierte das finanzielle Wohlergehen der Frauen, in dem Sozialhilfeprogramme gekürzt wurden. Diese Kürzungen hatten zur Folge, dass Frauen wieder stärker von Männern und deren Einkommen abhängig gemacht wurden. Die Filmindustrie und die Populärpsychologie untermauerten stereotypische und traditionelle Darstellungen von Frauen. Gleichzeitig dämonisierten diese die unabhängige, karriere-orientierte Frau. Daher kommt diese Diplomarbeit zu dem Schluss, dass es in den 1980er Jahren tatsächlich einen Rückschlag gegen die Rechte der Frauen in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft gab.

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