Chapter 1
The Representation of Women in Feminist Cinema: Fried Green Tomatoes as a Revolt Against Patriarchal System

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ABSTRACT

In the art of cinema, which fulfills the function of a “dream factory” with its male-dominated narrative structure, men are represented in active roles with their actions, while women in passive roles that do not or cannot interfere with the flow of events with their inactions. This perception, which dominates the cinema, showed a change with the reflection of intellectual context of the Second Wave Feminism to the films. In this sense, in the study, Fried Green Tomatoes, regarded as a feminist film example by movie critics and directed by Jon Avnet in 1991, was chosen as a sample. In the study, structuralist narrative codes that construct meaning in the film are analyzed in the context of feminist thought and film theory paradigms. In the film, the “strong female character representations,” which are placed in the center of narrative and positioned to advance the story, are subjected in the foreground; these characters also stand against the known stereotyped roles imposed on women by traditional narrative cinema.

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INTRODUCTION

Feminism did crack the mirror. That gesture was necessary in order to open up the powerful camera eye to new fields of vision: to different angles, points of view, positions, images and representations. (Anneke Smelik – Introduction, xviii)

The feminist movement changed the appearance of American culture in the seventies and eighties with its radical reaction to male dominance and rebellious attitude. In the political environment of the seventies, many feminists considered rape and pornography as the basic elements of male domination over women and began to focus on these problems. The movement, which was supported by radical groups both in the intellectual and local subcultural platforms, thus reach the large masses (Ryan & Kellner, 2010: 216). During these years, with the effect of changing social structure and feminist formations, feminist film theories have emerged and feminist films presenting alternative women images were started to be made. In the words of Smelik (2008: 221), the main purpose of feminist directors is to eliminate the old forms of representation. These directors sought to find new ways to represent the lives and experiences of women, to display feminine subjectivity and to address the feminine audience. Feminist cinema has become prominent with the development of feminist film theories by the names such as Claire Johnston and Laura Mulvey in the light of feminist paradigm. Hollywood cinema, on the other hand, while paid no attention to these feminist films which oppose the traditional narrative patterns, gave importance to male films where men have the power and women play side roles in which women take part as the proving element of the masculinity of the male character.

In the light of this information, the main purpose of the study is to analyze *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), directed by Jon Avnet, in line with the paradigms of feminist thought and film theory. In the analysis section of the film, it was utilized from the semiotic methodology by considering the multilayer film language structure of *Fried Green Tomatoes* and relationship between feminism-semiotic. This method is used to interpret how the meaning is produced through the representation of women in the film, to evaluate the contribution of social, cultural, auditory, technical and color codes created by the director’s preferences to the creation of film language and to reveal the subtext of the film.

In the conceptual and theoretical framework of the study, while a historical frame for women in the film industry is formed, also women in building blocks in the lesser known sector in the history of cinema are mentioned. Considering that the film industry is a very wide field, it is not possible to examine the women in the sector in detail within the scope of this study. For this reason, under the title of *Being a Women in the Film Industry*, the first and most important names among
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