

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The female liberation movement in the 1920s

In *Chicago* (2002), film watchers are brought back to the Chicago of the 1920s period to observe lives of women who struggle for their liberation. Therefore, the liberation movement of American women in the 1920s should be reviewed as a means to understand and analyze the film.

The period of the 1920s in the US encapsulates an emergence of a new and confident image of modern womanhood. Sheila Ruth (1998) regards the 1920s as the first wave of the twentieth century of feminine liberation movements in North America. In 1920s, women received the right to vote by the Nineteenth Amendment, they were, to some extent, recognized as equals by men in political, professional, and social status.

In regard to political movement, the suffragist Alice Paul and her co-worker of the radical Congressional Union introduced the Equal Rights Amendment and lobbied for its passage. However, it is argued that although in 1920 women gained the right at the polls, the women's movement simply died because women had exhausted themselves in the fight for suffrage. It is claimed that the political power of women was later diminished because the suffrage movement was not a united movement. (Ruth, 1998: 488-489) Many suffrage activists established various organizations with

their own political agenda, moved into different areas of activity, and presented their values through different models. (Freeman, 1995) Thus, the liberation movement in 1920's culminated in the winning of the vote but exhausted the new feminist women, because it was not a centralized movement.

In addition, during the 1920s, America's economic system underwent various changes, as women had more participation in it. Due to the depressing economic situation after the First World War, many American families needed to replace the incomes of the family fathers lost in the battlefield. Therefore, more women had to accept a job, and move outside the home into the public workplace. Many women did clerical jobs in unprecedented numbers. Professional organizations such as Business and Professional Women (BPW) supported women in gaining better educational and business opportunities. This gave them a new self-confidence in the trade union movement (Ruth, 1998: 489). However, in the following years, there was increasing discrimination against the campaigns. From 1925 to 1945 medical schools limited quotas on female admissions to only five percent. Columbia and Harvard law schools also refused to consider women applicants. (Ruth, 1998: 499)

The Roaring Twenties gave a new definition to womanhood. The newly developing social sciences had strong effects on women's lifestyles. Freud's theories of female sexuality were a reference to give support to positive attitudes toward women's freedom in their social and sexual behaviors. (Ruth, 1998: 489) A new image of woman was born. During this time period, women asked men out. They began smoking, drinking and dancing in public. The feminine liberation movement also had

a strong effect on women's fashions. A more masculine look became popular, including flattened breasts and hips, and bobbed hair. Such trends were popularized by actresses Louise Brooks, Leatrice Joy and Colleen Moore in the early 1920s. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roaring_Twenties) According to the female liberation in the 1920s, the new meaning of womanhood was defined as women who gained more freedom politically, financially, sexually and psychologically. The changing role of women during that time encouraged them to struggle for their own identity, self-decision and self-determination.

2.2 Film as Discourse

To understand what brought success to the film *Chicago* (2002), it is essential to see the film as a medium of communication and analyze it as a discourse. Discourse has been developed and studied in various fields, including linguistics, psychology, literature, sociology, cultural studies and communication. In this paper, film discourse refers to how the language of filmmaking, including verbal and non-verbal techniques as well as musicals and expressionistic mechanisms, are made to influence the viewer and inscribe ideologies in the film.

Film is one of the ways a society talks to itself and exchanges information with other cultures. Turner (2001) mentions film is equal to a language in terms of its act of constructing meaning through its codes e.g. cinematography and sound editing. Besides, he simply clarifies that the influence of language in leading to normative expectations and human's behaviors is the same influence that film has. Graeme

Turner (2001) describes the role of language: “[w]hat language does is to construct, not label, reality for us. We cannot think without language...we acquire our sense of personal identity through language, and we internalize the value systems which structure our lives through language. We cannot step ‘outside’ language in order to produce a set of our own meanings which are totally independent of the cultural system”(53). Similarly, film is one of the powerfully constructed codes affecting culture in a way that it can, “...[p]roduce the behaviors, the practices, the institutions and the meanings which constitute our social existence” (Turner, 2001:52).

Functioning as a language, film generates its meaning through systems, especially photographic systems. As noted by John Kavin (1987), “[p]hotography itself, on which the medium of cinema principally depends, directs the viewer in two opposite directions ... in order to have a reality fragment to leave alone or to distort...once several photographs are arranged into a structure, that structure reveals a mystery of its own, for it begins to display some of the attributes of a language...” (54). Therefore, it is clear that, film is more complicated than just being a genre of entertainment. It is even an artistic way of communication which has its own pictorial systems to convey its intended messages. Whereas reality seems to exist in the cinematic world, oblivious to an audience, the reality presented on the screen is constructed from the filmmaker’s perspective.

Since the filmmakers communicate their powerful ideas through visual images, certain significant film techniques should be considered to facilitate and illustrate the film analysis. Basic film language is the frame or photographed image. Hence, the

camera is a tool for filmmakers to create various perspectives. Rose (1972) demonstrates that shots and angles are intentionally chosen to create different perceptions for audiences. Some commonly used terms include camera shots and angles. A shot is what is seen on the screen from the time the camera is turned on until it is turned off while an angle is where the camera is placed in relation to what is being filmed. Apart from shots and angles, other conventions such as colors, lighting, sounds and editing also serve to construct meanings and perspectives in film.

In *Chicago* (2002) in particular, the use of signs or semiotics, Expressionism and musicals filming style also bring success to the film. Therefore, it will be helpful to review such techniques further as a means to understand the film.

2.3 Gaze and Feminism in film

In analyzing visual culture, the “gaze” in feminist film theory is used as a means to demonstrate imbalance of power between male and female characters in the film.

The concept of “gaze” derives from the article, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey (1990), a feminist film theorist. Mulvey (1990) uses psychoanalysis to understand the enchantment of Hollywood cinema. Mulvey (1990) refers to Freud’s notion of “scopophilia”, which is a fundamental erotic drive of human beings. Such a notion is described as the pleasure involved in looking at other people’s bodies as sexual objects. And, the fascination of Hollywood films can be explained through this notion (30).

Mulvey (1990) argues that the desire to look can be aroused by integrating structures of voyeurism and narcissism into the story and the image. “Voyeuristic” visual pleasure is created through the process of objectification of female characters whereas “narcissistic” visual pleasure is derived from self-identification with the figure in the ideal image on the screen (30-32). In addition, Mulvey (1990) distinguishes the characteristics of males and females by using a scale based on activity and passivity. This binary opposition is described saying that in a patriarchal society “...pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (33). The male character is normally portrayed as active and powerful. The narrative structure of traditional cinema always focuses on the male protagonist and his perspective. In contrast, the female character is regarded as passive and powerless. Women can only be the object of desire for men. Such sexual difference is invented in order to establish male heroism (33-34). In this sense, the action of possessing a gaze can be identified as belonging to males, technically called the “male gaze”. The form of gaze can be doubled “...as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (33).

Moreover, according to Mulvey (1990), in classical cinema, there are two treatments for male “castration anxiety”. Since female appearance reminds the male subject of the lack of a penis, the threat of castration can be solved either in narrative structure or through “fetishism”. To relieve the “castration anxiety” in the narrative sense, the female character has to be found guilty. Consequently, punishment or salvation are classic responses of the women’s “guilt”. It can be witnessed that the

film story always offers two women's traditional endings which are death or marriage. Thus, Mulvey (1990) argues that such endings have associations with "sadism". (35) For "fetishism", the fetishistic look involves " [t]he substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. This builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. The erotic instinct is focused on the look alone (35)" As said by Mulvey (1990), making a fetish of the woman changes her from a dangerous figure into a satisfying object of perfect beauty. Hence, the image of "fetish" leads to overvaluation of the female image and to the craze of the female movie star. Marilyn Monroe, the sex symbol, is an example of a female star made into a fetish. Fetishism in film makes the fantasized female figure become real but fails to represent the truth of the woman outside the patriarchal norm. Therefore, the notion of "the male gaze" is shorthand for the analysis of complex mechanisms in cinema, including structures like voyeurism, narcissism and fetishism. These concepts help to understand how Hollywood cinema has been specially designed to fulfill the male desire.

2.4 Sign or Semiotic

Another way to understand and analyze film is through semiotics or the study of signs. The concept of signs has been discussed among philosophers and linguists for many years. Some of them have conducted very interesting discussions about signs and the creation of meaning from the use of signs. Kavin (1987) notes that sign is a

relationship between “signifier” and “signified”. The signifier is the physical form of the sign such as the image, sound, word or photograph whereas the signified is the mental concept or idea referred to. The meaning of each sign can be read on at least two levels which are “denotative” and “connotative” meanings. (Turner, 2001: 54)

The denotative meaning is a literal level of meaning that contains a fixed relationship between the word and the object. On the other hand, the connotative meaning is interpretative and depends on personal cultural experience. For instance, the word “apple” on the denotative level refers to a round fruit with smooth green, yellow, or red skin and firm white flesh. However, on the connotative level, a picture of an apple in western mind-set can be interpreted as desire, passion, sin, seduction, or New York (Wongbiasaj, 2001:56). In addition, according to Louise Giannetti (1993), film uses sign to communicate and establish thoughts or attitudes of the film maker (434). It is also possible that with in a single frame, many signs can be seen though most audiences normally focus on the dominant one. For example, in one frame, a low-angle shot can encode the subject as a figure of power, just as a white hat can encode a cowboy as a hero and a jump cut can act as a sign of discontinuity. However, the audiences may focus on a white cowboy hat only and perceive that the man wearing the hat is a hero. Hence, in analyzing the film, semiotics is an important principle that can't be overlooked since it is a practical tool that influences film watcher's perceptions.

2.5 Expressionism in film

Expressionism is a style of filmmaking that helps analyze visual language in the film *Chicago* (2002). Generally, Expressionism is a term used to describe works of art and literature that use symbols and exaggeration to represent emotions rather than representing psychical reality. In film, Joseph Boggs (1996) defines the Expressionism as “[a] dramatic or cinematic technique that attempts to present the inner reality of a character...there is usually a distortion or exaggeration of normal perception to let the audience know that it is experiencing a character’s innermost feelings” (457). Therefore, Expressionism is another means that films use to unveil a deeper dimension.

Expressionism is a powerful and effective means to communicate with an audience. Originating in Germany, the German expressionist cinema from 1919 to 1933 released some very successful films that were able to compete with the American cinema. Expressionism in filmmaking developed in Germany ,especially Berlin, during the 1920s. After World War One (1919), Germany lost the war and the people were damaged financially and emotionally. As quoted from a famous expressionist director, Fritz Lang, “[g]ermany entered a period of unrest and confusion, a period of hysteric despair and unbridled vice full of the excesses of an inflation-ridden country”(Ziesing, 2006). Consequently, the people needed a cheap way to express their emotions. Constructing and filming realism is expensive, so the filmmakers of a German studio developed a method of compensating for the lack of high budgets by using symbols and sets in a theatrical, exaggerated way to insert

mood and mindset of characters into a movie. The German Expressionist cinema from 1919 to 1933 developed a new movie style that revealed a few widely regarded films. Expressionist became a genre and had an influence through style on classic horror, film noir, science fiction, and contemporary films.

Expressionists use certain techniques to create certain effects on audiences, such as lights and shadows. The first Expressionist film is *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), directed by Robert Wiene. The plot dealt with a madman's paranoid world which was crooked and irregular. The film was made by using set designs with wildly non-realistic and geometrically absurd characteristics, along with designs painted on walls and floors to represent lights, shadows, and objects. Based on *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), David Hudson (2006) featured important elements of German Expressionist film which primarily consist of chiaroscuro lighting, surrealistic settings, and symbolic signs.

First of all, chiaroscuro lighting is often used in expressionist films. German Expressionism concentrated on a heavy use of light and dark contrasts in order to infuse the images of madness and the monstrousness. In Expressionist films, shadows, in fact, can take on a threatening presence of their own. For instances, the monster's shadow ascending the stairs in *Nosferatu* (1922), the shadow preceding the murderer in *M* (1930) or the pursuit and capture of Maria in *Metropolis* (1926) can create fear even without a glimpse of the actual characters themselves.



The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919)



Nosferatu (1922)

Surrealistic settings are also important when it comes to Expressionism film. Dreamlike atmosphere, primarily urban settings are used to let the audience explore the criminal underworld and the complex architectural and compositional possibilities offered. Expressionist filmmakers normally set their scenes by stairways and railings, mirrors and reflecting windows. They favor playing with stripes, angles and geometric forms sliced from the heavy contrasts between lights and shadows. In addition, the use of symbolic signs is primary. Emphasis on symbolic shapes, forms, patterns, colours and body language can create a tendency towards mental images in Expressionism films. For example, white colour represents death or purity, nakedness connotes freedom or vulnerability and red signifies passion or blood. Expressionism is then not only a means used in a work of art, but it is a convention adopted by many Western film producers since this technique greatly affects audience's perceptions and understandings.

2.6 Musicals

Since *Chicago* (2002) was originally adapted from a Broadway musical and many movie scenes contain faithful choreographies and songs from the Broadway show, it is essential to study the development of musicals as a means to understand the film.

John Kenrick (2003) basically defined a musical as “[a] stage, television or film production utilizing popular-style songs and dialogue to either tell a story and / or showcase the talents of varied performers.” Action and dialogue in musicals is not only fundamentally involved with singing but also commonly interspersed with dancing. In film, the musical film is a film genre in which several songs sung by the characters are interwoven into the narrative. Musical films characteristically contain elements reminiscent of musical theater since they are cinematic forms that emphasize and showcase intense songs and dances as part of the film narrative in a significant way. The songs are usually used to advance the plot or develop the film's characters. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_film)

Gary Daum (1996) mentioned that musicals were gradually changed from plotless origins to having outstanding plots. The American musical theatre was developed from a background of pre-civil war minstrel shows. The traveling shows were performed by white actors with blackface for mocking plantation life. In the late 1800's there were high demands of these entertainments so that the shows were performed in halls and theatres. A certain street in New York known as Broadway

became the focal point of these theatres. Although the shows gave audiences pleasure and amusement, this genre is performed without any plot or continuity. For many years, the main point of most shows was to showcase a musical score or a major star. As a result, the text of most Broadway musicals consisted of a series of scenes, jokes and sight gags designed to get from song to song. Subsequently, after World War I and before World War II, American musical theatre production teams were more concerned about strong and outstanding narrative structures that flowed smoothly with melodic performances on the stage. By the 1940s, American musical theater reached its most complete and mature state. Many shows with outstanding plots and impressive musicals convention were created. One of the most outstanding stage musicals is *Oklahoma* (1943) by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein. Apart from its distinctly American theme, this show made dance become a very strong element in story telling. The plot dealt with long ago and faraway lands, the settling of the territory of Oklahoma. Its theme was mainly about cowboys. An important section of the story was told using classical ballet. It worked beautifully and changed the theatrical medium. The team of Rodgers and Hammerstein is inseparable with the modern development of musical theatre and they gave it some of its finest works such as *South Pacific* (1949), and *The King and I* (1951). (<http://www.gprep.org>)

According to Engel (1975) and Kenrick (2003), the key elements of musicals are libretto and musical scores. These two forms contain their own unique conventions and are interwoven to tell a musicals story effectively.

Libretto is considered to be one of the most dramatically important elements of a musical. In terms of operas and musical plays, a libretto refers to a written version of a play or other dramatic composition which is used in preparing for a performance. (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/libretto>) The common term of libretto is also called “the book”. Engel (1975) describes that the more the libretto works together with the disjointed medley of songs, the more cohesive a story is invented (38). Besides libretto, musicals are a separate art form, which are outstanding regarding musical scores. The musical score refers to performances connected with music such as singing and dancing. Different types of song are also important factors to give a show sense of audible organization.

Chicago (2002) uniquely charms audiences with its fascinating musical style. Engel (1975) notes, “[m]usic can instantly create an atmosphere, set of mood, or convey a spirit that would otherwise require a great many words to do. Sometimes a single musical number can do the work of an entire scene of a play” (38). In this sense, melodic convention helps audiences to feel they belong to the created situations easily. Engel (1975) further suggests that to present characters in musical shows will set more powerful and immediate impact upon audiences than to let audiences judge each character by his or her costumes and outer appearances. (42)

Therefore, in analyzing *Chicago* (2002), musical convention is an important technique that should be concerned about. It is because this melodic style can effectively and immediately influence the mind-set of the film watchers.

2.7 Background of the film *Chicago* (2002)

Chicago (2002) is a movie adaptation of a Broadway musical from 1975. The choreographer director named Bob Fosse was famous and unique in his sexy cynicism. The story is all about merry murderesses and tabloid fame. As said by John Kenrick, the author & Managing Director of website www.Musicals101.com, “This concept musical cast a cynical, merciless spotlight on social hypocrisy and media-based celebrity. Fosse helped shape the libretto and staged it in a vaudeville format.” Therefore, *Chicago* (2002) became one of the most brilliant and biting Broadway musicals ever produced. Unfortunately, *Chicago* (2002) was overshadowed by the success of the other Broadway musicals. It took a 1996 Broadway revival and a 2002 film version by the director, Rob Marshall to bring this masterwork the attention it deserved. Then, *Chicago* (2002) was one the most influential musicals that inspired the rebirth of the Hollywood musicals because the movie enchants audiences with fascinating songs and dances. It got many awards and nominations for excellent cinematography and film productions; it was the Winner of six Academy Awards (R) (2003) including Best Picture, and Best Actress. (www.amazon.com and www.Musicals101.com).

The film is set in the Roaring '20s. The 1920s, a prosperous time period is known by a few names, such as the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age, the Age of Wonderful Nonsense, and the Age of Intolerance. There are many different and interesting things that occurred during the 1920s in America. In 1919, the 18th Amendment passed the act of Prohibition, which made consumption and even possession of alcohol illegal.

The general intent of this Amendment was to lower crime and improves the general quality of life. But, the opposite happened. Crime increased as people rebelled against not being able to drink alcohol. Numerous illegal bars called speak easies were created to provide drinks for the people that required alcoholic beverages. This time period also included bathtub gin and other versions of homemade alcohol. Gangsters profited during this decade by smuggling alcohol and dealing with illegal businesses. Al Capone was one of these gangsters who made \$105 million a year on smuggling alcohol into the United States.

(<http://www.geocities.com/MotorCity/Lane/6341/History/Roaring20s.html>)

In the meantime, there were several changes to women's status. Women received the right to vote by the 19th Amendment, but they still had little interest in politics. During this time period, women asked guys out. They wore the new flapper style of clothing and were more assertive. They took the same jobs as men and fought for laws against inequality. *Chicago* (2002) seems to highlight this interesting phenomenon by presenting similar atmosphere in which the lives of women were liberated. However, when examining it through film techniques, *Chicago* (2002)

doesn't seem to portray such female liberation. In contrast, oppression of women can be witnessed through certain evidence in the film. Therefore, the film *Chicago* (2002)

is worth investigating in terms of the changing role of women in that period through the film's techniques and musical conventions to see whether it portrays female liberation or female oppression.