

### **The Role of Women's Network in Recent "Women's Films"**

Women's films as a distinct category known in the 1940's and 50's ceased to exist. However, since the 1990's we saw a resurgence of movies that could be categorized as such again. They have strong women at their center, making life-changing moral decisions. A subset of these movies, made in the last decade, set in the 1940's-50's, are consciously attempting to convey their message from an era, when women's films were an integral part of the cultural landscape. The major difference between the classic women's films and recent ones is that in the latter meaning is created not through an individual heroine's story, but through a network of women's. In this paper I will describe how three popular movies are placing this very network in the center and the various ways these networks manifest their roles. What "How to Make and American Quilt" (1995), "The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood" (2002), and "Mona Lisa Smile" (2003) have in common is that they all show how female to female relationships provide solidarity helping women to survive and excel in a male dominated society. (For the sake of simplicity I will refer to them hereafter as "Quilt", "Ya-Ya" and "MLS".)

Women's films from the 1940's and 50's were almost exclusively stories of individual heroines and the movies themselves were driven by (and marketed based on the extensive usage of) the movie stars of the era. The newer movies I am analyzing also use the support of big name actors to some degree. Winona Ryder was not yet a major household name at the time of making Quilt, but she had two Oscar nominations and several teen classics behind her. Sandra Bullock on the other hand, by the time she played in Ya-Ya, had made over 30 movies including commercial successes like Speed, The Net, and Miss Congeniality. Mona Lisa Smile's main character is played by Oscar-winning Julia Roberts, who is a "star" as the word is understood in public

consciousness. These stars are present, but their relative importance has decreased compared to the classic era and got replaced by the valence of the multiplicity of actors/characters. Two out of the three directly refer to this expanded notion in their titles. The recommended way to make an (American) Quilt is for women to do it together as a joint project through their informal network. Sisterhood is the social bond that plays central role for the Ya-Yas. The appreciation of Mona Lisa's smile--and preparing for life after college--is a class project, where the individual students' stories make up the quilt of their sisterhood. It is through the interactions within these networks that stories and meaning unfold, as opposed to one person struggling alone.

The three movies use the women's network motif to frame other themes that are different, yet overlapping. Quilt is a treatise on the variance of male-female relationship, with a subplot of mother-daughter relationships. Ya-Ya is focusing on one particular mother-daughter relationship, and a woman's struggle with herself and motherhood. MLS is about teacher-student relationships, the fight of traditional role of woman in marriage, and her potential role through education. This generalizing summary shows that the site of the first two movies is exclusively in the "domestic sphere" and in the third it is in the conflict between that and the public sphere. In this regard they are similar to the women's films of the 1940's-50's, where the action also took place there. What is different though, that these places are no longer just the locations for the conflict between women and men, or women and society, but also filled with meaningful relationships with other women. The setting may have remained the same as in the classic movies, the domestic sphere, but the meaning and context has been changed in the recent films by emphasizing the previously unrecognized importance of female-to-female interpersonal relationships.

To gain a sense of how the public sphere is depicted one can look at the example of war. In these worlds war is something that men do, and affects women only indirectly. Quilt, similarly

to Mildred Pierce, “omits any reference to the war, both represses and reflects women’s wartime experience.” (Thornham 64) This omission makes it difficult to place the narrative precisely on the timeline of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The intention of this vagueness is to tell timeless stories. The narrative of the women needs the internal and relational actions as opposed the external extremities of war. Jack Whitman’s enlisting to become a pilot in World War II helps to date Ya-Ya’s plot. Because Vivi’s (the mother in Ya-Ya, played by Burstyn and Judd) love for him is depicted as a “true romantic love” his death causes an irreparable void in her that was never to be filled again, initiating her lifelong emotional and mental troubles. Her work of “building morale by being beautiful” (Walsh 51) can not be completed. On the other hand Jack’s death helped to strengthen the sisterhood by enabling Jack’s sister and Vivi to mourn together and the rest of the sisterhood to provide emotional support. For *MLS*, set in the 1953-54 academic year, the war appears only in the background of the Italian professor’s stories. Their secondary role is to entertain a whole class, i.e. a group of women, but primarily to be (ab)used by him to gain sexual favors, by creating an exotic, masculine persona. When we learn that he never fought or even has been to Europe he gets discredited. Thus the indirect ways war--a fragment of the public sphere as it is socially constructed--is used is to bind women together by getting replaced with women’s stories, through mourning, and class experience.

These films are also “women’s films”, because of the decisions the women have to make are moral ones, as opposed to the men’s films’ strategic, war, external kind. The moral choices the women are facing are “complex rather than abstract and embedded in the network of interpersonal relations.” (Walsh 43) The decisions almost always boil down having to decide between career and marriage/family. Instead of the classical dilemma of giving up the first as a sacrifice for the second, the issue and the answer gets reframed as a conscious choice. This

replaces the traditional model of “moral equation of goodness with self-sacrifice.” (Gilligan 72) Finn (Ryder in *Quilt*) opts for marriage and we don’t even learn whether she finishes her thesis. Vivi returns to her family duties after he “involuntary breakdown,” despite the fact that she clearly needed more help. Sidda (played by Bullock) will also be marrying her beau and her work, which in the beginning of the movie seemed crucial to her, is not even mentioned in the second half of the movie. In *MLS* the most promising student (Joan, played by Stiles) ends up not going to graduate school and becomes a housewife, just like her professor feared. On the surface the difference is in her attitude, as she very vocally says, “It was my choice. I wanted a home, didn't want to sacrifice it.” With this statement she pushes away the argument that she could have both, confirming that “obligation and sacrifice override the ideal of equality.” (Gilligan 64) What goes unacknowledged here is how people’s wishes and wants are developed. To what extent social norms and peer pressure define them and to what extent they are innate. According to Bandura's social learning theory we learn, our values and norms are formed in social context. The women in these movies leave, breathe, think, relate, as members of their circle. They develop their identities there interacting with each other. Thus their participation in the networks can account for, at least partially, for the choices they make.

All the women in the previous examples decided to get married. *MLS* shows that there are other possible choices when “women’s judgments are concerned with the resolution of real as opposed to [men’s] hypothetical dilemmas.” (Gilligan 69) Betty (played by Dunst) divorces her cheating husband, creating a social scandal in her family and environment. Furthermore Miss Watson (played by Roberts) also opts out from marriage despite being proposed to; an unthinkable and unfathomable act for most of her students. For men in classic films “all the excitement of life—the passion, the risk—occurs outside marriage rather than within it.” (Haskell

156) The aforementioned choices paint a complementary picture, that there is life outside marriage for women too. I could not avoid noticing though the differences in the genders of the movies' creators. *MLS* was written, directed, and produced (on the executive level) by men. Compared to this *Quilt* was written and directed by women and two out of its three executive producers were also women. Similarly *Ya-Ya* was also written and directed by women, and its four executive producers were all women. In short, *MLS* is the brainchild of men, while the other two movies are products of women. While *MLS* is more confrontational and explicit--driving points about equality and challenging "traditional values" (including women's place in society) more vocally—its network of women is the weakest. The network of women on screen is stronger in movies with a network of women behind the screens. They want to convey their own experiences and vision through more subtle ways; for them "the social and political is understood in private contexts and emotional terms." (Thornham 47)

Social class is another strong common theme in these movies. "The ambiance of most of these [classic women's] films is distinctly middle-class." (Walsh 28) Similarly, the women and men of *Quilt* are from the middle-class. *Ya-Ya*'s women are upper class ladies, while *MLS* has both middle-class and upper class characters. Class consciousness is manifested in all three movies, albeit differently, as an integral and integrating aspect of the women's network. The quilt-making artisans of *Quilt* relate to the world from their (upper?) middle-class position. They welcome in their circle the African American friend, who becomes equal in some sense, superior in others to them. The lack of significant difference in social class amongst them is a necessary prerequisite for the network's smooth operation. The *Ya-Ya* ladies recognize their higher social status, even as young girls, but join forces, when their beloved African American servant is treated harshly. The difference is too big and embedded in social structure for them to elevate her

to their level, though. The college in *MLS* acts as an equalizing force, because all women are students there, whether they came from upper class or not so upper. The joint experience of college life, including living together in the dormitory, forges the school class into a virtual social class, that of educated housewives(-to-be.)

The depiction of work as the struggle of daily life for economic survival is largely absent from these movies, with a few notable exceptions. The opening scenes of the first two movies show young women working, but in depreciative ways. Finn is supposedly working on her thesis, but we learn that she keeps abandoning it. Sidda's theatre play (in *Ya-Ya*) is also over, when we join in, and the neon-lights on stage are breaking down, suggesting failure on other levels too. We never learn what effort she put in it, only that she got a negative review. In *MLS*, Miss Watson's initial lectures are failures. On the other hand, any work with positive outcome is the result of joined efforts of a group of women. Most notably making an exquisite quilt is hard physical work and is shown as such. This network of women wove a physical quilt with their hands and a metaphorical quilt, representing the oral history of America, with their stories. Another reference to this theme is that all the women of *Quilt* collect a page or two of Finn's thesis when the storm blows the pages away. The *Ya-Ya* sisters also do hard emotional work to maintain their friendship and their friend. The grand happy end of that movie, signified by the reconciliation of the mother and daughter is due to their efforts. Miss Watson is also much more successful when her students cooperate with her. In exchange they, the students, discover knowledge and their strength in unity. Their self-enabling discovery is similar to the modern, feminist media students, where "the greatest change in feminist media studies is our conception of our own agency within the broader sphere of media culture." (Spigel 1217)

Artistic creativity is a common form of action in these epics. Be it a splendid quilt, elaborate headdresses or vivid paintings of flowers (ala Van Gogh-by-numbers) these are all handiworks of women. The faceless, therefore eternal, narrator of *Quilt* says that, “self expression heals the wounded heart.” We do not see how the Ya-Yas headdresses are created, but it is implied that they made them themselves. When each student surprises Miss Watson with a painting they accompany the gift with the words, “How else would you remember us?” The end result of making these artworks together is not just the tangible object, but also the bond between the people involved in the process, the joint experience is strengthening the network. How much more powerful this image is from that of the struggle of woman in classic woman’s film for herself, her husband, and family.

Having dealt with the content of the networks it is time to look at their forms. Women in these movies create to semi-secret societies. The quilt making is a tradition these women created on their own, but they always do it in private, in their rather closed club. They experience it as an enriching, fun, and exclusive activity. However by the nature of being exclusive they not just exclude others, but exclude themselves from society. The benefit is that the members become stronger together with their friends. The Ya-Ya is explicitly a secret-society, seemingly born out of young girls’ boredom. However it developed into a lifelong network, around which the women organized their lives. The young women in the Wellesley college have their own secret society the “Adam’s Ribs.” With this signifier name they define themselves in relation to men. Their only explicit goal is to get married. This society’s objective is to provide a venue for sharing experiences, wisdoms, ideas, and tips on how to accomplish it. This is a conservative reaction to “the 1946 national divorce rate, [being the] highest in the world, reflecting confusion and disruption.” (Walsh 77) The strength of these, exclusive, semi-secret clubs lays in the process and

target of inclusion and exclusion, who gets in and how. By establishing autonomy over this aspect of their lives they

All three of these networks are tools for women's individual and communal self-empowerment in different ways. The first and last time we see the circles of Quilt and Ya-Ya they are immersed in their ritual activity with African tribal drumming in the background, evoking a sense of sacredness and framing them as exotic. Once we, the viewers, are in this enchanted mode we can hear the words. In Quilt: "Women of the world unite. Let us bring together in a harmonious design this theme: where love resides." In Ya-Ya: "I revoke the queens that have come before us...I declare your queen, and princesses. ... We are the waters of the rivers, the rocks... Let no man put us down. Loyal forever." We can relate these to the closing lines of the MLS narrative that we hear when the group of students bikes in unity after the professor who is leaving the campus for good: "Not all who wonder are aimless. Especially not those who seek truth beyond tradition, beyond definition, beyond the image." The first quote is calling for unity amongst women, the second reminds us of feminine continuity and interdependence, and the third encourages growth. What is common in them is the message that women together have more power than they are aware of.

By bringing back the absent female voice, their self-expression is emphasized in the patriarchal society. Finn cannot talk to her fiancée boyfriend when she wants and needs to and has ongoing writers' block. When Vivi confesses hatred towards her children, wanting to abandon them, and running away to be unattached, the priest's answer is, "bear your cross silently." This parochial answer typifies patriarchy. Miss Watson does not have a chance to answer when she is proposed in a public space (a bar), she can only say her hesitant "no" in the privacy of her home. This is a reminder that classic women's films "are set in an interior, and often domestic spaces."

(Walsh 27) She is put in a position where the only acceptable answer is yes, anything else would be and is interpreted as no, despite that not being her intention. The narratives suggest that speaking is multi-person activity, one needs a receptive audience. To be the sympathetic ears is another role of the successfully utilized women's network.

These women's films still "convey the primacy of emotionality and human attachment" (Walsh 24), but both characteristics moves in a wider continuum now than 50-60 years ago. Struggling for honor was a central theme in those decades, but these movies are more interested in redefining what honor is, than accepting blindly the patriarchal definition. All three movies show situations where "responsibility for care includes both self and other." (Gilligan 95) The women have to take care of themselves and for others and not doing one at the expense of the other. Their personal network is the place where they accomplish it. This is a new development compared to the classic women's films, where women often opted to do only one or the other.

The difference between classic and modern women's films is the multiple role of the women's network. The star driven nature of the production is enhanced by strong support characters. The separation of domestic, i.e. feminine sphere from the public, e.g. war) sphere is filled with meaning derived from personal connections. Women's choices (and the values driving them) are developed in the framework of strong women circles, as a mechanism of coping with patriarchy. They support and create class consciousness, meaningful work, and beautiful art all together in their semi-secret societies. The overall effect of the presence of this network in the women's lives is not just listenership, but also unity, continuity and growth of the female voice. I believe all of these aspects show that small personal networks are models to be followed to empower the disenfranchised.

## **Bibliography**

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## QUILT NOTES

How do we know if we are supposed to stay with one person for the rest of one's life? Then silence

Bring together in a harmonious design this theme: where love resides.

Women

Sense of ritual

Wedding quilt surprise

Why marriage is a sacred thing?

You have to force deeply not thinkable

**Self expression heals the wounded heart**

Your sister was the closest I could get to you.

Did you ever forgive grandma?

I let her move in.

**Tribal music women of the world unite.**

Sophia – I like the feeling of falling. Picking on people

Bra off – baby crying

Where are you off this time?

I want to go to college

We can send only one of you to college

More important for junior to go

What happened? I became your wife I guess

Preston leaves Sophie's face through window with water running down.

I am not like my mother

Does not care.

-

Dear te artist, not a conventional man. Being married to Dean makes me feel unusual  
Dean: will die you leave. I am an artist, it makes me greedy

She moved to her parents' house, 2 streets down, it took 3 months for dean to find her

She was pregnant

Tenall keeps the next. Daen is more typical than not.

Leon feels strangling him

-

Constance the roses were yellow in Chicke's (dog) garden

Hardest part of being a woman is not being able to be a friend of a man"

Snailbait killed dog, buried under yellow roses.

Constance spent time with another man he was the love of her life (Hal)

Constance's husband died

Hal is done and I don't believe in grief

Daen and Constance over Hal's jacket

--

Anna's life before she quilt

Great grandmother set out to be free

Yellow tones

Crow is sitting on the fence.

Upstarting music

Crow let her to man

Anna is negro so must be especially nice to her

White (Glady's) hand on Ana's belly with black hand holding on it

Love of my daughter I was meant to find not love of a husband.

I am young, I am supposed to do foolish things.

Just spend the rest of your life regretting it?

Wordless seduction in the orchard, Leon

--

Marianne's pictures

She was a wild thing. All these men tried to tie me down

I refused to be tied down.

Marriage is created for the convenience of the father.

Your lovers seek perfection

Old lovers learn to see beauty in the.

--

Mom your father and getting remarried;

Red quilted sweater

I've been fooling around

Don't ever tell him.

Storm/winds start up

Paper thrown all over

-

Lays on the ground when she wants to leave.

Wind forces her into the artist studio where she sees pictures of herself

Artistic representation vs. cheating

Sophie steps onto

It is easier to start over

Yes

How nice to be so unattached.

They all worked 73 straight hours

Incorporated pattern and all the past stories.

Quilt is ready, follow the crow

What makes me happy about marriage you

have to choose your confrontation carefully.

The right choice will enhance your quilt.

Sophie dives again.

## YAYA Notes

All girl film production  
Openings tribal music, Louisiana, girls speaking out  
Revoking the "Queens that have come before us"  
Blood of people to rule our world -> **women empowerment**; I decarle your princess  
Quenn; we are the waters of the rivers, rocks,  
**Let now man put us down.** Loyal forever.  
Bullock: most wounded charming person -?  
Complex  
She danced her way through it  
"Dark Waters" play's title  
Spare the rod, spoil the child  
Phone trashing pattern  
Her mom never have gotten over anything  
Fededxing back and forth  
Grow up – both of you  
Mom's henchmen - Ya-Ya  
Triumph of the will/pill  
Go to the bathroom – it brings the food faster  
Sate rape, roofer  
To Mom – Long may she rave!  
Yaya mission of mercy  
Film title – book title  
Mama-Walker  
CPR exercise – memory on the porch  
Mama visits old black lady  
To the premier of Gone wit the Winw Picture based memory  
Looking down on nouveauc riches  
Most exciting time of her life  
Passion for servant – She has her own family vs. Hot chocolate  
Revolving door transition - standing up against racist family  
Brother Jack  
Drinking problem – Bloody Mary – celery staple  
To be a pilot  
**We have ot make our own G-d damned breeze.**  
Moral fiber shredded – showing breasts, going to jail  
Clinging of ice-cube  
Granddad treated wife heard, who did not want party

## Cross generational emphasis

Grandma praying  
Patriarchy-humiliation-granddad against grandma  
Grandma hated ma  
Mama always did the party thing well  
**Secret society, not public**  
You are more normal than you have the right to be  
**Jack dies, solidarity strengthens (war in background)**  
Loving mom<->duagter not a problem. What about dad?  
Child consoling Mom  
She drinsk, they shout  
Phone etiquette sucks – hanging up  
Power relations between the YaYa  
Mom in the car behind glass – **separation and reflections**  
Ritual – circle – oldest daughter don't let go away from true love  
She only saw me holding back  
I do the best I can 0 Just help her this one time  
Who shuts out who?  
Wide swamp dawn landscape  
Best lesson never learned from me – lay low  
Road back from hell is paved with humility.  
Mama is hurting too.  
Lyrics – I am such a mass that I've been desperately trying to be alone.  
Walker as name  
Father walked out  
Confessing – hatred towards children, want to abandon, run away want to be unattached.  
Bear your cross silently –  
**patriarchal/parochial answer from priest**  
Mom to dad: Did I ruing your life? When I said for better or worst I knew it was a coion toss.  
There is no shame in what happened.  
You can't all go.  
Once I dropped the basket  
Don't look at me in that tone of voice.  
Single motherhood, quitting drinking  
Physical abuse in the rain  
**Money not mentioned at all**  
She didn't leave – she was in hospital; she sure as hell was gone  
I am sorry if I made you gone (**guilt**)  
6 month involuntary breakdown

She never talked about it.  
She is distant she never trusted herself.  
She never believed she deserved you.  
Keeping up appearances  
Cars lining up – flying trip  
**Stigma of non-motherhood**  
Outsmarted again – got gas money  
Some things I don't expect to be forgiven, not  
by my children.  
Answer for prayers for more – you (daughter)  
Do I look like I gained weight – feminizing  
concern  
YaYa Initiation (framing the movie) carry on  
queens  
**Continuity**  
Opening up old YaYa wounds for me (scraping  
the palm)  
Always there were you need someone  
I love you - emotional reaffirmation

## MONA LISA SMILE NOTES

1953 fall  
**Writing as frame**  
You can smell this fear  
First class humiliation  
Better discipline next class Mrs. W.  
Her "companion" died  
Is it any good? It's not on the syllabus  
Not in the text book to tell you what to think.  
She is not done. She is at least over 30.  
No woman chooses not to marry.  
Dunst bitch, snitch, contraception  
We promise not to appear to be liberal  
Your sole responsibility will be taking care of  
your husband and his children  
If you were mine I would if I have let you go  
I wouldn't have asked for your permission  
Five years ago things would have slept my  
writs (1953)  
After I graduate I plan to get married  
And then?  
Then I plan to be married.  
Which law school would you go to?  
Keeping up with the Jones'  
You did something to impress her  
(No husband- Jenny) It was not supposed to  
turn out this way.  
I can do both (school and marriage)  
Giselle open woman

Fiancee - engagement, **absence of female  
voice**, no chance to answer (in the bar)  
Last time I checked we were not on this track  
**(said in private, while engagement in public)**  
Van Gogh's **honesty**; VG in art by mass  
production, VG by numbers,  
Refuse to compromise integrity  
The choice is yours, you can compromise  
or...  
I know be ourselves  
I am educating you.  
Don't disrespect our tradition  
Adams's ribs" – very secret society  
Truth or Dare – why are you not married?  
Divorce first in the city block  
**Who is subversive?** Enforcing/encouraging  
traditional values  
A girl to set you free? **What does it mean?**  
**Thrice!**  
I didn't realize that by demanding excellence I  
was challenging the roles you were born to fill"  
Gift – art,istine chapel, David and Lord,  
Mona Lisa  
Old soldier – Italian professor masculinity  
stereotype (**war removed**)  
Feeling a of being a rebound  
Synchronized swimming, don't forget to smile  
**(for the gaze)**  
Dunst show as evil, backstabbing  
Stiles will not go to Yale, eloped  
It was my choice  
You didn't have to choose  
I wanted a home, didn't want to sacrifice  
You can do both  
Cataclismic events strengthen connections  
Italian professor's war body, Stan  
Stationed at Army Language Institute in Long  
Island  
Dunst divorces  
Mona Lisa's smile: is she happy? She looks  
happy? What does it matter?  
Not everything is as it seems  
Celebrate – let's go dancing  
Life is not about "striking rich"  
Art, creativity – handy work, - sanctified outlet  
New York Kike, roommate  
I come to Wellesly because I wanted to make a  
difference"  
New walls to break down.

Not all who wonder are aimless  
"Especially not those who seek truth beyond  
tradition, beyond definition, beyond the  
image."

A league of their own (1992: WWII)

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0104694/>

Green Fried tomatoes (1991: 1920's  
Alabama)

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0101921/>

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113347/>

Not relevant

Truman show

Cry-Baby

Sky captain

Pleasantville

Big Fish

Blast from the Past

Sin city

Far from heave

Vera Drake

Magdalena sisters (2002)

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0318411/>

Walk on the clouds

The notebook

Radio Flyer

Good night Good luck

LA confidential