
Gender and feminism in Flashdance and Dirty Dancing

The eighties were a time of change for many women around the globe. The fight against the sexual stereotypes set by the media, art, and advertising of the previous decades starts to become stronger. People start realizing that beyond women's basic rights, such as voting and education, achieved by the first feminists, a deeply rooted patriarchy still exists. This social structure still generates inequality and hierarchies that benefit men. For this reason, women's sexuality and their right to their own bodies, as well as to abortion and contraception, enter the debate. In this essay, two of the most iconic dance films from the 1980s will be analyzed and compared. Both Dirty Dancing and Flashdance tackle the theme of gender, which englobes the ideas of feminism, femininity and female sexual liberation. The idea of the hyper-sexualization of the female body by the "male gaze" will also be explored. To support the arguments in this essay, I will use sources from dance and film studies, such as Laura Mulvey's "Film and Visual Pleasure" In Film Theory and Criticism.

Flashdance tells the story of Alexandra Owens, a young and beautiful girl who works a day job at a steel mill and a night job doing exotic dance performances in a local bar. She does this to finance her dreams of becoming a professional ballerina. One night, Alex's boss from the steel mill, Nick Hurley, sees her dance at the bar and is attracted to her sensual performance. He tries to approach her, even following her in his car, to seduce her. Nevertheless, she continues rejecting his advances. Finally, after a lot of persuasiveness, Alex and Nick start dating. However, they soon start having problems. Alex realizes that Nick, behind her back, wrote a letter of recommendation to the dance academy she aspires to join. Alex dislikes this, as she wants to achieve her goals through her own diligent work. Due to this, Alex spends a week at home, not going to work either to the steel mill or the bar. However, she is distraught when her best friend Jeannie's resigns from her job dancing in the bar to go work at a competing strip club, after abandoning her dreams of becoming a professional skater. Additionally, her mentor Hanna, an old woman who was once a ballerina, sadly dies. After fighting with her pride, she decides to go to the dance academy's audition. She fights her fear of failure and demonstrates that she will not abandon her dream of becoming a ballerina.

Flashdance was an instant hit when it came out in 1983. Alex's unconventional personality, her cool sense of style as well as the electrifying dance sequences attracted millions of girls. They aspired to resemble her. On the other hand, Flashdance also attracted young boys and men. Not for Alex's personality, but because of her athletic body in the highly sexualized dance sequences. They aspired to have her. Flashdance, although based on a real story, was written and directed by men. This ultimately affected the way it portrayed its characters. The female characters are watched by a predominantly "male gaze".

The "male gaze" is a feminist theory discussed by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Film and Visual Pleasure". This theory invokes the gaze's sexual politics and suggests a sexualized way of looking that empowers men and objectifies women. In the "male gaze", the woman visually positions herself as an "object" of heterosexual male desire. Women's feelings, thoughts, and sexual impulses are less important than their "framing" to please men's desires. As Mulvey, herself wrote: "The concept of the male gaze maintains that Hollywood defines the female body as a form of erotic spectacle which plays to and signifies male desire" (809). This theory can be

easily applied to many aspects of Flashdance, especially to the dance scenes.

Flashdance's first choreography scene, where Alex performs at Mawby's bar, illustrates the theory of the "male gaze". In this scene, the camera lingers over her sweaty, athletic body as she energetically dances, while the mostly male audience gazes. It can be argued that this scene was made not only to attract teenage girls with the exciting performance but also to arouse men. These scenes could be problematic for the viewers, as they can promote unhealthy standards of beauty for women and the objectification of the female body for men.

Chris Jordan, in his essay "Gender and Class Mobility in Saturday Night Fever and Flashdance." makes an interesting point about the "male gaze" in Flashdance. He argues that Alex's character could support the myth that women's sole purpose is to be looked at by men. This myth could be harmful, as it "encourages women to view their looks as a source of power and to predicate their self-esteem on their ability to attract the male gaze." (9). Flashdance was highly marketed as a teenage flick. It was designed to attract teenage girls, yet the sexualized visual subtext was made to seduce men.

Dirty Dancing, like Flashdance, is also considered one of the most iconic dance films. Nevertheless, its narrative and characters differ greatly to Flashdance's. Dirty Dancing tells the story of the idealist teenager Franc's "Baby" Hausman and her wealthy family as they go spend their summer at a lake resort. Here, Baby is instantly attracted by the handsome dance teacher Johnny Castle, who comes from a drastically different background than hers. Baby discovers Johnny's dance partner, Penny, has an unwanted pregnancy. Baby then lies to his father to lend Penny money to illegally abort. Because of this, she has to take her spot as Johnny's dance partner. While training for the dance routine, Baby and Johnny fall in love. Problems start when Penny falls very ill after the unsanitary abortion procedure. Because of this, Baby calls his father, a doctor, for help. After saving Penny, he discovers what Baby has been up to, and with whom. He promptly bans her from associating with "those people". Baby rebels against his father's commands and goes to Johnny's cabin to apologize for his rude attitude. In his cabin, Baby confesses her feelings for Johnny and decides to initiate their first sexual encounter. After someone accuses Johnny of stealing, he is promptly fired from the resort. Nevertheless, he comes back to the resort's annual talent show and gives a speech about Baby. He tells her how much he respects and admires her, and that she should never be put in a corner. The movie ends happily, and while the summer is over, Baby continues with her life plans of changing the world, without being held back by anyone.

In her essay about 80s cinema, *The Time of My Life*, Hadley Freeman, describes Dirty Dancing as "one of the greatest feminist movies of all times" (Freeman 2). The Guardian's columnist recounts what she, as a preteen, felt while watching the Eleanor Bergstein classic. She, like many others, was so excited by the dance routines, Patrick Swayze, and the "dirtiness" of the movie, that she did not pay attention to what happened to Penny's character. Years later, while rewatching the film, she realized that Dirty Dancing talks about abortion naturally. The subject was not turned into a drama or the main argument of the movie. In addition, Dirty Dancing also deals with the subject of the female sexual awakening, gender stereotypes and what could be categorized as the "female gaze". Contrastingly, while Flashdance objectifies the female body through the "male gaze", Dirty Dancing does the opposite.

There are no lingering shots of Baby's half-naked body in Dirty Dancing. Instead, the camera captures Johnny's "dirty", shirtless, movements. The roles are reversed. Women take the place

of men behind the camera. Instead of gazing through the eyes of a man, we do so from the eyes of a woman. Baby was attracted to Johnny from the first time she saw him, and we see him through her eyes. In *Dirty Dancing*, it is the woman who approaches the man, unlike *Flashdance*. Baby is not scared of communicating her feelings and initiating a romantic, and later sexual, relationship. It could be argued that Baby breaks the patriarchal order when she decides to have sex with Johnny. She knows she will disappoint his father who wants to preserve her "purity" for a marriage with a rich man, yet she does it anyway. Baby makes a free decision, she feels desire and she is the sole owner of her body.

There is an acceptable argument for categorizing *Dirty Dancing* as a feminist film that goes beyond its pro-choice claims. In many films, women who enjoy sex and recognize it openly end up badly. Whether they end up with an unwanted pregnancy, used only for sex, or in an unhappy marriage. Nevertheless, Baby enjoys her sexual encounters without any reprisals from the script. Freeman emphasizes in her essay the unusual of the matter. All of the sex scenes in *Dirty Dancing* are told from her perspective. Instead of an ordinary man seducing the most attractive girl, a plot that never seems to surprise anyone, the story is reversed. And to the female audience's delight, the camera focuses on the dancer's body, which is the object, while the one that is aroused, the subject, is her.

Overall, it is safe to say that while *Flashdance* and *Dirty Dancing* both have somewhat similar themes, they have a very different message. Both have strong, sexually empowered female characters with goals, but the way that they are presented is different. *Flashdance* was made from a male perspective while *Dirty Dancing* was made from a female point of view. In both films, there is also the theme of low-class vs high-class, yet the roles are reversed. In *Flashdance*, Alex aspires for upward mobility by reaching her goal of becoming a ballerina, yet the way the film portrays it suggests that she needs a man to do it. In *Dirty Dancing* Baby is part of the upper-class, and she aspires to be part of the peace corps, so she can change the world. She does not need a man, and the film's narrative does not suggest it. Baby does not depend on Johnny. Instead, they have an equal relationship of respect and trust in which there is space for both of them to grow without stunting the other. *Flashdance* is an iconic movie, yet the way it portrays women, their sexuality and their relationships could be considered sexist. *Dirty Dancing*, on the other hand, could be considered feminist, as it portrays women and their relationships justly and realistically.