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## **Emma, Elle & Elizabeth The Contemporary 'Woman's Film' as Aesthetic Modality of Experience**

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Since the mid-1990s, a new type of female characters has been dominating the media landscape: Both on TV and on cinema screens, we see white, heterosexual, young single women who are financially independent, professionally successful and sexually self-determined while mastering the ups and downs of everyday life.<sup>1</sup> It all seems to have started on TV with *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Carrie Bradshaw* (1998-2004). But remember that equally self-confident women are also presented on big screen, for example in *Clueless* (1995) or *Legally Blonde* (2001), or in the film adaptation of *Sex and the City* (2008, 2010). Almost naturally, these independent women make an appearance in chick flicks<sup>2</sup> – productions that are (like the classic Woman's Film of the 1930s and 1940s) supposedly appealing to a female audience. But this type of the independent woman also leaps into recent literary film adaptations such as *Emma* (1996) or *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), or history films such as *Elizabeth* (1998), *Elizabeth – The Golden Age* (2007) or *Marie Antoinette* (2006).<sup>3</sup> At first glance, the protagonists of these films could not be more different: for example, Elle of *Legally Blonde* attends a Californian high school while Marie Antoinette resides in a French palace of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, these films represent entirely different genres. Yet, what ties them all together is their presentation of female subjectivity as something that constitutes the particular experience of genre. Femininity becomes an aesthetic experience, that is the individual's perception of herself and her relation to the world as genre specific experience of experience<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Vgl. dazu z.B. Smith 2008, oder Lenzhofer 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Zur Vielfalt der Definitionen und Klassifizierungen s. z.B. Ferriss/Young 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Je nach Fragestellung anderer Forschungsprojekte werden die von mir als Chick Flicks bezeichneten Filme auch als Girlie Movies – als Ausdruck einer neuen Konsum und Lust orientierten Mädchen- und Frauenkultur und eines radikalen Abschieds von der Frauenbewegung der 1970er Jahre – oder als Teen Movies definiert, vgl. z.B. Brecht 2004. Jane Austen-Verfilmungen werden wiederum weitestgehend allein in Bezug auf die Romanvorlagen diskutiert, z.B. Troost/Greenfield 1998, oder ebenfalls dem Chick Flick zugeordnet, vgl. z.B. Karen 2004. Filme wie *Clueless* basieren jedoch ebenfalls auf Romanen und könnten daher auch als Literaturverfilmung bezeichnet werden. Jane Austen-Verfilmungen wiederum haben immer auch eine historische Dimension. Genredimensionen und -zuschreibungen variieren und verändern sich: die Perspektive produziert das Forschungsobjekt. Die von mir genannten Genres sind als heuristische Kategorien zu verstehen, um eine bestimmte Art vermeintlich äußerst unterschiedlicher Filme zusammen zu denken und in Bezug auf die Erfahrungsmodalität zu analysieren.

<sup>4</sup> Ästhetische Erfahrung meint hier die Erfahrung einer Erfahrung bzw. wahrgenommene Wahrnehmung – angelehnt an Vivan Sobchacks Definition des Films als „an expression of experience by experience“ (Sobchack 1992, S. 3), die weder mit einer diegetischen Figur zu verknüpfen noch mit Alltagserfahrung gleichzusetzen ist und die eine Reflexivität auf Empfindungsebene generiert, welche nicht einem zum sinnlichen Erleben distanzierenden Bewusstsein gegenübersteht. Zur filmischen Erfahrung vgl. auch Morsch 2010.

In the following, I will analyze this gender-specific concept of subjectivity in what I call the contemporary ‘woman’s film’. For this, I will define the above mentioned female characters as aesthetic conceptions of audiovisual figures. This means, I will take a closer look at the experiences produced by the films in relation to social attributions such as ‘female’, ‘emancipatory’, or ‘feminist’. When I talk about these female figures, I mainly draw on two theoretical concepts. First, I borrow Stanley Cavell’s definition of the screen *type* (Cavell 1979), and second, I employ genre-theoretic approaches to aesthetic modalities of experience as suggested by Linda Williams, Christen Gledhill and Hermann Kappelhoff (Williams 1998; Gledhill 2000; Kappelhoff 2004).<sup>5</sup> The above-mentioned genres – the chick flick, the literary adaptation, and the history film –, serve as symptomatic research field for my dissertation. Today, I will discuss only one of them – the film *Legally Blonde* as an example of the chick flick.

I believe that a genre-theoretic approach calls us to contextualize each media production within the frame of its transmedial as well as historic particularities. Only on this condition can questions relating to contemporary representations and productions of gender difference be discussed. As Christine Gledhill has pointed out, by analysing the demarcations and shiftings of genres, their generation and transformation, the cultural and aesthetic conditions of their emergence can be examined. Here can we find the productive power of genre theoretic approaches (Gledhill 2000, 222). Following Gledhill, I define genre as an experience that is connected to a specific sense of community, a shared ground of subjectivity, and thus a common relation to the world.<sup>6</sup> In other words: genre is defined as „culturally conditioned modality of perception and aesthetic articulation“ (ebd., S. 227). Genres are processual and inconclusive and hence only to be recognised in its historicity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Diese drei Bezugspunkte bilden ebenfalls die entscheidenden Analyseparameter zur Klassifizierung des Genrekinos im Forschungsprojekt *Die Politik des Ästhetischen im westeuropäischen Kino* des Sonderforschungsbereichs 626 *Ästhetische Erfahrung im Zeichen der Entgrenzung der Künste* an der Freien Universität Berlin, an das dieser Beitrag als Teil eines Promotionsvorhabens zum gegenwärtigen Woman’s Film anschließt.

<sup>6</sup> This aesthetic modality of experience is generated, activated/actualised, affirmed and negotiated by each respective genre.

<sup>7</sup> Gerade die jüngere Forschung zum Genrekino setzt sich mit der dynamischen Prozesshaftigkeit im historisch-kulturellen Kontext auseinander, vgl. z.B. Hickethier 2003 und insbesondere den kanonischen Text zum historischen Genrebewusstsein von Jörg Schweinitz (1994). Vor allem das Verhältnis zwischen Genre und Gender wird in diesem Zusammenhang diskutiert, vgl. z.B. Braidt 2008; Liebrand/Steiner 2004; Gledhill 2004, Schneider 2001.

Bachtin hebt ebenfalls den historisch-kulturellen Kontext hervor, die unabgeschlossene zeitgenössische Wirklichkeit, welche die jeweiligen *Chronotopoi* bestimmt und durch diese zum Ausdruck gebracht wird. Bislang wurde Bachtin vor allem in Bezug auf seine Konzepte der Dialogizität und des Karnevals gelesen. Der *Chronotopos* hat bisher weniger Aufmerksamkeit gefunden, vgl. Frank/Mahlke 2008. In der filmwissenschaftlichen Genreforschung spielt er kaum eine Rolle. Gledhill bezieht sich beispielsweise in ihren genretheoretischen Überlegungen allein auf das Dialogizitäts-Konzept Bachtins, s. u.a. Gledhill 2000. Braidt spricht vor allem das Karnevals-Konzept Bachtins an, s. Braidt 2008. Und Roberta Garrett erwähnt in ihrem

*Legally Blonde*, produced in 2001 and directed by Robert Luketic, is about a young woman called Elle Woods from California, who is dumped by her boyfriend because he considers her too blonde. Warner Huntington III, bound to be a political leader, believes he needs a 'Jackie' and no 'Marilyn' for his career. To convince him that she is indeed the right one, Elle decides to transform into such a 'Jackie' type and applies for Harvard Law School, which Warner also plans to attend. Her chances to get into the school are low because her main interest is in the fashion field – not exactly a proper fit for an ivy league university. The jury nevertheless accepts her application, unlike Warner's. He only gets in because his father calls the university's headmaster. In the course of the film, Elle faces multiple obstacles at Harvard, most of which are due to her appearance – she is simply considered too blonde, respectively pink, by her fellow students and professors. In the end, as Hollywood fashion has it, she becomes a celebrated lawyer in a spectacular murder case. She rejects Warner, who finally agrees to marry her, and falls in love with a colleague who appreciated her appearance right from the beginning.

So much for the story. How then is Elle's emancipatory mode conceptualised on the cinematic level? What exactly constitutes the aesthetic experience of *Legally Blonde*, which is classified by some as the peak of postfeminism? Let's take a closer look at the first two scenes, the introduction of the protagonist and the shopping scene in the boutique.

>> **film scene** (0:00:09-0:03:56)

Waves of blonde hair and the pop song *Perfect Day* constitute what I call the *image space*, the aesthetic dimension of the film<sup>8</sup>. By way of parallel montage, the film presents this close-up brushing of hair in turn with a young blonde, mini-skirted woman on a bike. While the camera follows the woman on the bike on her way through the campus, it also brushes a group of

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Buch *Postmodalityrn chick flicks* (2007) zwar den Chronotopos, jedoch ohne die Kategorie näher zu erläutern, geschweige denn produktiv zu wenden.

<sup>8</sup> Mit *Bildraum* ist hier eine ästhetische Dimension des kinematographischen Bildes gemeint, welche nach Hermann Kappelhoff das zeitliche Wahrnehmungsempfinden der Zuschauerin umfasst. Die Dimension des Handlungsraums, in der Bewegungen entsprechend der alltäglichen Wahrnehmungswelt in einem gegebenen, repräsentativen Raum vollzogen werden, und die Dimension räumlicher Ausdrucksfigurationen, sich durch Schnitt, Montage oder Kadrange vollziehende Darstellungsformen, bestimmen die affektive Dimension des Bildraums. Damit ist weder die empirische, rein subjektive Rezeption noch die kognitive Leistung der Zuschauerin angesprochen, sondern ein an die Phänomenologie angelehntes medientheoretisches Konzept des audiovisuellen Bildes, vgl. Kappelhoff 2006. So geht es, wie bereits erwähnt, auch hier um die mit der Inszenierung verbundene ästhetische Erfahrungsmodalität, um die Ausdrucksbewegung der Filme, und nicht um das Verhältnis zwischen dem Woman's Film und seinem sozialen Publikum oder um die Diskussion von Zuschauerinnenpositionen.

Zu Versuchen, die Definition von Gender sowie die filmtextliche Positionierung und die empirische Erfahrung gleichsam in den Blick zu bekommen vgl. z.B. Bechdolf 1999 und Braidt 2008. Obgleich der sehr interessanten Diskussion um die Problematik geschlechtsspezifischer Medienproduktion und -rezeption, kommt in der Studie von Bechdolf zum ‚doing gender‘-Prozess des Musikfernsehens meiner Meinung nach die ästhetische Analyse zu kurz. Und in der Analyse geschlechtsspezifischer Wahrnehmung von Braidt wird die Produktivität einer empirischen Methode zwar erläutert, aber nicht erprobt.

half-naked young men. Later, the young woman passes the gateway to the student's hall. A letter with the glittery-pink inscription "Elle", is passed from one woman to the next – like at a relay – to be signed. In doing so, the viewer peeks into different rooms of female disciplinary rituals: we walk through the gym, pass practicing cheerleaders, then we go upstairs, see the collective beauty care in the steamy bathroom, and arrive at the door to Elle's room. In between, fragmented images of further body modulations and female attributes are cut in, for instance, the shaving of a leg, polishing of finger nails, a pile of *Cosmopolitan*, a Homecoming Queen banner, and perfect pedicured feet in plateau shoes with hearts. There are shades of pink and blonde wherever you look. With every additional shot, like a gigantic puzzle, the image of the protagonist is created until, finally, the blonde woman par excellence emerges. However, before we recognize Reese Witherspoon's face, it remains uncertain who is actually starring in the film. The introductory scene leaves us guessing who that blonde woman really is; it could be the bicyclist who we are following around, or the woman passing around the letter or the two friends who deliver it to Elle's door, where a dog picks it up to finally hand it to Elle.

Instead of presenting a clear protagonist, the film shows a variation of blonde women: only at the very end of the scene do all these variations accumulate to the single figure of Elle. However, the camera does not linger on her image. Elle too seems to be only another messenger in this scene; this is at least what her first communicative gesture indicates: Elle turns her head and blows someone a kiss. The camera then pans to a photograph of Warner, Elle's lover and possible future husband. The point, of course, is an ironic one. It can be defined retrospectively as quite a sexist gesture, which underlines the audiovisual construction of gender difference by pointing out the previously seen actions of female performance as teleological acts for the pleasure of a male counterpart.<sup>9</sup>

>> **film scene** (0:03:57-0:05:02)

While the previously watched introduction scene gives us an image space, here, the viewer is presented with an *action space*, the representative dimension of the film<sup>10</sup>. On the narrative level, Elle and her friends are looking for an engagement dress. At first, Elle Woods embodies the cliché of the "dumb blonde with Daddy's plastic", by performing a marriage-crazy perfectly styled woman who is thrilled about the offered dress. This cliché is however quickly

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<sup>9</sup> Vielen Dank an Sarah Greifenstein für diesen Hinweis.

<sup>10</sup> Mit *Handlungsraum* ist hier ein repräsentativer Raum gemeint, in dem Bewegungen entsprechend der alltäglichen Wahrnehmung von Objekten oder Personen vollzogen werden. Diese Dimension des kinematographischen Bildes ist allerdings nicht zu verwechseln mit einer abbildenden Funktion des Films. Vgl. Kappelhoff 2006 und Fußnote 12.

turned upside down when Elle reveals herself as a fashion expert who knows that the dress is entirely “last year.”

During these first two scenes, the viewer’s idea of Elle changes from a stereotypical blonde to an individual figure. Elle is now what Cavell calls a screen *type*, that is, an individual which embodies a social role in a specific way (vgl. Cavell 1979, 33). Elle represents the social role of a woman, whose individuality, however, is clearly expressed. In contrast, a social stereotype is marked by its social role alone, such as the mammy or the entertainer, that we often find in other genre films. As Cavell says, the *type* is not defined by “similarities with other members of that type” but by his “striking separateness from other people” (vgl. ibd.). Cavell argues that the generation of *types* is the possibility of the medium cinema to create meaning. Closely connected to the play of the actors, Cavell gives some examples, such as „the Public Enemy”, “Gary Cooper” “the Other Woman“ and „the Moll“ (ibd., 36). With the formation of *types*, he believes, film cycles develop, which in turn constitute genres as meaning creating media.<sup>11</sup> For me, this opens up an interesting perspective regarding the new female type in the contemporary woman’s film.

The definition of the *type* enables to grasp the protagonist’s tension between the stereotypical images and the individual characteristics. In contrast, her surrounding social network, remains to a great extent as a fixed constellation of different stereotypes (Elle’s father holds a glass of Martini until the end!). On the one hand, Elle permanently escapes the image of the stereotypical blonde by surprising the spectatrice; on the other, she argues and acts with a logic which is labeled as female, when she underlines her knowledge in fashion and declares pink as her philosophy of life. Exactly this tension produces the aesthetic experience of *Legally Blonde*. It’s not the figure which changes during the film, but the attitude of the spectatrice viewer. Elle appears quasi as embodied prejudice. The film creates a modality of female experience, which the spectatrice understands or rather feels. This genre experience helps the viewers (regardless of their actual gender) to experience themselves as *a* woman and not *the* woman.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the film deconstructs the idea of pure representation. Elle – and for that matter, all other female characters – does not embody *every* blonde. She rather reveals the very constructedness of the concept of blonde in the first place.

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<sup>11</sup> Explizit erwähnt Cavell den Zusammenhang zum Genre in dem Kapitel zum Typus in einem einzigen Satz. „For a cycle is a genre (prison movies, Civil War movies, horror movies, etc.); and a genre is a medium.” Cavell 1979, S. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Vgl. dazu auch de Lauretis (1987 [1985]).