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"1930s Hollywood Film Fashion; Transgressing 1930s Class and Social Barriers through Fashion"

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by

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In dedication to my father, Juan Gomez, and the memory of my mother, Teresa Gomez.
Mom, thank you for always reading to me.
August 25, 1964 – November 29, 2018

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to answer research questions such as: what role do 1930s Hollywood films, and fashion in film play in our understanding of 1930s America? Of the values important to America in the 1930s? What is the significance of the rags to riches film motif in regards to 1930s America? The thesis closely examines the film case studies, *Baby Face* (1933), *Stella Dallas* (1937), and *The Bride Wore Red* (1937), which depict the way in which the women characters utilize fashion to challenge and subvert gendered, racial, and class-based social barriers; tensions between women's freedom to self-fashion and self-identify themselves and notions about the 1930s ideal femininity. The case study *Stella Dallas,* demonstrates Stella's downfall is rooted not in her inability to adapt into high society, but in her relentless determination to fashion her own identity and version of motherhood. Stella's punishment simultaneously reveals embedded class expectations and class as a visual performance. The fashions in these films thus signal this point of contention. By examining the role of fashion within these films, we are likewise able to understand the role of fashion in women's attempt and pursuit of social mobility during the harsh years of the depression. This thesis advocates for an analysis of 1930s films and fashion in films to better understand the social relationships during the 1930s in America, a complex and contradictory decade tied to a growing consumerist society, the privileging of whiteness in Hollywood and America, and the relationship between those factors and the rags to riches film motif.

PART I

Introduction

The rags to riches and social mobility film motif is the overarching connector for this paper, and it is through this theme and theoretical framework that the three 1930s films are analyzed. Dress in these films functions as a code that is interconnected with 1930s America; it is simultaneously a point of contention and signals tensions between independence and notions about the 1930s American ideal femininity. The rags to riches film motif is the thread of the paper which allows this for discussion. Among my research questions are: What role do 1930s Hollywood films play in our understanding of 1930s America? What role does fashion and fashion in film play in our understanding of 1930s America? Of the values important to America in the 1930s? How does fashion/dress signal a tension as seen in these three films? What is the significance and function of the rags to riches film motif, specifically, in 1930s America?

The thesis is divided into four parts. Part I discusses the theoretical framework which includes the theorists and scholars Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Joanne L. Rondilla, Richard Dyer, and George Lipsitz to analyze class in 1930s America and understand why class-passing in the case studies is perceived as such a transgression. Part II, "1930s Hollywood Film as Historical," assembles early American to 1930s film and advocates for 1930s American culture and more precisely, 1930s film, as a medium of significant insight on 1930s American life. I join 1930s scholars Lawrence Levine and Susan Ware in asserting that 1930s film was not an escapist media, but one of reaffirmation. The films reaffirmed their frustrations, fears, and beliefs. Films of the 1930s offer valuable clues and demonstrate how Americans grappled with a complex and contradictory decade. In "The Hollywood Film and 1930s Consumer Culture," I discuss the relationship between Hollywood films and the rising consumer culture during the 1930s. What is known as the "tie-in," the collaboration of Hollywood and consumerism arose at a time when it was perceived women made up most of film audiences and when the American economy went from one of production to one of consumerism. This link, and the influence of American films, helped construct an American look, a look with global significance. "The Hollywood Costume" and "1930s Fashion" work in tandem with one another and function as two sides of one coin. I assert that while the Hollywood costume and fashion differ, the two nonetheless function similarly. What makes the 1930s Hollywood costume so significant, however, was its global overreach and ability to *become* fashion. In "1930s Fashion," it details the evolution in fashion prior to the 1930s through the 1950s and the changing technologies that enabled the democratization of fashion. This section largely points to the freedom that fashion allowed for, at the same time that the ideal silhouette constructed what women should wear and look like. "The Studio Star System" discusses the way in which the system not only transformed individuals into stars, but turned them into *white* stars. The system shares similarities

with the rags to riches motif, and because of this also serves as a transition into "Part II: The Rags to Riches Motif."

In “Part III: The Rags to Riches Film Motif”, I highlight the importance of social mobility and the tools women have at their disposal to achieve such a rise. In addition to the racial and ethnic passing is the actual socioeconomic status of the women in the case studies. This chapter deconstructs the Cinderella myth as a visual bluff, in accordance with fashion as a visual tool of social passing. Cinderella demonstrates that class is performativity and given the right clothes and the right behavior, women were able to fool society into being part of the upper echelons. Not only does the fashion matter, but so too does the fabric materials as it leads to the democratization of fashion and its accessibility to more women. The fantasy here is that the bluff is a carnival of aesthetics and performance to achieve high social ranking.

Part IV sets the stage for the case studies analyses. The section discusses the significance of the films chosen for analysis, as well as contextual information on the Hollywood film studios and Motion Picture Production Code during the 1930s. For the sake of the case studies analyzed, MGM and Warner Bros. Studios are further emphasized. The consequent section is the analysis of the three 1930s film case studies, the pre-code film *Baby Face* (1933), and the code-era films *The Bride Wore Red* (1937) and *Stella Dallas* (1937). The three case studies and three characters Lily, Anni, and Stella, serve as challengers, disruptors of the white, American feminine ideal *myth,* at the same time as they fall into its trap and reinforce it.

In Part V, the conclusion, I answer the questions posed earlier in the introduction and conclude that fashion is a legitimate lens of inspecting 1930s culture of the feminine ideal. I maintain that the feminine ideal of the era was white and American. This is achieved primarily through class-passing. Fashion and dress became the main signifiers to be able to read the cultural ideal in the Hollywood films of the 30s.

Theoretical Framework

Social Class in America

The discussion of class in this paper is based on the hierarchical, three tiered model in America: 1. the rich or upper class, 2. the middle-class, and 3. working or lower class. Additionally, the paper is framed through the lens of theorists and scholars Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of the 'habitus,' Richard Dyer, Joanne L. Rondilla, and George Lipsitz and their discussions on whiteness and the possessive investment in whiteness, and Roland Barthes' semiological theory of the *myth.* This frames the analysis for class and class-passing in this thesis to illustrate what kind of system is in place to perceive class-passing as such a transgression and nearly impossible act, and why social mobility is tied to whiteness.

According to the course, "Social Class in the U.S." by Lumen Learning, "Social class refers to the grouping of individuals in a stratified hierarchy based on wealth, income, education, occupation, and social network (though other factors are sometimes considered)." America has always been divided by class distinctions. This is particularly relevant to 1930s America because, while the depression affected all Americans in the 1930s, the depression did not abolish social classes and hierarchies. Many of the upper class indeed lost money during the crash, however, many retained wealth and did not suffer from unemployment as the lower class did. Class tensions heightened as the lower class viewed high society with disdain, and increased when President Roosevelt implemented the New Deal programs to help the unemployed and lower classes, programs which the rich resented. Likewise, 1930s occupations were distinctly marked: the upper class consisted of lawyers, judges, doctors and tended to have luxurious homes; the middle class consisted of businessmen, churchmen, farmers, manufacturers, and the women were housewives. The lower class consisted of farmers, most were unemployed and thus forced to turn to public service. Living spaces were rundown, unheated, unsanitary and crowded. The women were forced to support themselves (something we see in the case studies). Because occupation (or the lack of) clearly demarcates one's social standing, likewise "social class is thought to share particular cultural traits, such as manner of dress and speech, that reinforce divisions between different classes" ("Social Class in the U.S.," Lumen Learning). This theory thus leads us into Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the 'habitus.'

Pierre Bourdieu's 'Habitus'

According to Bourdieu's study on the French bourgeois and petit bourgeois, *Distinction; A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* taste, such as the books we read (or do not), the films we enjoy, hobbies, sports, are one's habitus, and one's habitus is tied to their social class. Equally important is his discussion on *legitimate* and *illegitimate* art. For instance, museums and the opera have higher cultural value than other forms of

art such as film or sports. I utilize Bourdieu's theory, however, not to argue that taste and class are *inherently* linked. Sociologists indeed tend to agree social classes tend to share similar taste, dress, even behavior. Thus we may read dress as a code for class, something more easily distinguished in the 1930s than in 2019. This inevitably informs our way of *reading* dress and appearance as signifiers of social class. However, as the case studies demonstrate, this is precisely what the three women in these films challenge and disrupt, revealing the fragility of visual markers of class in the 1930s. The women in these films demonstrate Bourdieu's theory of 'habitus,' at the same time that they problematize and destabilize it. I utilize this theory to demonstrate *why* this transgression is subversive and important and to show that it is legitimate and arbitrary within the context of 1930s America. This analysis is inextricably linked with the changing social and economic structures, and the democratization of fashion in 1930s America.

Whiteness

Because Hollywood film is a visual medium, this thesis must address the issue of whiteness. Richard Dyer demonstrates in his book *White,* that photography and cinema, as media of light, have been lent to the privileging of white people. Whiteness is interwoven with early Hollywood cinema that it is accepted as natural, the norm. Dyer argues that overlooking whiteness is tied to the assumption endemic to white culture: other people are raced whereas white people are *people,* and will continue to function as the human norm (Dyer, 1). Moreover, Dyer argues that the technologies themselves are technical as well as they are social; we simply don't stop to consider them culturally. For instance, what Dyer calls Hollywood 'movie lighting' was developed with the "white face as the touchstone" and thus assumed, privileged, and constructed whiteness (89-90). This fact contributes to and constructs what Roland Barthes calls a *myth:* which I argue is the 1930s American feminine ideal. In order to unpack this *myth,* we must "make whiteness strange" (Dyer, 4). In doing so, we dislocate the visual representations created from the position of power.

I incorporate Dyer, Joanne L. Rondilla, and George Lipsitz into my methodology because whiteness, and Lipsitz's analysis of the possessive investment in whiteness, help us better understand the significance of class-passing and *why* these characters do so. As these scholars point out, whiteness is desirable because of the privileges that come with being white[t1]. Hence, class-passing entails whiteness. In a more contemporary book, *Is Lighter Better? Skin-Tone Discrimination Among Asian Americans* (2007), Joanne L. Rondilla, studies the interlink between whiteness and privilege. Rondilla's studies reveal that colorism, when "some people, particularly women, are treated better or worse on account of the color of their skin relative to other people who share their same racial category" (66), is a class imperative in Asia. The desire is not to be or look like whites, but to look rich (125), hence whiteness and class-passing is a tool to the upper echelons of society. This issue is equally prevalent in America, as Rondilla and Lipsitz point out. While the fear of being dark-skinned in Asia is tied to the peasant class, in America it is

tied to a history of slavery, genocide, and discrimination. For instance, Rondilla illustrates that some mixed individuals enjoyed "relative freedom… some learned to read and write, which were privileges denied by law and custom to most slaves" (265). Moreover, in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (1998)*,* George Lipsitz demonstrates the institutionalization of whiteness when he writes, "White settlers institutionalized a possessive investment in whiteness by making blackness synonymous with slavery and whiteness synonymous with freedom, but also by pitting people of color against one another" (3). One of the more extreme examples Lipsitz discusses as a result of this is environmental racism which, "makes the possessive investment in whiteness literally a matter of life and death" (23). I include these scholars in my methodology because class-passing is *visual,* and a way to read these characters' desire to pass is to obtain a higher class and higher status. While the ultimate desire was class, the instrument was color, whiteness. The possession of a higher-class and higher-status, then, is the possession of whiteness. This is vital to this analysis and is equally tied to dress and appearance. These three case studies demonstrate that class passing is as much about whiteness as it is about class.

Semiotics and The *Myth*: The 1930s American Feminine Ideal

Working off of Ferdinand du Saussure's theory on linguistic semiotics, Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics is, as he calls it, a second order semiological system. Linguistic semiotics is the combination of the signifier and signified to create a sign. Barthes calls the linguistic system the *language-object,* and adds to it a second language: the *metalanguage.* It is in the *metalanguage* system that the sign becomes a new signifier. The new signifier warrants a new signified and the two create a new sign, sign II: the *myth*. As Stuart Hall summarizes, that which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second and this new combination creates a *myth* (Hall, 52). I utilize Barthes' theory of semiotics and the *myth* in the three case studies to demonstrate the way in which dress and visual appearance function as markers of taste, class, and thus transformed into a *myth,* the 1930s American, feminine ideal. The 1930s American feminine ideal was fittingly epitomized by 30's films stars such as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Crawford, and Katherine Hepburn. It is significant to point out the feminine ideal was depicted by European actresses, for instance, Greta Garbo was Swedish and Marlene Dietrich was German. The later 1930s feminine ideal is also communicated through *Life* magazine's 1938 photograph of a model named June Cox (Fig. 1). The text accompanying the photograph states the increase of women in sports and athletics resulted in thinner and flatter figures, and later a soft feminine figure became idealized. The photograph also includes the exact weight and measurements of the model. For instance, the caption states the ideal figure must be between 125-135 lbs, however, her head, neck, bust, upper arm, waist, wrists, hips, thighs, calves, and ankle measurements are also included. The magazine writes this was the ideal standard most women wanted,

and again, it is significant to note, like many of the Hollywood actresses, the model appears to be of European descent, with blonde hair. The ideal standard is always a visual one and when disintegrated and seeped into the culture, becomes accepted as natural, thus transforming into the *myth* of the 1930s American feminine ideal.

(continued)

HEAD: 21½ in.
NECK: 12 in.
UPPER ARM: 9½ in.
BUST: 34 in.
WAIST: 24 in.
WRIST: 6 in.
HIPS: 34 in.
THIGH: 19½ in.
CALF: 13½ in.
ANKLE: 8 in.

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THIS IS IDEAL FIGURE

THAT MODERN WOMEN WANT

Most women in the U. S. would like to have a figure like 20-year-old Model June Cox. Miss Cox is 5 ft., 6¾ in. tall and weighs 124 lb. According to life insurance statistics, she should weigh 135 lb.

The perfect 1938 figure must have curves but it differs from the perfect figure of past decades in relationship of curves to straight lines. In the 1890's women had full bosoms, round hips. In actual measurements they probably were no rounder than Miss Cox but they seemed so because they were shorter, tightened their waists into an hour-glass effect.

As the American girl stressed sports, she grew taller and flatter. The boyish form became the vogue. With the recent return of the romantic influence in clothes, the soft feminine figure is again back in style. Now, though, the ideal figure must have a round, high bosom, a slim but not wasp-like waist, and gently rounded hips. Because U. S. women sit so much—in autos, at bridge tables, at desks and in the movies—big hips are their most serious figure problem. On the whole, though, they have the sort of figure that prompted dumpy Elsa Maxwell to say "No French woman should be seen on the beach by her lover—all American women should."

Fig. 1. 1930s American feminine ideal. Source: Time Magazine website.

PART II

1930s Hollywood Film as Historical

The 1930s Hollywood film is a significant site for our understanding of a complex and contradictory decade. Moving pictures captivated audiences from the beginning; however, they were at the same time, seen as a lower-class form of art. Authors Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen point out in *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of an American Consciousness* (1982), "The first audiences for motion pictures came primarily from the immigrant working-class neighborhoods of American's largest cities" (57). Film's early immigrant and working-class audiences, along with the notion that film is mere entertainment, has and continues to inhibit the serious treatment of film as a medium of historical inquiry. However, it is important to understand cultural products always work within a context-dependent discourse. Because of this, we can learn about a social context by critically analyzing Hollywood films. For instance, as Susan Ware writes in *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (1982), aspects of popular culture "reflect the values and interests of the mass culture" (171). To study 1930s films and genres, means one must dig further to better understand *why* they were prevalent. This admittedly adds more work for the researcher, but doing so adds a nuanced understanding of 1930s America and history which would otherwise be absent. Film as a trace of history can clarify the ways in which Americans grappled, responded, and contributed to changing social and economic structures. Likewise, in *The Unpredictable Past* (1993), for instance, American historian Lawrence Levine writes that the significance of 1930s films such as *Gone With The Wind* (1939), "was not escape—it probably provided no more of that than most expressive culture does—but reaffirmation" (218). Levine's use of the term reaffirmation is an interesting choice and one I fervently agree with. The 1930s rags to riches film motif is an important example of this, as it reaffirms how the Depression and rise of Consumer Culture influenced perceptions of class structures in America. Depression-era history tends to focus on the politics of the decade, however, critically analyzing 1930s films helps us understand what Americans felt and responded to the time. The close study of 1930s film also illuminates the intricacies of that decade, and forces us to acknowledge that a history cannot always be filtered down to facts and dates. As Levine states, "We must try to comprehend the Great Depression as a complex, ambivalent, disorderly period which gave witness to the force of cultural continuity even as it manifested signs of deep cultural change" (221). The case studies discussed in further detail indeed illustrate a complex and at times contradictory decade in American history.

Hollywood Film and Consumer Culture

In the chapter, "Female Audiences of the 1920s and early 1930s" from *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences* (1999), Melvyn Stokes discusses the prevalent notion that women made up most of film audiences. George Gallup and Leo Handel collected surveys for RKO Pictures in 1937-1939 and concluded that "women made up 'only' 51 percent of movie-goers" (43). The men that did attend, were also believed to attend the films their significant others watched, which were women's pictures. This led to the assumption by the studios that films must appeal to women to be successful. Concurrently (and importantly), the American economy went from being one based on production to one of mass consumption and, despite the Depression, women were seen as consumers and wives were called "managers of the household," as Susan Ware writes. A cause of this growing industry is the collaboration of businesses and Hollywood studios to sell products to women. These items include "goods (clothes, cosmetics) designed for women's own use, as well as more general household products (for example, appliances)" (Stokes and Maltby, 44). An instance of this kind of "tie-up" was "Cinema Shops," which sold fashions worn by famous actresses and advertised in movie magazines such as *Hollywood, Picture Play, Photoplay, Movieland,* and *Silver Screen* as well as 15-minute advertisements shown before films (Fig. 2). In "The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window," Charles Eckert includes an excerpt from publisher Mr. Tielhet on these short advertisements: "'Ten times was the square bottle of "Seduction Fleur" displayed before us, for a total of seventy-eight seconds[…] Then a seven-second title was flashed, "This film is sponsored for your entertainment by the Parfum de Fleurs Company, Paris and London…'" (12). The advertisement was so successful that by 1931, *Variety* reported that 50 percent of theaters were showing these advertising films, and two of the largest studios, Paramount and Warner Bros., largely invested in them. The influence of Hollywood film and particularly fashions, on American culture was quite clear. As an analyst in 1926 wrote,

> The peoples of many countries now consider America as the arbiter of manners, fashions, sports, customs, and standards of living…several large British manufacturers complained that they had been compelled to change the established style of the shoes they made for their customers in the Far East, and they traced the change directly to the movies from America…' (James True, *Printer's Ink* Feb 4, 1926) (Eckert, 5)

As this passage points out, by the 1930s an American style reached global proportions through Hollywood films. Indeed, Hollywood film fashion gained so much power in the 1930s, American fashion rivaled the established Parisian haute couture fashions. Hollywood became, as Sarah Berry states, a cultural elite worthy of emulation. Hollywood film, fashion, and the consumer culture thus constructed what American-ness and American style looked like. Likewise, the link between Hollywood and consumerism

worked in tandem with one another to demonstrate that an American look could be attained through the purchase of American products such as cars, beauty products, fashions, even cigarettes.

Fig. 2. 1936 Lux Soap Ad, Irene Dunne RKO-Radio Star. Source: *Period Paper*

The Studio Star System

With the public's easy access to films, and the growing omnipresence of Hollywood, film and fashion's role in 1930s American society continued to deepen. The system by which this culminated is the studio star system: a process by which Hollywood transformed and produced actors into stars. The rise of Hollywood stars grew by the 1920s with stars such as Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and Charlie Chaplin but exponentially increased in the 1930s into the 1950s. Hollywood film scholar Jeanine Bassinger provides an in-depth look at the way the studio star system functioned in her book, *The Star Machine* (2007). On star and dancer, Eleanor Powell, Bassinger writes "The dream of stardom that Hollywood sold was always a dream of promise and possibility… and if anyone doubted it, there were "before" and "after" portraits of Powell for proof" (29). Not dissimilar from the rags to riches film motif, the studio star system constructed a perception of stardom based on appearances; achievable if the actor *looked* the part. For instance, the December issue of *Photoplay* magazine titled "The Glorifying of Eleanor Powell (How in Twelve Months She's Been Transformed from an Ugly Duckling into a Vivid, Radiant Film Beauty)" (Bassinger, 29). The process entailed "young properties" who were brought into studio rooms, their height, bust size, shoe size, shoulder width measured, they were weighed and told which weight they should attain and/or maintain. They sat under bright lights as men in white lab coats scrutinized, examined, and discussed their problems and how to solve them. Both the 1937 and 1954 versions of *A Star is Born* depict scenes accurate to this process (Fig. 3). Actors' names and background stories were changed—for instance, Frances Ethel Gumm became Judy Garland, Lucille Fay LeSueur became Joan Crawford, Archibald Alec Leach became Cary Grant, etc. The intention was to sell the star as *types*, in Clark Gable's case, he was sold as a masculine man, thus, likewise had lead, masculine roles, and film magazines included images of him outdoors and fishing.

The system, however, is important as the star transformations are demonstrative of the rags to riches film motif. As Sarah Berry writes in *Fashion and Femininity: Screen Style in 1930s Hollywood* (2000), "Fashion was a medium of new beginnings, and the mythology of the "makeover" became synonymous with the Hollywood star's rise from obscurity to fame" (xviii). Actors were transformed into *stars,* however, those who decided what was "beautiful" were all men. Additionally, film stars were not only coiffured to appear more beautiful, but more *white.* For instance, the actress and dancer Margarita Carmen Cansino was transformed into Rita Hayworth. Cansino was of Spanish and Irish descent with dark luscious hair. Believed to look too "Spanish," however, her hair was then colored a bright red and her hairline was raised. Once this transformation occurred, Hayworth's fame skyrocketed and she became *the* GI pin-up girl for World War II. It is ironic that a Spanish woman became a symbol and emblem of Americanism, but it also demonstrates that the visual of whiteness is the default for an American, Hollywood look.

Fig. 3. Actress turned star, *A Star is Born* (1937). Source: Unknown.

The Hollywood Film Costume

The function of the film costume from its inception was to help actors better identify with their role and the narrative, and convince audiences the film is not artifice. Theoretically, the costume's "performance" function ends once the film ends. Fashion, on the other hand, as sociologist Fred Davis writes in *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (1992), is classified as "the phased elapsed time from the introduction of a fashion (a new "look," a new visual gestalt, a pronounced shift in vestmental emphasis, etc.) to its supplantation by a successive fashion" (103). The fashion *system* begins with the introduction of a style and ends when it is dispossessed and no longer worn. Moreover, it is dependent on variables such as identity, culture, and social status. Yet, despite the differences in function, film costume *does* have a similar function as fashion. Like fashion, it can tell us about the social context in which it was worn. While the film costume's function is not intended to become fashion, (and many film costume designers and scholars disagree with calling film costume fashion), it can and at times *does* become that. For instance, famed costume designer Gilbert Adrian, known as the mononym Adrian, created many designs for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios (MGM), including the iconic dress for Joan Crawford in the 1932 film *Letty Lynton*. In *Fashion in Film* (2011), Drake Stutesman describes that the dress framed Crawford's face and shoulders in layers of white organdy ruffles and consisted of many of Adrian's trademarks such as beaded sheaths, broad shoulders and slim hips, which were also integral to American fashion in the 1930s and 40s. Women found the silhouette so enchanting that women all over the country clamored for copies; Macy's in New York claimed to have sold 500,000 copies of the dress (Stutseman, and Munich, 9). Thus, film costume has the ability to become fashion, and even more than that, it creates an American fashion, an American look. Stutesman adds that Adrian was in fact "part of the early foundations of a rapidly developing American identity….He adamantly defended an American Look that still exists today with all the Adrian earmarks—clean tailoring, practical elegance with an original and extravagant use of fabric, and an urban sophistication that speaks of a woman on the move" (34). Adrian was a proponent of a growing American fashion, and Hollywood was open about its desire to remove Paris as the fashion leader. Film costume and fashion at times overlap. American film costumes *did* in many cases become fashion, a scheme designed by the film and fashion industry. American film costumes helped construct an American look and identity.

It is important to note that in some cases, films abroad have also utilized fashion similarly. For instance, the German silent film by Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (1927), presents a clear division between the lower, working-classes and the upper class through the film fashions. In the film, the lower class function as slaves which run the modern, burgeoning city in the darkness and literal bottom. Fritz Lang was intentional about making a clear distinction between the classes. The upper class wear modern and fashionable styles of the 1920s, influenced by the French designer Paul Poiret. The working-class wear dark uniforms which functions as a way to not only blend them into their surroundings, but it

also blurs them together and overlooks their individual identities for a collective one: a worker. The film costume is always an important element to the film narrative, however, a global analysis of film is perhaps best left for another research project.

1930s Fashion

Fred Davis writes in *Fashion, Culture, and Identity,* that "Cultural induced strains concerning who and what we are find symbolic expression in dress and the pulsations of fashion" (26). Fashion is always an expression of the culture and society it is a part of. To have a better understanding of 1930s American fashions we must analyze it not as a standalone decade, but, as Stella Blum points out, a decade framed by the crash of 1929, the depression and the outbreak of world hostilities. 1930s fashion history is in many instances overshadowed by 1920s' liberating fashions and the 1940s' military-inspired and rationed fashions, however, fashion continued even in the 30s as it simultaneously reflected the economic troubles.

The 1920s in America were for white women, a decade of liberation. The fight for white women's suffrage culminated on August 18, 1920, with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment. The "new woman," most often referred to as a "flapper," was in constant motion—she traveled, drove, smoked, and partied. The effects of liberation materialized in women's dress and appearance with the elimination of the boned corset, a dropped waistline, a slightly raised hemline (which allowed women more mobility), short bobbed hair—overall, the Victorian feminine ideal changed to a boyish form. By the late 1920s, however, hemlines began to fall and the waistline was returning to its natural position. Women's hair was slightly grown out, and the move went from a boyish flapper to a more feminine form once again. It was as James Laver writes in *Costume and Fashion; A Concise History* (1969)**,** "as if fashion were trying to say: 'The party is over; the Bright Young Things are dead'" (240). By the 1930s, then, women's fashion changed. In the early years the hemline dropped very low, almost to the floor, then went up slightly to the ankle and stayed there until the end of the decade. Square shoulders helped accentuate the ideal feminine body: a trim waist and elongated body (Fig. 4). For evening wear, rather than short beaded gowns, long dresses and more fitted hats like pillboxes took over. Laver details elements of 1930's fashion:

> Dresses were slim and straight, being sometimes wider at the shoulders than at the hips. Tall girls were admired, and all the tricks of the couturier were employed to give the impression of increased height… the hair was dressed rather close, with a small curl at the back of the neck. (243)

As Laver details, the 1930s fashion silhouette was long and trim. In many cases, designs resembled Greek columns such as many of Madeleine Vionnet's designs (Fig. 5). For most women (especially married women), however, reckless spending was left in the past, thrift was the attitude of the day, and as Susan Ware writes*,* repairing, rather than replacing, was the motto.

A salient change in 1930s fashion is more styles were accessible to more women in a broader range of prices and fabrics. As the authors Fiell and Dirix write in *1930s Fashions: The Definitive Sourcebook,* this meant that "less well-off women could afford

their own piece of glamour" (16). This democratization of fashion had important ramifications on class distinctions. There continued to be a distinction between luxurious fabrics such as mink, silk, and velvet, and more affordable fabrics such as cotton, and artificial alternatives such as rayon. However, the patterns and silhouette remained the same and women were either able to make their own copies at home, or purchase ready-to-wear options in department stores such as Macy's and Sears. More significantly, as Jan Goggans writes in *Make it Work; 20th Century American Fiction and Fashion* (2019), this offered women "a new opportunity to physically and psychologically own fashion and its readable social message" (120). Hence, while in earlier decades fashion functioned as a way to emphasize class and social distinctions, by the 1930s, fashion became a tool that helped blur class distinctions. A woman could purchase or *sew* herself a dress that facilitated class transgression, a fact pertinent to the rags to riches film motif. I believe this is one of the most important aspects of 1930s fashion as its democratization destabilized not simply class, but gender and race as well. However, while 1930s fashion indeed offered freedom, it nonetheless was managed. As two of the case studies demonstrate, for instance, women may have had more options, but they still abided by the 1930s fashion silhouette and feminine ideal, so women had more freedom, but it was a contained sort of freedom.

The transition between the 1930s into the 1940s and 1950s, however, must also be contextualized by changes abroad *and* in America. For instance, in Germany, Berlin and Munich were cities of high-end fashion. The German expressionism (1910-1930s) art movement was extremely influential and likewise influenced Hollywood films, most noticeably in the 1940s film noir genre. The genre and specifically the film, *Metropolis* (1927), continues to influence film and fashion today. However, when the Nazis came to power in 1933, Hitler attempted to return German women's style to *Trachendenkledung,* or "traditional dress". The style was promoted in newsreels and in 1934, the propaganda label Adefa (Association of Aryan Garment Producers) had a country-wide tour to promote the styles. Hitler believed Nazi fashion could aid in German control and victory during the war. It achieved its influence after Kristallnacht, on November 1938, in which Jewish-owned stores, buildings, hospitals, synagogues and establishments were destroyed, and created the Deutsches Modeamt, "Reich Fashion Bureau", to control German women's fashion. The Nazis also understood the power of style, and Senior Nazi and Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels exploited the way in which clean and tailored uniforms have the power to instill fear in others. The rise of 1930s American fashion likewise correlated to Germany's invasion of Paris. During the 4 year occupation of Paris, many fashion houses closed and Paris haute couture no longer held power and influence over the global fashion industry.

1940s American fashion was also dictated by the second World War. Unlike the 1930s, fabric was restricted and elements such as the amount of pleats on a skirt, buttons, seams, ruching, the length of dresses, skirts, jackets, and more, were rationed and controlled by the War Production Board, put in place in 1942. Materials used for clothing were used for the war: wool for uniforms and coats for the soldiers, silk for parachutes,

leather for boots, even the new material nylon, was also used for the war. Because of this, synthetic fabrics such as rayon was the most used fabric of the time. The silhouette changed to an hourglass figure with masculine, military elements. A-line dresses with padded shoulders and a slim waist came up to the knee, and ladies also began to wear high-waisted pants (Fig. 6). The 1940s silhouette indeed was a subject and result of war, and continued until around 1950, after French fashion designer Christian Dior debuted a new silhouette named the “New Look” in 1947 (Fig. 7). The look featured a cinched waist and full skirt with a jacket. While some American fashion and costume designers initially disliked the new look, the influence took hold by the 1950s.

Fig. 4. 1930’s Fashion Plate. Source: Unknown.

Fig. 5. Madeleine Vionnet crêpe dress inspired by Classical Greece. Source: Vanity Fair.

Fig. 6. 1940s Victory Suits. Source: Vintage Dancer website.

Fig. 7. Christian Dior's 'New Look', 1950. Source: Harper's Bazaar.

PART III

From Rags to Riches

American audiences continued to attend movie theaters during the onslaught of the depression and saw mass media as "a necessity, not just a luxury, during a time when luxuries were few and far between… mass media provided entertainment and distraction during the 1930s, but more importantly, it established a strong and powerful presence in American homes that shaped an increasingly mainstream, national American identity" (Gledhill, *Stardom: Industry of Desire,* 202). Most of the "Big Eight" Hollywood film studios struggled during the depression, however, in general, audiences continued to watch films that specifically contributed to the notion of a national American identity.

One of the oldest film motifs, the rags to riches theme can be traced back to early film and literature. The fascination with social mobility is evident from the Cinderella tale, which has been adapted to the screen many times (1914, 1922, 1950, 1997 etc.) The Cinderella story is generally similar to a storyline that depicts social mobility, even if the means of achieving riches differ. The motif's popularity, however, increased during the 1930s in Hollywood. The popularity of the rags to riches motif is vital to the 1930s economic and social reality and sent the message to audiences that one *may* be successful with the correct values. It might seem easy to proclaim that 1930s films were escapist due to extreme glamour and elaborate musicals, however, the notion that films were mere escapism overlooks the way that dress in Hollywood films and particularly, rags to riches films functioned to "parody, invert, and denaturalize social distinctions…along with its demystification of specific codes of behavior, dress, and social entitlement" (Berry, xxi). The rags to riches and class-passing theme in many of the case studies illustrate the same as Cinderella does-- that social classes rely on a visual and embodied performance. As the case studies demonstrate, dress and performance function as a way to identify and define social class and, at the same time, calls this into question. This is especially significant for 1930s America *because* of the democratization of fashion. Berry includes an excerpt from the sociological study of midwestern American values and habits, *Middle-Town,* in which "a business man complained, 'I used to be able to tell something about the background of a girl applying for a job as stenographer by her clothes, but today I often have to wait till she speaks, shows a gold tooth, or otherwise gives me a second clew [sic]'" (Berry, 2). The quote beautifully depicts the way in which dress is used as a means of transgressing and blurring class binaries and the frustrated realization that it *works.* Berry's point here is key to understanding the importance of dress and its function in many rags to riches films. Rather than gloss over rags to riches films, Berry asserts many of these films spoke to 1930s America and revealed the mythology of "bluff" that harkens back to the original Cinderella tale.

By the 1930s many women film stars dominated the film box office like Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo, Norma Shearer, and Barbara Stanwyck. But the star that epitomized the rags to riches character most was Joan Crawford. From *Sadie McKee*

(1935) to *Mildred Pierce* (1943), Crawford was the go-to actress for this—*because* her own life epitomized a rags to riches tale. Born Lucille Fay LeSueur, Crawford came from a working-class family and worked her way up to becoming a Hollywood star. Fans were open about their fascination with this fact, and stated in *Photoplay Magazine*, "It seems to me that Joan Crawford has accomplished the one difficult thing so many girls dream of doing. Rising from a lower status to her present heights is in truth a modern fairy tale that holds the working girl of today entranced… Is it any wonder she is fascinating to us?" (Berry, 28). However, Berry states that the fascination with Crawford was not just because they escaped the working-class, but because they rejected being "trapped in predetermined roles" (xix).

In many cases, rags to riches films critique the wealthy for being out of touch with reality, narcissistic, and careless (*My Man Godfrey* (1936)). This critique was most likely tied to the 1920s reckless spending which influenced the Crash and Depression. As with *My Man Godfrey,* the film is an analysis of a wealthy family from the perception of a "forgotten man" turned butler (William Powell). The characters fail to acknowledge their father when he discusses financial matters, until it becomes too late and they lose their money. It is equally significant that those who fail to recognize the family's struggle are the women characters dressed in elaborate costumes, and the one that pulls them out of it is the butler. The film ultimately continues the American belief that those who consume carelessly are doomed to fall, and those who consume and invest in the name of family and nation, will survive.

An important aspect of many 1930s rags to riches films is the ease of white characters "passing" upwards in class. In many cases it is dependent on being at the right place at the right time (not unlike the way the star system worked). For instance, the film *Easy Living* (1937) is about a fur coat that falls in the hands of young girl and she is able to pass from that moment on *because* of the fur coat. Yet this is not to say class-passing is easy for everyone; it is tied to the way in which 1930s America and old Hollywood privileged whiteness and demonstrated that class-passing is intertwined with whiteness. As mentioned in the section "1930s and Fashion," the democratization of fashion helped (mostly) white women transgress and blur class distinctions. As Jan Goggans writes in *Make It Work*, Cinderella was able to pass *because* her constructed appearance was exactly what allowed her to access the upper echelons of society. A tale of dress-up, then, is much more than that. Goggans continues,

> The ability to pass out of one coded stratum by adopting the visual markers of another can be as simple as wearing the right clothes… At the same time, it is a complex maneuver, one that exposes the dehumanizing effects of cultural categories while at the same time acknowledging their power. The act of passing requires passers to acknowledge a system—be it race, gender, or class—which their act rejects. (Goggans, 7)

Goggans points to the complicated act of class passing: class-passing *may* be as easy as donning a luxurious coat, but it is as much about the clothing as it is about race, gender, and class. The reason Rita Hayworth became an American icon was not just her makeup, hair, and clothing transformation, but also because of her fair skin color. The three women in the film case studies demonstrate the ease at which class-passing can be done for them as *white* women. For instance, the character in Baby Face, Chico. Chico's inability to pass and seduce men the way Lily Powers does, is tied to her skin color. Again, part of the allure of 1930s rags to riches films was the ease at which it occurred. But to recall Dyer, Rondilla, and Lipsitz, we must interrogate and ask *why.* Class-passing in rags to riches may on the one hand, seem like an innocent, and even attainable fantasy. But what these films demonstrate is how "dress and performance increasingly functioned to define social identity" (Berry, xvi), and likewise the arbitrariness of one's identity, and that class-passing is about dress, class, gender, and whiteness.

PART IV

Setting the Scene

The Hollywood Film Studios

The Hollywood film industry in the 1930s was distinguished by the "Big Eight" studios: Metro-Goldwyn Studios (MGM), Paramount Pictures, Warner Bros., 20th Century Fox, Radio Pictures Incorporated (RKO), Universal Pictures, United Artists, and Columbia. In general, studios attempted to balance the cynicism Americans felt, with entertainment that uplifted morale and values. In addition, the Motion Picture Production Code was strongly enforced by 1934. The film studios worked according to long-term contracts and had control over the actors, scripts, film choices, writers, directors, publicity, budgets, and staff.

The films *The Bride Wore Red* (1937) and S*tella Dallas* (1937) were distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studio (MGM). MGM was led by Louis B. Mayer and was known for its glamour, spectacle, and considered "The Home of the Stars", which included Clark Gable, Myrna Loy, William Powell, Greta Garbo, Norma Shearer, Jean Harlow, Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney, Katharine Hepburn, and many others. They had high pre-production investment, thus high quality production, and were known for their screwball comedies, musicals, and romances. While all film studios controlled aspects of their film productions, Louis B. Mayer was, as Thomas Schatz writes in *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (1988), "especially adamant about regaining control over Metro's production operation" (165), however, his lack of creative input gave MGM producers Irving Thalberg, David O. Selznick, and others, more control over their own productions. The depression and code, however, influenced the studio to produce top-grade and uplifting films such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939). This combination perhaps resulted in the fact that MGM was the only film studio that did not lose money during the depression.

The film *Baby Face* (1933) was released by Warner Bros. Studios. Warner Bros. was established by Harry, Sam, Jack, and Albert Warner, a jewish immigrant family from Poland. By 1925, the studio was known as the leader of the silent film business, and debuted talking pictures with *The Jazz Singer* (1927). Warner Bros. was known for their "tough guy" stars such as Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, James Dean, and equally tough women stars such as Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, Lauren Bacall, and Ida Lupino. During the 1930s, Warner Bros. was considered the "depression studio", because it produced socially conscious and realistic gritty films such as the gangster films *The Public Enemy* (1931), *G-Men* (1935), *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), which shed light on prison reform and the legal system in America. The studios were also known for their large-scale musicals such as the Busby Berkeley films, *The Golddiggers of 1933* (1933)*, 42nd Street* (1933) and others. Thomas Schatz writes, "Warners supervisors oversaw script development as well as production, and then helped prepare a

rough cut before passing the project back to Wallis and Jack Warner" (200). Indeed, the studios exerted immense power over every aspect of the filmmaking process except for specific circumstances, as was the case with Busby Berkeley. Berkeley was a choreographer, however, his work was so commercially successful he was given authority to conceive, design, direct, and even edit his musical numbers. He had "virtually complete creative control" (Schatz, 201). In other instances, however, the studio was less keen on relinquishing power. During the making of *Baby Face,* for instance, director Darryl F. Zanuck quit because Harry Warner didn't allow Zanuck to go against the code. Likewise, both stars James Cagney and Bette Davis fought against the studios to break away from the roles they had been given in the past. As with the other studios, the code changed Warner Bros. films and the studio also lost money during the depression, losing about $8 million in 1931. However, Warner Bros. persevered and continued to be known for their musicals, gangster films, and social realist films.

The Code

The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) adopted the Production Code in 1930, but the code was not enforced until 1934, (the time in-between is considered pre-code). Pressure to implement a regulation came from sources such as the Catholic Legion of Decency campaign worried about the effects of Hollywood's risqué films and off-screen scandals, and Hollywood studios preferred self-regulation, thus, adopted the code to avoid government censorship. The code was enforced by the Hays Office, led by William Hays, and studios had to be given the "seal of approval" from the board. Failure to receive the seal of approval resulted in a fine and exclusion from theaters. The code stressed the importance of the moral responsibility of motion pictures because their accessibility and scale could contribute to their influence on society. Amongst the list of regulations were: no promiscuity, no excessive violence, no ridicule of ministers of religion, no clear depiction of rape, seduction, adultery or passionate, illicit sex, no excessive or lustful kissing or embracing, or suggestive gestures. Moreover, David Eldridge and Martin Halliwell add in *American Culture in the 1930s,* that sin and criminal behavior were acceptable subjects for drama and could be present as story material, as long as the film stressed moral values. Criminal or sexual acts would cost characters "the love and comforts of home, the intimacy of family, the solace of religion, and the protection of law" (66). This point is important to all the case studies.

The Films

The three case studies, *Baby Face* (1933), *The Bride Wore Red* (1937), and *Stella Dallas* (1937), are women's films (films with female protagonists and revolve around women's issues), and include rags to riches narratives which deal specifically with class-passing. Passing is the ability to be a part of a different identity group or category,

and while it intrinsically includes ethnicity, racial identity, gender and religion, the distinction here is important as the protagonists in the films are all white, and the worlds within the films are also white. The exception to this is Chico in *Baby Face;* Chico is an important figure as well, yet she moves up *because* of her friend Lily's ability to move up. In general, all the women in the films move up in class, Lily in *Baby Face* sleeps with men to move up, eventually marrying the president of the bank she works at, Anni in *The Bride Wore Red* goes from being a working-class cabaret singer to one of the elite at a fancy hotel, and Stella in *Stella Dallas* marries up in class. While the means of moving up differ, all three films demonstrate the way in which fashion signals mobility as well as its ability to blur and transgress class binaries. With the right dress and performance, class binaries may be crossed, revealing their fragility.

The films reveal the inner turmoil and tensions within the Hollywood film industry, the Motion Picture Production Code, and the economic and political climate during the 1930s. As with many of Warner Bros. films, *Baby Face* offers a bleak and realistic look at the lives of the working, lower-classes, particularly for women during the 1930s depression; however, it nonetheless straddles the line between pre-code and code as the film depicts what would be considered 'sinful acts' by a woman, yet it also has a happy ending, (something that would not occur during the code). *The Bride Wore Red* enforces working-class values, a detail especially important during the depression, and stresses that what is important is not elaborate fashions, but an appreciation and satisfaction with one's social class, work, and love. Stella in *Stella Dallas* is punished for failing to "adapt" to upper-class notions of ideal femininity and motherhood. Moreover, the code's influence can also be seen in films with rags to riches, class-passing narratives. For instance, as evident in these three films, the act of class-passing must also be contained. Lily in *Baby Face* gives up her riches, Anni in *The Bride Wore Red* embraces a peasant, working-class life, and Stella in *Stella Dallas* is depicted in rags and becomes a part of the lower, working-class once again.

Moreover, the films poignantly demonstrate the complicated nature of class-passing and the unique role that fashion plays in this act. They challenge and subvert the 1930s American feminine ideal at the same time that they reinforce this *myth*. These points will be further discussed and expanded on in the next section.

Case Studies

Baby Face (1933)

Directed by Alfred E. Green and costumed by Orry-Kelly, the film stars Barbara Stanwyck, George Brent, and Theresa Harris. The film addresses Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics and the 1930s American feminine ideal, as well as Bourdieu's theory of the 'habitus.' The film also demonstrates the struggle between 1930s pre-code and the implementation of it just a year later. On the surface, Lily (Barbara Stanwyck) appears to be the ideal 1930s woman; she is white, thin, blonde, and dresses well. However, Lily uses this as ammunition against men for her benefit and security. Lily is mindful of the role dress has on performativity and succeeds in a male-dominated space, (a rare sight to see in Hollywood film and why the film is a rarity). What is unique to the film and character is it reveals what women of lesser means must do in order to rise in social class. Similar to Anni in *The Bride Wore Red,* Lily begins in a speakeasy that her father owns in a steel mill town. Lily works with her friend, Chico (Theresa Harris), a young black woman. The male customers ask for Lily and attempt to grab her, except for Mr. Craiggs. Craiggs tells Lily she must realize her potentialities, (a term she doesn't understand), and asks if she read the book by Nietzche he gave her, to which she replies that she tried to but "never did get very much out of books." This becomes important as it is Craiggs who later pushes Lily to use men.

Fig. 8. Lily's beginnings. Frame Capture.

Representative of the censorship struggles, however, is one, if not the most memorable scene: A man walks into the speakeasy and threatens to shut it down (the prohibition of alcohol was in place from 1919-1933), so Mr. Powers (Lily's father) offers her as a favor. It becomes evident that Lily has been prostituted to men by him from her exclamation to him, "A swell start you gave me. Ever since I was 14, what's it been! Nothing but men! Dirty, rotten men!" This reveals a dark truth, that her father sold her body off to men since she was a young girl, highlighting the harsh reality of vulnerable young women. Likewise, it reveals Lily's difficult life and reason for her determination to escape it. The exchange between her and the man, however, demonstrates her strong will, and after repeated attempts, Lily puts an end to it by breaking a bottle of alcohol on his head.

Fig. 9. *Baby Face* Frame Capture.

Fig. 10. *Baby Face* Frame Capture.

The scene is significant for its depiction of 1930s Depression life and similarly, class, gender, and the code (Turner Classic Movies writes *Baby Face* is a final hurrah in Pre-Code cinema). Indeed, the film is entirely pre-code for its subject matter, suggestions, and depiction of sexuality. Nonetheless, there are two versions of the film, a pre-released and theatrical version. The pre-released version remained unseen until 2004, when it was found at the Library of Congress. The changes are distinct; for instance, the man's hand

on Lily's leg and his comment to her as the "sweetheart of the night" are excluded in the released version. A less subtle but significant exclusion is Mr. Craigg's speech which convinces her to start anew in New York City. In the pre-released version he tells her a young, beautiful woman like her could get anything she wants in the world because she has power over men. He tells her to leave town and use men, quoting Nietzche, "Use men! Be strong! Defiant! Use men to get the things you want!" The theatrical version, however, made Craiggs a spokesman for morality. While he still tells her she can get anything she wants, he states, "*But there is a right way and a wrong way. Remember, the price of the wrong way is too great*. Go to some big city where you will find opportunities! *Don't let people mislead you.* You must be a master, not a slave. *Be clean, be strong, defiant, and you will be a success*." Although the code was enforced a year later, the change shows traces of what would come. The censored version becomes a moral warning: Lily can get anything she wants if done the *right* way. More significantly, however, is Lily does go on to exploit her body, to sleep with men, and to use men. Thus, the film narrative remains the same despite the censored facets of the film.

Lily's social mobility begins when she and Chico board a train to New York. When a man sees Chico, he is about to throw her off when Lily steps in and with a smirk on her face says, "Why don't we talk this over?" The camera (standing in for the man's perspective), pans over her body and shows the man smirk. Lily turns off the lamppost, and Chico happily walks away. The scene was also changed for the theatrical version and many of the sexually suggestive scenes are left out. When they arrive in New York, the two women notice a young woman in a fur coat and Chico points out, "That lady's dressed up. And look at her automobile!" To which Lily replies, "What I want to find out is how did she get 'em?" Lily's reaction signals her interest in women's clothing as a correlation with financial gain; a fashionable woman must have financial worth, and Lily is concerned with *how* to get *that.* This detail also reveals how Lily views social mobility, unlike the character of Stella Dallas, Lily is interested in upward class mobility versus status mobility. A fur coat may represent high status to other like-minded women, however, what it represents to Lily is financial security, and she is more interested in achieving financial security rather than an acceptance into high class society.

Continuing this trajectory, Lily gains entrance into the bank by flirting with the security guard. Once inside, she seduces a young man to get a job. Lily begins in the Personnel Department at a bank and moves up to the filing department, then to mortgage. The film shows a panning up at every level of the building, a clever way of illustrating that for every man she seduces, she moves up a floor. Lily's rise is demonstrated through her dress, for instance, in the mortgage department, she wears a black dress with a white ruffled collar. When Lily moves up two levels to the Accounting Department, she appears with a fresh perm in her hair and a dark, crisp dress with a collar resembling an envelope and matching cuffs. Again, the film speaks to conditions specific to 1930s America; with the democratization of fashion, more women were able to afford fashionable trends that *appeared* high class. Lily demonstrates this through the change in dress for every floor. The simple designs and detail in the matching collars and cuffs

demonstrates costume designer Orry-Kelly's craft, but more than anything demonstrates Lily's ability to "dress the part" within an office building, many times appearing more formal than the other women in the bank. When Lily and her boss, Mr. Stevens, get caught by his fiancé, and she is later confronted by Stevens' father-in-law and boss, Carter. She is told to quit, but garners his sympathy as a weak, feminine woman. This transition for Lily is the most visible rise in class as she begins an affair with Carter and he rents her a luxurious apartment and she stops working at the bank. Accordingly, her dress becomes much more luxurious: fur coats, velvet, wool, all luxurious fabrics of the 1930s perfectly matched with angled and fashionable hats.

Chico

I take the character of Chico as the second most important character of the film and one deserving of analysis. Most acting roles for black actors in 1930s Hollywood were that of maids or butlers; this makes it even more significant that Chico is not only Lily's close and only friend and who *poses* as Lily's maid. Lily and Chico seem to be genuine friends for instance, Lily's defends her when Mr. Powers threatens to fire her in the beginning of the film. More significantly, however, is the way in which Chico's dress becomes more luxurious with Lily's. This is demonstrated by the luxurious white, mink fur Chico wears, which is exceedingly similar to Lily's fur (Fig. 11). As Ellen Scott asserts in "More than a "Passing" Sophistication; Dress, Film Regulation, and the Color Line in 1930s American Films," that Lily's rise is marked by the richness of Chico's dress (63). The image of Chico and Lily in luxurious fur is indeed striking to see particularly because the film was still, in some instances, still censored. Scott continues and adds an additional layer to our reading of Chico's fur ensemble,

> Costume, however, was a realm generally outside of censors' close scrutiny in the 1930s and was thus a freer space of racial inscription than the narrative. Not only was costume essential to Depression-era screen narratives of class rise (and fall), it sometimes operated to complicate the narrative, threatening to distract viewers with its overwrought embellishment of a character's affect and personality of glamorizing the "low" figures—the gold digger and the fallen women—that censors reviled (Gaines 1990, 188; Foster 2007; Jacobs 1997, 58-59) (61).

The passage is vital to my argument that fashion in film is an important site of analysis. While costume was generally censored for particularly risque and revealing outfits, in many cases films that depicted 1930s fashions were taken as mere glamour, fashion films. This does not mean, however, that costume could not be subversive in different ways. As Scott and many rags to riches films demonstrate, even censored films found ways to subvert and challenge the ideal feminine mythology. Moreover, Lily and Chico are both acutely aware of the relationship between dress and class position. When Lily is with her lovers, Chico wears a maid outfit and acts as a maid. When the men are gone,

however, it is clear that Chico lives a rather independent life; she goes out with friends and Lily never makes this an issue. Analyzing Chico's role in the film is thus, just as important as studying Lily's because Chico's performance as a maid exhibits that all class identity and more importantly, a white feminine ideal is also a performance. Chico's performance as a maid is the acceptable role for black women actors in 1930s Hollywood, likewise, Lily's visual appearance and performance with men is the acceptable and idealized role for white women in 1930s America.

Fig. 11. Lily and Chico wear luxurious fur. Frame capture.

In an angry rage, Stevens comes looking for Lily to get her back, and barges in to find Carter with her. Stevens shoots Carter and then himself. A scene unlikely to be found in pre-code films, however, is Lily's witness of the incident with no expression of sadness or remorse. She wears a silk evening gown with a high collar and long, draped sleeves (Fig. 12). What is more, the back is completely open, showcasing what the 1930s Sears Catalog states was a new erotic zone in the 1930s. This dress not only signals Lily's rise in class, but her capitalizing on 1930s fashions as a way to draw men in and utilize them for their financial wealth. Her lack of emotion, however, signals that men are only of use to her as long as they provide a financial or material gain. The silk evening gown is a clear visual representation of Lily as a vamp (a woman film type, known for being seductive and dangerous).

Fig. 12. *Baby Face* Frame Capture.

Members of the bank (all older, white men), seek to pay Lily for the newspaper story, and while the men fall for Lily's tears, the new President of the bank, Trenholm (George Brent), seems to see through Lily. Rather than pay her for the story, then, he instead offers her a job at their bank in Paris. Lily accepts the offer, and excels at the job. A few months pass and Trenholm visits the Paris location, and Lily quickly sets her eyes on him. The two go out often, and interestingly, they fall in love-- a differing detail compared to the men up until then. The dress that represents Lily's motivation is the last dress of the film. The two have married, and Trenholm embezzles money from the bank to give to Lily. He gifts her a case with half a million dollars' worth (Lily says to Chico, "Someday I'll have the other million that goes with it"). Lily is thus surrounded by riches, her own silk evening gown has jewels sewn onto the neckline. But when Trenholm gets indicted, he asks Lily for the money for his bail. She declines and flees with Chico to board a ship. Her dress is significant not only in the way it signifies her riches, but the jeweled collar resemble wings, signaling her response to flee.

As previously mentioned, the film demonstrates the power *white* women have over men and Lily's exploitation of her body showcases gender roles in America during the 1930s. While the theatrical version attempts to censor the sexually suggestive and graphic scenes, the film message remains intact: Lily weaponizes her body (and fashion) over men and is successful at it. Unlike Anni and Stella, Lily moves up in a more "unconventional" way, but this is what makes her a strong female character. Lily does not

seek to marry men, in fact, she is disillusioned by them after her father used her body for gain. This sets the film apart from films that came after the code was enforced in 1934.

While the film is definitely pre-code, the theatrical release demonstrates that it is still working in-between pre-code and code. Moreover, Lily is taught to be heartless, and seduce men throughout the film, which is why the ending feels slightly out of place within a pre-code genre film. As the code laid out, a woman who is considered to commit sins must be punished for them by the end of the film. We see this in both *The Bride Wore Red* and *Stella Dallas.* Yet if we compare it to the film *Red Headed Woman* (1932) with Jean Harlow who also plays a seductress, we find a different kind of ending here. In *Red Headed Woman,* Jean Harlow seduces men until the very end, whereas Lily returns to Trenholm and in the end, chooses love over riches. Lily comes back to Trenholm to find he has attempted suicide and she proclaims her love for him. The film is indeed pre-code, Lily would not have had this ending if it was released during the Code, however, it is similar to many women's pictures *because* she realizes love is worth more than her riches. The last scene ends happily, with the paramedic assuring Lily Trenholm will survive. We are likewise made aware that Lily chooses love over the half a million dollars:

Paramedic: Your case slipped lady, you better pick it up.
Lily: It doesn't matter now.

Fig. 13. *Baby Face* Frame Capture.

The Bride Wore Red (1937)

Distributed by MGM studios and directed by Dorothy Arzner, the film stars Joan Crawford, Franchot Tone, and Robert Young, and is costumed by Adrian. A wealthy yet cynical Count Armalia believes luck separates the wealthy from the poor and sets out to test his theory on Anni (Joan Crawford), a working-class cabaret performer. Armalia sends Anni to an upper-class hotel in the Alps for two weeks under the name of Anne Vivaldi, and with fashions and fineries of a "high-class woman." Dress, in the film, is coded as the tension between notions of white feminine mythology and a woman's independence. As with the other case studies, Anni's class passing is representative of the rise of and capabilities of consumer culture in 1930s America. Her class-passing exhibits Bourdieu's notion of the 'habitus' as it demonstrates that dress is interlinked with class, while at the same time, it problematizes this very notion. In analyzing the film, I assert that the film is representative of issues for women in the 1930s and sends the message that American white woman should be happy with their class position, and that love and unity must be *the* most important values for women.

Similar to Lily in *Baby Face*, the film begins with Crawford as a singer in a night-club surrounded by men. The film makes its rags to riches motif clear: Crawford begins at the literal bottom, a nightclub below a building. As Count Armalia remarks, "Is this the lowest, the most decrepit dive in Trieste?" The camera soon pans over to the beautiful Crawford-- she wears a long, black, silk gown with a small belt and fabric flowers on the sleeve. It is important to remember who the character is played by, as Anni simply looks like a more toned-down version of the star. This detail shows the way in which stars such as Crawford, are many times intertwined with their roles as seen by the film costume. Although the dress is most likely real silk *because* Adrian was the costumer, Anni's working social class would mean the dress is artificial silk. The plain, black gown indeed makes it seem as if she belongs with her surroundings, so much so she almost seems to blend in with it (Fig. 14).

Fig. 14. Anni and her dress blend in with the surroundings. Source: Unknown.

When Anni is told to sit with a drunken Count Armalia, she replies cynically, “Oh a count is he? Come to stare at the animals in the zoo?,” but is surprised to find out he wishes to talk as “two souls in communion.” The Count asks to know more about her:

Anni: My name is Anni Pavlovitch, born in Poland, age 25, mother, Austrian. And I’m not going to tell you my father was an Aristocrat.
Count Armalia: Wouldn’t surprise me.
Anni: Wouldn’t surprise me either.
Count: You talk well.
Anni: Oh yes, guess, we breathe and sleep and are hungry, too. Very much like human beings.

Fig. 15. “Still too good for me ain’t, dutchess?” *Bride Wore Red* Film Capture.

There is a play on the misconceptions of class during this exchange. As the Count discusses the “powerlessness of protesting one’s fate” Anni tirelessly proclaims she is hungry. Armalia calls the waiter to bring caviar, but Anni declines, “Caviar for the count. Bring me a dish of stew with meat in it. And remember, put plenty of meat in it!” This “un-ladylike” behavior is returned by the Count as he asks if she would like a beer, but she asserts,

Anni: Champagne is good for me.
Armalia: Ah, you didn’t crook your little finger, thank you for that. Where did you learn such charming manners?
Anni: I go to the movies, I watch the ladies of your world, lots of simple and stupid and artificial.

It is the small details that tell us a lot about Anni: she is a working-class young woman who, based on her eagerness over stew with meat in it, cannot afford decent meals. Her demeanor and facial expressions reveal unhappiness in her life. Of equal significance, however, is her comment on the movies demonstrates her conflation of the "ladies" of the screen to be the ladies of Armalia's high-class world. Like Stella Dallas, Anni reveals she perceives the movies are representations of true high-class society. Thus, when Armalia offers her an unrealistic opportunity to live in a fancy hotel in the alps amongst the wealthy and "pass" as one of them for two weeks, Anni's not convinced, however, she accepts on one condition: "I won't go unless I can have a red evening dress." The red dress is revealed to be a beaded bugle dress-- a dress we later learn does not fit in with the upper echelons of society. And yet, Anni seems to believe the red dress is demonstrative of a high-class world she learned from watching the movies.

A common trope in rags to riches storylines is the "transformation" scene. The reveal becomes a kind of climax of the film: *Now, Voyager* (1942), *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Miss Congeniality* (2000), even *Princess Diaries* (2001). Yet, like Vivian in *Pretty Woman* (who also wears a red dress), Anni seems out of place when she shops for a new wardrobe. Anni's decision to ask for the coat ensemble on the window display shows her determination to class-pass. It is unclear how Anni knows to shop here, but it is a shop with the latest fashion trends. The coat in the window is a fur coat; one of the more luxurious and prominent fashion trends of the 1930s. While the film was released in 1937, it illustrates the studio's strategies: to predict and set fashion trends. For instance, the 1938 Sears catalog (Fig. 18.), depicts an extremely similar style—it even has a similar matching hat (Fig. 17 & 18). The description is "long, slender, perfect-fitting princess lines do the utmost for your figure." Anni's coat ensemble is missing the princess lines, but makes up for it with a more exaggerated fur collar than the one in the catalog. The ensemble in the lower right hand corner has a similar fur collar and is described as the "Queens of all luxury furs…so flattering, so rare and costly. It's the choice of America's wealthiest women!...a huge rippling collar that swathes your shoulders in a wealth of black-and-silver glory" (Blum, 101). The advertisement uses terms to imply the coat is the best of all luxury, expensive and rare, exactly what wealthy women purchase. (While Sears' catalogs tended to sell more affordable fashions, this ensemble cost $59.50 in 1938, an amount that estimates to $1,000 in 2019.) Hence, the perfect outfit for Anni to make an entrance with. Armed with this guise, Anni enters the land of the rich signaling royalty, wealth, and glory. But, when Anni realizes she could purchase whatever she would like, she takes her opportunity and tells the shop-lady, "and I shall like a red evening dress—with beads!" Harkening back to Bourdieu's 'habitus' theory, both "classes" collide in the fashion-- the fashionable regal fur coat Anni knows she must wear, and the red-beaded evening dress she *chooses* to wear. Two tensions begin to arise: what Anni wants for herself (signaled through the red dress), and what high class society deems as ideal feminine fashions.

Fig. 16. A window display signals to Anni what she should buy. *Bride Wore Red* Film Capture.

Fig. 17. A luxurious and fashionable fur ensemble. *Bride Wore Red* Film Capture.

Fig. 18. Fur Coat Ad. Source: *Everyday Fashions of the Thirties as Pictured in Sears Catalogs.*

Anni's successful class-passing is reflected in Rudi, a wealthy young man at the hotel, who asks to marry her. Yet at the same time, she falls for the mailman, Giulio, who has no intention of breaking out of his working-class. The film makes it clear she *could* be happy alongside Giulio, but she is more concerned with securing her social position and rising in class. The climax of the film is when Anni dons the red dress despite her maid's warning against it. As Anni gets ready to showcase the dress, the maid (who is also an old friend) has a strong reaction towards it and what it represents:

Maid: I'm afraid of you tonight! I thought I knew you. I thought you could love and be hurt and grow like everything else that lives. But you have no heart, Anni. You're like a fire that burns everything around it and destroys whatever it touches. And in the end destroys itself….
Anni: Oh shut up!
Maid: You're the same! You'll always be the same. I'm afraid of you.

Anni's maid, Maria, is an old coworker and friend, and the comparison between the two speaks to the 1930s Depression context. While Anni wants to get ahead in life, Maria tells Anni she was frightened of "how heavy the rouge had become" when she worked at the bar and claims she is truly happy working morning and night at the hotel, which suggests she is happy because the job is an *honest* one. The film depicts working-class

values as commendable and honest. Giulio is a mailman with no interest in wealth, Maria is happy as a hotel maid, and the peasant class that lives near the hotel are admired by the wealthy guests. This serves to justify Anni's eventual decision and ending: instead of her pursuit of riches through Rudi, she gives it up and chooses "love." But it is her desire for riches that takes shape in the red dress, and the reason Maria has a visceral reaction to it.

Anni's "downfall" is a result of two interrelated events: a letter from Count Armalia which exposes Anni, and the red dress. The dress signifies Anni's last attempt at a high-status life, her agency, and her "true" class. For instance, author Adrienne Munich writes of the dress as a signifier of Anni's "true" class, in *Fashion in Film:*

> The motion picture star is here illuminated by her own costume. Daring to put light shows within the light show, Adrian organized his own sartorial discourse within and something against the mise-en-scene. Who other than Adrian would have decided to render a dress and matching cape in red bugle beads? Let us not forget, however, that bugle beads, sequins, and rhinestones have a long history of signifying the side-show and burlesque side of sexualized entertainment, relying on a stabilized caricature of money and finery. (150)

Munich notes that costume designer Adrian was intentional about the *kind* of material he used for the dress. The red dress appears as lamé from afar, but as Munich notes, bugle beads, sequins, and rhinestones signify Anni's façade and occupation as a cabaret singer (Fig. 19). Luxurious 1930s fashions included fabrics such as velvet, silk, gold and silver lamé, fur, even cotton and linen were considered chic. And although the dress was made by hand and is impeccable craftsmanship, its function within the film says a lot more about the relationship between dress and status in 1930s America. Indeed, within the film the dress gives Anni's "true" class away, but it also reveals that Anni is attempting to be a false version of herself. She denies her "true" class values, her friendship with Maria, and her love for Giulio. However, more importantly, Sarah Berry adds that instead, it "...suggests Anni's desire to flaunt her contempt for the pretensions and codes of the upper class…a protest of reclaiming her original desire for autonomy and pleasure…" (37-38). Instead of abiding by the "rules" of high-class, feminine, fashion ideals, Anni proudly shows that women can wear *what* they like and *where* they like.
This transgression, however, nonetheless reveals who Anni is and she must leave the hotel. She walks out with her head held high in a simple, black wool cloak. Anni reveals what is underneath the cloak, her peasant dress from a dance at the hotel. It functions as a way to tell Giulio and the audience that she would rather choose love and a working-class lifestyle over the high society.

As with many women's pictures during the 1930s and 40s, the film ends in marriage, or the suggestion of marriage. The film that begins as a rags to riches, Cinderella tale, is not that in actuality. Anni learned her "essential place" and realized what is truly important: satisfaction with a simple life and marriage. This unconvincing resolution, however, actually "demonstrates the character's lack of social options in terms

of both class and gender; it problematizes the roles available to her rather than successfully naturalizing them" (Berry, 39). The film's message is that to successfully "pass" as a high-class lady, a woman must appear white, feminine, well-mannered, and abide by appropriate dress codes. Thus, as with Stella Dallas, the film reinforces the notion that Anni/Crawford could have had it all, (and in the end we're made to accept that she *does* end up having it all, a man who loves her, and a satisfaction with a lower-class life), but she *could* have had riches if she had only acted the part. But again, it is not simply that Anni wears an inappropriate red dress that is a threat, it is that she fooled everyone into thinking she was one of them. The real threat to society is a person's ability to pass through social classes by any means such as fashion. The film's message is a 1930s one: be satisfied with what you have, do not indulge in elaborate fashions, and love is more important than riches. At the same time, however, the film's message is also that transgressing class barriers can be done as long as one dresses, performs, and visually appears to be the white, feminine ideal.

Fig. 19. Design for *The Bride Wore Red* (1937), by Adrian. Source: Museum at FIT.

Stella Dallas (1937)

Based on the novel by Olive Higgins Prouty, *Stella Dallas* stars Barbara Stanwyck, John Boles, and Anne Shirley, produced by Samuel Goldwyn and directed by King Vidor. Stella Martin (Barbara Stanwyck) comes from a working-class background and dreams of escaping it. As with most 1930's women's pictures, the film ends in marriage, but it does not end happily. Stella is punished for being perceived as an unfit mother, a badly dressed, ill-mannered woman. One can argue that Stella's class is the cause of her downfall; her unawareness of appropriate high society behavior and dress and her inability to let go of her class leads her to a tragic end. Yet many scholars have argued that Stella *is* aware of what she is doing with dress. It is not that Stella cannot let go of her class, which aligns with Bourdieu's theory of the 'habitus,' it is that she is *choosing* to create her own identity through clothes, which is not tied to class binaries.

Stella Martin's social class is made apparent early in the film as she stands outside her parent's run-down home, waiting to get the attention of a wealthy young man Stephen Dallas. Stella develops a plan to run into Stephen and sews an appropriate ensemble to match: a white summer chiffon ensemble with a white summer hat. She claims to bring her father and brother sandwiches, but is really is an excuse to meet Stephen. This is an interesting moment, because although Stella comes from lesser means, she is fully aware of what to wear to obtain Stephen's attention. Stella's "class-passing" here is significant and signals the multifaceted significance of 1930s fashion. The democratization of fashion and diffusion of many fashion and movie magazines reached women of all classes. Stella's fabrics are most likely affordable alternatives, however, what is significant is that Stella is able to fashion herself to gain Stephen's attention. While Stella purchased the sandwiches from a store, she tells Stephen she made them herself, to which he replies: "Hey you're some cook, aren't you?" Stella here is coding herself as the mythological ideal, white, female companion-- one who is pretty, dresses well, and cooks, signaling the right kind of woman from the right kind of class, and Stephen is smitten by her. The two later go on a date; after the movie, the two walk and Stella brings up their social differences:

Stella: I wanna be like all the people you've been around. Educated, you know and speaking nice.
Stephen: Don't be like anyone else. I like you the way you are.
Stella: No, I don't want to be like *me,* not like the people in this place but like the people in the movie… you know, doing everything well-bred and refined.
Stephen: -and dull. Stay as you are, don't pretend Stella. Anyway, it isn't really well-bred to act the way you want.
Stella: But I wanted to be different ever since I met you and if I was around you long enough I could be. I could learn to talk like you and act like you and pretty soon I… well, you've done a lot for me even in these couple of weeks.

The exchange reveals Stella's yearning to be specifically, a higher status (unlike Anni and Lily). Stella here conflates high status and high class, based on the film they watched (and similar to Anni). To Stella, then, high-class is more so about status and appearances such as speaking well, attending dances, and dressing well. And yet, Stephen tells her not to change.

Stephen falls for Stella as she is, and the two marry and have a daughter, Laurel. The day they arrive from the hospital, Stella opens a party invitation for the two. She asserts she wants to go and have a nice time but Stephen replies: "Stella you don't want to go dancing already." Despite Stephen's disapproval, Stella succeeds. Unlike the ensemble Stella wore to meet Stephen, her dress here is more embellished. Stella dances and laughs with her new friend Ed Munn, while Stephen stands by disapprovingly. Upon their arrival home, their social and class differences rise to the surface once again:

Stephen: Stella I asked you not to wear those earrings, that cheap imitation necklace. You took them off, you agreed, then after we got there you came out of the dressing room…
Stella: -Now Stephen, I'm perfectly willing to let you tell me how to walk and talk and how to act. But please, don't give me pointers on how to dress. Allow me at least to know more about one thing than you do. After all, I've always been known to have stacks of style…

While Stephen didn't want Stella to change before, he now pleads her to "adapt herself." It is the excessiveness, the "cheap imitation" jewelry, along with her independent behavior that bothers Stephen most. Costume jewelry was fashionable by the 1930s, however, Stephen's disdain for it reveals *his* taste according to his high-class breeding and unwillingness to accept Stella's personal style. Therefore, while Stella's choice in dress and her behavior can be seen as independent and free, to Stephen, it is unsettling.

Unfit Mother

According to Jeanine Bassinger in *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930s-1940s,* Stella's downfall is tied to three events in the film. The first of these is when Stephen comes home from work in New York to find Ed Munn in his apartment drinking and smoking cigars (Fig. 20). Stephen walks in on a scene that makes Stella appear as an "unfit" mother. Stephen threatens to take Laurel away, but Stella will not allow it. Instead, Stephen separates from her. The scene stresses that Stella is in actuality a good mother because prior to this, Stella disclosed she had not left the house for two months because she didn't want to leave Laurel alone. Stella is a caring and attentive mother, however, Stephen judges her character and abilities as a mother on this event, one that supports his perspective of Stella as someone whose class will always define her, even in her role as a mother. (Bassinger writes the other three events are: Stella and Ed Munn's train ride into the city, when Stephen comes to visit during

Christmastime only to find a drunken Ed Munn in the apartment as well, and Stella's appearance at a posh hotel where she and Laurel are staying (423-424)).

Fig. 20. An unsightly scene, drink in hand and cigar on baby's plate. *Stella Dallas* Film Capture.

Un-lady-like Behavior and Party for Two

A comedic exchange between Stella and Ed on the train quickly turns into a shunning of Stella. As with most of the decisions Stella makes in the film, her action is innocent and well-intentioned. She is planning a birthday party for Laurel and is on her way to purchase party decorations. Ed accompanies her on the train, when he decides to have some fun and spreads itching powder on the passengers. It works, and he and Stella cannot contain their laughter. Stella walks over into the first-class section, still laughing with Ed. The passengers in the section stare disapprovingly, and two women recognize her as Laurel's mother. One of them is Laurel's teacher, and the two exchange a brief conversation about Stella:

Woman: Is that the father?
Miss Phillibrowne: No, it can't be, she particularly said her husband was in New York.
Woman: Such women don't deserve to have children.
Miss Phillibrowne: Laurel is such a lovely child. I don't want to think-

It is not only Stella's "inappropriate" behavior, here. It is important to point out Stella does wear fashionable *elements*. In comparison to styles in *1930s Fashions,* however, her dress is considered *excessive.* Stella wears a floral print dress with a ruffle neckline (ruffles are her signature detail) combined with a plaid wool coat, a fur piece, topped with an angled hat with netting (Fig. 21). The mismatched ensemble and brash behavior, along with her accompaniment of a man who is not her husband is, according to the two women and 1930s standards, reason to deem her undeserving of children. Miss Phillibrowne's comment "I don't want to think—" suggests Laurel can grow up to be like her mother. Never mind that Stella *makes* her own clothing, (a signal of her working-class status as well), her disavowal to dress herself according to the 30s fashionable and feminine ideal, and to act according to the upper-class' standards of legitimate ways of dress and behavior marks her as an illegitimate woman and mother.

Fig. 21. A horrific scene in the first-class section. *Stella Dallas* Film Capture.

This disapproval becomes clearer on Laurel's 13th birthday. Stella makes Laurel a lovely dress, a dress Stella tries to add a fabric flower but Laurel declines it, to which Stella replies, "Oh for heaven's sake you're just like your own father, you want everything to be as plain as an old shoe." The exchange says a lot about Laurel and recalls Bourdieu's theory of the 'habitus.' On the one hand, it presses forth the notion that, because Laurel is Stephen's daughter, she inherently has high-class taste. She knows how to dress "plainly," and thus "tasteful." On the other hand, it problematizes this notion because Stella has raised Laurel. While the film presses the notion that "high-class

taste" is something passed down, it simultaneously says taste has nothing to do with one's class. The scene is tragic, and although Stella and Laurel don't yet realize why no one shows up, they soon find out.

There Goes a Birdy

A few months pass later, Stella takes Laurel to a posh resort, and Stella decides to perm and bleach her hair to an extreme. She sets plans with Laurel and Laurel's love interest, a wealthy young man Richard Grosvenor whom she met during her time with Stephen. Stella wears a floral print dress with a ruffled neckline, excessively permed hair with a large bow headband attached to a polka dot netting, a purse, a white fox fur piece around her shoulders, and over six bangles and bracelets on each of her wrists (Stella's look is so loud, it could actually be heard) (Fig. 22). It is also clear that Barbara Stanwyck was put in a padded suit to appear what they called in the 1930s as "stout." An important note is that as the film progresses, Stella's figure gets "rounder." This is important because, as authors Charlotte Fiell and Emmanuelle Dirix write in *1930s Fashions,* "It needs to be remembered that fashion is not about reality—it's about elitism. Fashion is also bound to the imaginary with its fixation with the perfect body and its obsession with ever-changing ideals of beauty" (10). Fashion is about elitism; it is the fashion leaders that *create,* however, the elite that enact and *enforce*. Moreover, just as importantly, fashion is fixated with the perfect body, and it seems Stella is made to be larger to appear as if she moves further and further away from an ideal 1930s body. It is unclear why the film calls for this, other than to signal Stella's "letting go" of her figure might also suggest her "letting go" of morality and acceptable motherhood.

Fig. 22. *Stella Dallas* Film Capture.

Fashion historians on the *Dressed* podcast, Cassidy Zachary and April Calahan discuss "stout" fashion and bring up important points about the history of women's physical appearance in America. While standard sizing in America did not begin until the 1940s due to World War II, in 1930s America, there was the claim that stout women simply didn't exist. The assumption must have been influenced by anecdotes such as, "One woman recalled that she and her friend would go shopping together each week and split the two pounds of hamburger a quarter would buy, taking turns each week paying the extra penny." (Ware, 3). We know now that diet alone does not result in thin people, but this is especially important when we look at the way stout women were essentially written out of fashion history. Stout women were excluded from fashion magazines as evident from 1930s fashion advertisements. After all, the ideal feminine body was tall, thin, with a trim waist. Stella, like other "stout" women in 1930s America, is being written out of a high-class, high-status society. When Stella shows up at an ice-cream shop to meet Laurel and Richard's mother, Laurel overhears her friends making fun of her mother.

Did you see the makeup on her? And those shoes! Well I thought she was wearing stilts!
You sure missed a show!
What show?
Why that woman on the tennis court!
I didn't even know they let that kind of woman loose anymore!

You shoulda seen the get up!
What a woman!
That's not a woman that's a Christmas tree!
And it walks.

It is here that for the very first time, Laurel sees her mother through the eyes of society. Horrified, she runs out of the ice-cream parlor. Laurel does not tell her mother of the incident, she simply tells her she wants to leave. Stella accepts, and they board the train. It is on the train, however, that Stella too, finally overhears how others perceive her. She is in bed in her bunk, with Laurel below her, when she overhears young girls talk about her.

Girl 1: I'll tell you she was quite a number! Dresses up to here.
Girl 2: And paint an inch thick. And bracelets up to here that clanked.
Girl 3: Isn't it weird to have such a common looking creature as a mother?
Girl 1: Poor thing.
Girl 3: Poor nothing.
Girl 1: She's wearing Dick's fraternity pin.
Girl 3: She won't be wearing it long once Mrs. Grosvenor hears about it.

Both Laurel and Stella overhear the young girls, and Laurel, afraid her mother overheard, checks up on her in her bunk. Stella acts as if she is asleep, and Laurel kisses her on the forehead and squeezes in bed with her. However, Stella heard it all, and for once, realizes the danger she poses for her daughter's chance to be part of a high-class society. It is clear by Stella's tears, that she realizes what she must do (Fig 23).

Fig. 23. Stella Knows What She Must do. *Stella Dallas* Film Capture.

A Mother's Sacrifice

The next morning, Stella visits Stephen's new partner, Helen Morrison, about giving Laurel up. The differences between Stella and Helen are abruptly clear. Stella wears a printed fur coat, a white top underneath with ruffles on the neckline, a necklace on top of that, and a black angled hat with a netting over it, while Helen wears a simple white silk dress. Helen epitomizes a "true lady," as Allison Whitney describes in "Race, Class, and the Pressure to Pass in American Maternal Melodrama: The Case of Stella Dallas," and writes, "There is nothing in Mrs. Morrrison's behavior or appearance to suggest anything other than whiteness" (13). Helen is indeed a "lady" and understands what Stella feels she must do. Afterwards, Stella convinces Laurel she will marry Ed and will move to South America with him; she plays loud music and sets a picture of Ed above the fireplace. Laurel doesn't believe her mother would want to give her up, but is horrified by the scene and runs off. Years later Stella has given up Stephen's financial support, and seems to be a part of the working-class once again. She reads Laurel will marry Richard in the newspaper. As Laurel is getting dressed in her wedding gown, she wonders why she never heard from her mother again or whether she will attend the ceremony. Helen assures her she would be there if she could, and makes sure to leave the windows open for Stella. Stella, out in the rain and in rags, slowly walks up to the

window and sees her beautiful daughter kiss her new husband. The film pans to a close-up of Stella, and we see her expression of happiness and sadness. She has fulfilled her role as a mother by giving her daughter everything she deserves in life, even if it meant a life without her.

In *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory* (2015), Joanne Entwistle writes that cultural conventions are incredibly important. She writes, "Conventions of dress attempt to transform the flesh into something recognizable and meaningful to a culture; a body that does not conform, that transgresses such cultural codes, is likely to cause offense and outrage and be met with scorn or incredulity" (275). This is exactly the case for Stella Dallas. She was unwilling to transform into something recognizable and acceptable. Moreover, dress, as Fred Davis writes, is not simply clothing, it is the way in which one talks, and acts. Entwistle continues to say in the chapter, "Addressing the Body," that we draw attention to the conventions of our culture by breaking them. "Bodies which do not conform, bodies which flout the conventions of their culture and go without the appropriate clothes are subversive of the most basic social codes and risk exclusion, scorn, or ridicule" (274). Again, although Stella is still a white woman in 1930s America, (her one privilege, and one we can relate simply to the fact that Hollywood visually Americanized its actors), Stella's way of dressing herself was her downfall as it showed her visual decline of the 1930s American feminine ideal, thus breaking convention. A woman must not only be white, thin, and well-mannered. She must also dress fashionably and tasteful if she wishes to be accepted by 1930s American society.

Yet, it would be an injustice to Stella to argue that she fails to dress appropriately simply because of her working-class background. For instance, her ability to sew dress designs for Laurel makes it clear that she *knows* what "tasteful" style looks like. When it comes to creating designs for herself, however, "she is conscious of its failure to fall within those same boundaries. Stella treats taste like a spectrum, adopting the visual markers that appeal to her, personally" (Goggans, *Make It Work,* 123). Stella knew what to wear to appear as the white feminine ideal when she met Stephen, however, as Goggans and Anna Siomopoulos both discuss, Stella does not abide by fashions suggested in fashion advertisements. Her mix of luxurious fur, ruffles, patterns, indicates an "aesthetic approach to classlessness" (Siomopoulos, 9). Stella sews ensembles for herself in a way that denies an identity to be imposed upon her, instead, creating her own identity. *This* is what is most frustrating to everyone around her, especially within the upper echelons when she is married to Stephen, and what I argue, makes her so uniquely powerful and a great 1930s figure. That Stella loses her daughter as a cause of this transgression reinforces the notion that women, and even more so mothers, were encouraged to consume for (and exert energy into) the family and the nation, but not for their self-interests. Stella is punished for her refusal of not simply the 1930s white, feminine mythology, but likewise, the ideal 1930s mother. As Anna Siomopoulos writes in "'I Didn't Know Anyone Could Be So Unselfish': Liberal Sympathy, the Welfare State, and King Vidor's Stella Dallas", "Rooseveltian rhetoric distinguished between "good"

consumption, done in the name of the family, the nation, and the "general welfare," and "bad" consumption, done for the purposes of "individual self-interest and class rise" (7). The film reinforces this Rooseveltian rhetoric as Stella is punished for not only attempting to rise in class, but for exerting energy into creating her own definitions of style and fashion, rather than appear to be an ideal 1930s mother.

Barbara Stanwyck's life was also a rags to riches tale and this heavily influenced her politics. Born Ruby Catherine Stevens, Stanwyck lost her mother at the age of four and consequently, abandoned by her father. This forced her to grow up quickly, and at the age of fourteen dropped out of school to work in a department store. Stanwyck later worked as a Ziegfeld follies dancer, was "discovered", and went on to become a film star. Because Stanwyck was able to succeed without aid, she firmly believed others could obtain success with hard work and without government assistance, thus, opposed Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency. Stanwyck sympathized with the lower, working-class, however, she felt that hard work was the American way. Like Stanwyck, the director for the film, King Vidor, was a republican and member of the 1944 anti-comminist Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American ideals, a group which believed communist, fascist, and totalitarian groups perverted the medium and sought to preserve American standards, ideals, and beliefs. Among Vidor's films include *The Crowd* (1929) and *Hallelujah* (1929), which present social commentaries. It is difficult to comprehend the extent that Stanwyck, King Vidor, and the studio influenced the 1937 version of *Stella Dallas,* however. The film had to versions before it, the novel and the 1927 film, which is also sympathetic to Stella Dallas. However, Stanwyck did indeed have tremendous star power, and according to the U.S. Treasury, she was one of the highest paid actors with a salary of $151,979 the year of 1937. It is possible, then, that our sympathy towards Stella and her motherly sacrifice is seen as a heroic act because, despite Stella's diminished social standing, she continues on and is proud of her sacrifice. This can be attributed to a few factors: Stanwyck's interpretation of the character, the producer King Vidor, or the studio, which (also because of the code), sought to have an uplifting and moral ending to the film.

PART V

Conclusion

In the introduction, I state research questions I sought to answer by the end of the paper. What role do films and fashion play in our understanding of 1930s America? 1930s films are crucial artefacts of history. These three 1930s films in particular help us understand the changing social and cultural dynamics in America which influenced everyone, but women in particular. What these case studies show are the effects of the democratization of fashion and consumer culture, and the power of dress dependent on this decade. Early Hollywood films demonstrate race, gender, and class realities which made up American life, a fact evident when we compare pre-code to the code era in Hollywood.

What is the purpose or function of the rags to riches film motif, specifically, in 1930s America? The rags to riches film motif is central to the Depression, and reveals the blurring of class distinctions as well as the performativity of gender, race, and whiteness. 1930s fashion enabled (mostly white) women the opportunity to "dress up" in class, which gave them a sense of freedom at the same time that it revealed the arbitrariness of class. These three rags to riches films show the way that class is tied to one's visual appearance. Social mobility is thus anchored to dress and class.

What role does film play in our understanding of women's/gender roles? Of the values important to white America in the 1930s? How does 1930s dress signal a tension as seen in these three films? Dress in these films signals a tension between emancipation and restriction. While women attempted to break free from ideal notions of a woman, their inability to succeed reveals a society unwilling to accept too many changes, even during the Depression. The Depression caused Americans to re-think where success came from, and whether it was attainable at all. The rich were no longer seen as worthy of emulation, they were viewed with disdain. However, the fear of losing everything caused Americans to strive for security and tradition. Hence, the white feminine ideal continued to be enforced by the end of these three films. The films subvert the *mythical* construction of this 1930s American ideal woman, at the same time that they support it. Anni settles for a peasant-class life and is happy with it, Stella sacrifices her love for her daughter because she failed to mold into the ideal mother, and Lily becomes a selfless wife who gives up her riches in the name of love. Indeed, these films function as a way to construct a *myth*, 1930s white femininity who was a product of her time. It is a *myth* because as Barthes writes, it is accepted as natural. The 1930s American feminine ideal became a touchstone and standard for all women, and what we think of when we think of early Hollywood women. In order to stress the white feminine ideal, and significant for Anni, Stella, and Lily, the films first had to depict the opposite of what was "moral." For instance, to convince women that marriage, motherhood, and family were the right route,

films had to show women do the exact opposite. But I argue that this does not take away from what is *shown.* Anni and Stella's transgression through dress is just as important, and in my belief even more important, as the backlash in highlighting important aspects of 1930s America. Moreover, Jeanine Basinger poignantly points out in *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960*, that "No one ever suggests how unintentionally liberating a form the women's film actually was. The stories were a kind of protective coloring, which allowed women to step outside the rules and thus be riotously freed" (Basinger, 6). However, to align with the code, the film's ending needed to be *safe,* and to communicate the message that the white feminine ideal must be upheld at all costs.

This thesis analyzes the *myth* of the 1930s white, American feminine ideal, I advocate for and utilize 1930s film as the site of this analysis and argue that dress is a crucial component to the subversion and construction of the *myth*. These elements are all integral to the rags to riches film motif and I argue that the act of class-passing and social mobility is as much about class, as it is about gender and whiteness. The characters problematize Bourdieu's theory of the 'habitus', and demonstrate that one's taste is not anchored to their class. Analyzing 1930s film and culture offers a more nuanced vision of the depression. In analyzing these three rags to riches films, we better understand the importance of dress and fashion in 1930s America. Dress is never a frivolity. The function of dress in 1930s films serves as a reinforcement of a feminine ideal, however, more importantly, it allowed women a chance to create their own identities through their clothes and continues to do so. This is enough for an advocation of the legitimacy and *power* that clothing has on our social lives.

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