“SHE DOESN’T LET AGE DEFINE HER”: SEXUALITY AND MOTHERHOOD IN RECENT “MIDDLE-AGED CHICK FLICKS”

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This article explores Hollywood’s recent representation of older women as having a relatively more open and fluid sexuality than they were portrayed as having in earlier decades. While seemingly offering a liberatory vision of older women as sexual beings, there is nevertheless a subtext in many of these films that this newfound sexuality is disturbing to the stability of the nuclear family. The analysis also focuses on the “super-text” of how the actresses who portray these older women, such as Susan Sarandon and Diane Keaton, are themselves constructed in the popular press as being mutually sexy and “women of a certain age.” In this way, these popular cultural representations are trying to tap into the growing demographic of aging female baby boomers, both celebrating and marketing to this group as sexually embodied beings.

Introduction

In a February 2002 interview, American film actress Susan Sarandon offered the following observation about women who are turning 50:

In 2002, more women will turn fifty than in any year before. The force of that collective power fills and inspires me. It’s thrilling to know that around the world, women everywhere are working, thinking daring, creating, making change. I don’t know if our mothers ever felt this way about their counterparts—but I have the feeling that our daughters will.
Despite Sarandon’s optimistic pronouncements about the “collective power” of women turning 50, for female movie audiences, the ability to see their stories up on screen has been anything but powerful in recent decades. For example, film scholar Peter Kramer has described the period of the 1990s Hollywood as one where, despite the fact that there were more female executives than at any point in Hollywood’s history, there were few films about women or addressed to a female audience. Commenting on this dearth of good films aimed at a female audience, Kramer has commented that:

For thirty years now, Hollywood’s major releases have addressed themselves primarily to a young male audience, and with comparatively few and mostly only modestly successful exceptions, women have not been given films in their preferred genres, but have largely been expected to accompany their male partners or their children to the movies, going along with the film choices of others rather than making their own.

Highlighting Kramer’s analysis, Amy Pascal, for example, who is chairwoman of Columbia pictures, and whose recent hits Spider-Man and XXX outdistanced her earlier, female-directed project, A League of Their Own, has noted that only these kinds of teenage male films are the ones that will be “greenlighted.” She also pointed out that, even when a “woman’s film” is made, there is a certain strategy for distribution and marketing, which includes a slower release or “rolling out of the film,” at certain theaters; the slow, steady courting of critics and the advertising campaign that shows up as commercials during television shows such as Oprah. All of these marketing and distributing strategies towards women’s films contribute to its lower ticket sales.

Other film scholars, such as Thomas Doherty, have generally traced the changing marketing strategies in Hollywood from creating films that were primarily geared toward female audiences to the later emphasis on catering primarily to teenage males between 16–24. Citing studies conducted by Hollywood back in the 1940s, Doherty demonstrates how Hollywood, in finding that teenagers and young adults were the most frequent moviegoers, embarked on a doctrine known as “The Peter Pan Syndrome.” This doctrine