

Spotlighting the Othered: The Formation of Stereotypes in Early Cinema and Their Silent Echoes Today

Antonia Jungwirth

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Antonia.Jungwirth@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

Barbara Tapa Lupack's *The Othering of Women in Silent Film: Cultural, Historical, and Literary Contexts* is a comprehensive examination of racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes in early cinema, with a focus on the representation of women. Lupack examines recurring tropes that are prevalent in silent film and sheds light on the broader social and cultural contexts that influenced these representations. The book is organized into eight chapters, each devoted to a specific underrepresented or misrepresented group in silent film.

Spotlighting the Othered: Stereotypen im frühen Kino und ihre stummen Echos heute

German Abstract:

Barbara Tapa Lupacks *The Othering of Women in Silent Film: Cultural, Historical, and Literary Contexts* ist eine umfassende Untersuchung rassistischer und geschlechtsspezifischer Stereotypisierungen im frühen Kino. Mit besonderem Fokus auf Frauenfiguren untersucht Lupack wiederkehrende Klischees und beleuchtet darüber hinaus soziale und kulturelle Kontexte, die diese Darstellungen beeinflusst haben. In acht Kapitel widmet sich Lupack einer bestimmten im Stummfilm unter- oder missrepräsentierten Gruppe.

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Within the flickering frames of silent film lies a kaleidoscope of social hopes, fears, and aspirations of early twentieth-century America. Lupack's comprehensive analysis delves deep into cultural and cinematic history, focusing on the portrayal of marginalized women against a backdrop of social change. With a rich academic background, including roles as Fulbright Professor of American Literature, academic dean at SUNY, and New York State Public Scholar, the author brings a wealth of expertise to her examination. Her writing and detailed descriptions of the films discussed demonstrate a commitment to thorough research and a nuanced understanding of historical context.

Like most studies in this field, Lupack's focus is on the prominent representatives of the film industry such as producers, directors, and actors. Little attention is paid to the rest of the crew behind the camera. While Lupack delves deeply into the individual experiences of various marginalized groups, some readers looking for a more intersectional analysis may find it somewhat limited, as each group is examined separately. Nevertheless, Lupack's efforts underscore the importance of diverse voices in shaping our collective storytelling and challenging prevailing norms.

Lupack takes a thoughtful approach to engaging with the material, seeking to address the historical portrayal of women without revision or justification. Instead, she focuses on examining the genesis of demeaning stereotypes that have othered women in silent film, while also seeking to challenge enduring narratives of white supremacy and male superiority by demythologizing these pervasive tropes (p. xviii). She not only explores female

stereotypes, but also sheds light on analogous male stereotypes that were prevalent in early cinema.

Contrary to the author's stated goal of combating stereotypes, the table of contents may seem somewhat superficial, almost essentialist, with broad categories such as "African Americans," "Native Americans," "Latinos," and "Asians," followed by the more nuanced treatment of prominent white women under chapters titled "Suffragists" and "The New Woman." Lupack emphasizes the role of language in shaping perceptions before diving into her analysis and she makes a considerate effort to address and contextualize disrespectful vocabulary. Nevertheless, she references controversial terms and while one might acknowledge the strategic use of terminology for historical context, her decision to quote language that is now considered harmful and to use terms such as "Indian" in her analysis without citation, clear justification or necessity could be seen as insensitive (p. xvii).

The first two chapters focus on the portrayal of "African Americans," especially women, highlighting the demeaning and limited roles assigned to them in early cinema. Lupack states that "although Black characters had appeared on film almost from the beginnings of cinema in the 1890s [...], racial portrayal remained static or retrogressive" (p. 14). While identifying and analyzing many very problematic films, Lupack also discusses – especially in the second chapter – how "race filmmakers" (p. 46), most notably Oscar Micheaux and Richard E. Norman, began to make black-produced and black-cast films in response to these troubling representations. Lupack offers inspiring and nuanced insights into how they sought to counter prevailing stereotypes and present more authentic portrayals of African Americans, while also setting some records straight: "Black men were regularly accused of raping white women, in fact it was white men who routinely raped Black women" (p. 49). These "race films," made by the oppressed, also provided a more authentic representation of women. A number of these films were led by ambitious, resourceful, and intelligent heroines. For example, the homesteader Eve Mason in *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), who defies conventional norms by rescuing her frightened (male) neighbor from an attack by the Knights of the Black Cross, who want to forcibly remove him from his property.

The following chapters explore the representation of “Native Americans” in early film history. Lupack details how dime novels and Wild West shows shaped the portrayal of Native characters in early cinema, perpetuating stereotypes as noble savages or violent aggressors and obstacles to civilization. Meanwhile, Wild West shows portrayed Native Americans as exotic figures in sensationalized performances. These representations influenced early filmmakers and established enduring tropes in Western cinema. The author provides examples from specific films and prominent filmmakers such as D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille. She also explores the social and cultural dynamics that contributed to the stereotypical portrayal of Native American women as “squaws” or “Indian princesses” in early cinema and provides insight into how these stereotypes were perpetuated through film narratives. There is often an ironic, detached undertone to the way Lupack describes the storyline – understandable, given the deeply racist and, by today’s standards, almost absurd content: “an exotic-looking Native Other, the daughter of the tribe’s chief, is attracted to a white man and disavows her community, betrays her own people, and even sacrifices herself in order to save him and his white friends” (p. 94).

In chapter four, Lupack highlights the important role of filmmakers such as James Young Deer and Lillian St. Cyr in providing more sympathetic and authentic portrayals of Native Americans, and especially in portraying female characters as strong and individualized figures, emphasizing the historical significance of these early efforts in shaping the industry.

The fifth chapter on “Asians” and the following chapter on “Latins” are structured in the same way as the previous ones: Lupack gives many examples of misrepresentation in various films, followed by introducing individuals who have tried to tell authentic stories and their efforts to counter derogatory imagery. Lupack effectively captures the struggles of Asian actresses like Anna May Wong, the absurdities of “two-hour-long” (p. 160) yellowface makeup processes performed on white actresses instead of casting an Asian actress in a major role, and the pervasive stereotypes of Latin women who were portrayed as “servants, sexy cantina girls, or vengeful ‘spitfires’” (p. 203). She then examines the efforts of some filmmakers to challenge and reshape these portrayals, acknowledging the limitations and challenges of these individuals, while highlighting their contribution to changing perceptions. These two chapters,

while also very insightful, are shorter than the others, potentially leaving room for more in-depth exploration.

Chapters seven and eight on the “New Woman” and “Suffragists” highlight the evolving roles of (mostly white) women in early cinema. Lupack discusses how serials and suffrage films provided a platform for portraying strong, independent female characters who challenged traditional gender norms. Despite these efforts, however, many films depicted suffragists in a negative light, portraying them as incompetent and ridiculous. For instance, in *Mrs. Pinkhurst’s Proxy* (1914), a man pretends to be a suffragist and fools everyone, showing how easily these activists could be tricked. According to Lupack, such cases of men being cast to ridicule women and their “supposedly eroded femininity” in early cinema perpetuated stereotypes of mannish feminists (p. 263).

At this point, I would like to draw attention to the lack of recognition of fluid gender identities throughout Lupack’s analysis. By focusing primarily on binary representations of gender, Lupack’s examination overlooks the nuanced experiences of individuals whose identities transcend traditional masculinity or femininity. While this approach may serve strategic purposes, it limits the analysis and may hinder efforts toward trans* inclusivity and understanding.

Lupack’s summarizing thoughts do remind one a little of America Ferrera’s Women-Speech in Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* (2023), highlighting the often contradictory expectations associated with ‘womanhood’: “At times desexualized, at other times hypersexualized; at times fetishized, at other times scorned or ignored; at times portrayed as having low intelligence, at other times as possessed of malicious” intent (p. 284). This parallel underscores the enduring relevance of Lupack’s inquiries, the issues she uncovers, and the stereotypes she addresses. It serves as a poignant reminder that the challenges faced by marginalized women in early film continue to resonate in contemporary cinema and society, highlighting the ongoing importance of confronting these narratives.

In sum, *The Othering of Women in Silent Film* provides a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of how women, especially non-white women, were portrayed in early cinema,

focusing on the power of silent film as a pervasive force for propaganda and persuasion, both shaping and being shaped by historical contexts. Its timeliness lies in helping us understand contemporary race and gender relations by tracing the genesis of misrepresentations to silent film and further back. Understanding the origins of these stereotypes in film becomes crucial to deconstructing them, making the book an integral part of a necessary conversation about reevaluating storytelling approaches for the future.