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"Lenticular Logic" in a Hollywood Chick Flick: the Representation of the South in Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes* and Its Film Adaptation

Fannie Flagg's 1987 novel spent thirty-six weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list, and was described as "a real novel and a good one" in their book review section (Butler), providing a solid audience base for the 1991 adaptation by director Jon Avnet. The film also received critical praise, including two Oscar nominations, one for Best Supporting Actress (Jessica Tandy as Ninny Threadgoode) and the other for the screenplay by Carol Sobieski and Flagg herself, which was also nominated as best adapted screenplay by the Writers Guild of America and won the highly regarded Scripters Award ("Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café"). While it is not difficult to see why certain segments of the female readership would find intriguing a book focusing on the midlife crisis of a neglected Alabama housewife and her relationship with her new, elderly friend who opens her eyes through stories of two non-conformist Southern women from her youth, the making of the adaptation was fraught with difficulty from the very start, as remembered by Avnet: "Tomatoes was an impossible film to get made, because on the surface, its appeal is largely female. There were no male stars per se" (qtd. in McCreadie 82). Flagg, discouraged after initial turn-downs, was stunned by the success of the movie, as it lacked the 25-year-old sex symbol, gunshots and violence Hollywood associated with a hit movie, in her view, at the time (81). It was, however, not a coincidence that a four-woman company, Electric Shadow Productions fell in love with the script and proved to be instrumental in raising funds for a screenplay that lived up to their standards of providing "well-rounded, interesting characters and universal themes," and, most importantly, one that centred on women's empowerment, as they would not even "consider anything that exploits women" (Comer 27).

The South, given its traditionally conservative views on women's roles, might seem a surprising setting for a novel with both main storylines featuring strong women characters, but since Scarlett O'Hara's debut, audiences have been accustomed to see white Southern women challenge the restrictive role models the nostalgic Plantation myth imposed on them. Though the mythical figure of the Southern lady, invented by white upper-class Southern men and grown to symbolize what they considered best in Southern culture (Baym), may appear to be a relic of the past in the twenty-first century, her figure problematizes issues of race and gender, lynchpins of Southern regional identity, both black and white. The common denominator between the chick flick and the South, therefore, is a preoccupation with women's roles, and the fact that *Steel Magnolias* (1989) was one of the first films dubbed as a chick flick, followed by other prominent movies set in the South, such as *Thelma and Louise* (1991) or the *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002), has turned attention in Southern film studies to this relatively new genre.

The starting point for this comparative analysis was Tara McPherson's observation in *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* that a "lenticular logic" characterizes the way the South is imagined and represented. The term she coined originates from once-popular lenticular (aka. 3D) images, in which two pictures are overlaid in such a way that from different angles the viewer can see two different images, but at no point can the two be seen at the same time. The specific lenticular image that inspired her featured, on the one hand, a Southern belle and a white-columned plantation house, and a grinning, portly mammy on the other (26), literally incorporating the two most prominent and antithetical Southern female stock characters. McPherson defines lenticular logic as "a schema by which histories or images that are actually copresent get presented (structurally, ideologically) so that only one of the images can be seen at a time. Such an arrangement represses connection, allowing whiteness to float free from blackness, denying the long historical imbrications of racial markers and racial meaning in the South" (7). This arrangement, in fact, is more complex than the relationship between dominant and subordinate narratives or silencing, since "lenticular logic is capable of representing both black and white; but one approaches the limits of this logic when one attempts to understand how the images are joined or related" (26).

The novel, as it shall be demonstrated, clearly surpasses the limitations posed by lenticular logic, even though Ruth and Idgie's storyline is set in the segregated Jim Crow South. However, the tendency to focus on only one or the other side of the coin is also typical of films about the South, which has been lamented as recently as 2011 in the volume *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*. While the cinematic South often figures as an "exotic" region to the rest of the United States, it has also served "as a repository for the nation's unresolved problems and contradictions" (5), argue Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee. Given the long history of racial conflict in the region, films in the 1960s and 70s mostly thematised racial discrimination and events revolving around the Civil Rights movement, ensuring that Second Wave Feminism did not figure in connection with representations of the South (Barker 92). Therefore, the tradition of the idealized white Southern lady remained largely intact until chick flicks at the end of the 1980s started to deploy the South as "a traditional and often comic backdrop against which to examine the unresolved conflicts generated by the feminist movement, while avoiding issues of race by focusing mainly on the lives of white southern women" (Barker and McKee 11).

Barker's analysis of the link between the chick flick and the setting concludes that the South, with its celebration of traditional femininity, provides the ideal place to explore female empowerment while avoiding the politicized aspect of second wave feminism, thus rendering it the perfect postfeminist film genre. Her definition of the chick flick as "a film that emphasizes female empowerment through female bonding" (93) also very well describes Flagg's novel, though the book has little in common with the main concerns of chick lit, as epitomized by *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), hailed as the originator of the chick lit phenomenon[1] (Ferriss and Young 4). Thus, chick flick as a genre seems to encompass a wider age-range and does not have romance as its central focus, like chick lit, which has come under fire for shifting "the focus of analysis more fully to the moment, to romance, sex, and money, and less to friendship, identity, or empowerment" due to Fielding's text being pronounced as the genre's main exemplar (Farr 203). The generic conventions of the chick flick, however, are bound to inform the adaptation process, even when the author of the novel serves on the project as a screenwriter. Since both Southern cinema and literature have been affected by the exclusionary nature of lenticular logic, this paper focuses on the cinematic transposition of three major aspects of Flagg's novel that transcend this restrictive point of view: the deconstruction of the Plantation myth, the insight the omniscient narrator provides into the lives of both African American characters and communities, and the question of race relations, summed up by one of the black characters as follows: "Miss Idgie and Miss Ruth … they treat you white …" (Flagg 373), which was a lot to say in a Southern small town in the 1930s.

As mentioned earlier, the restrictive roles women could fulfil according to the Plantation myth has been under fire by strong female characters in both film and literature, but they have a long-lasting legacy: in "The Southern-Fried Chick Flick: Postfeminism Goes to the Movies" Barker posits the generational divide between feminists and postfeminists as the main conflict in chick flicks, through the confrontation of mothers and their adult daughters. The daughters "have to choose which elements of southern womanhood/motherhood to keep and which to reject," while the mothers have to face how their decisions as mothers and wives have affected their daughters (96). Neither the book, nor the film comply with this trait of the chick flick, as the women's liberation movement only features as something that has passed middle-aged Evelyn by and it did not even make an appearance in the traditional small-town existence of elderly Ninny. In the film, Evelyn is confined to the stultifying suburban existence of housewives: her unhappiness seems to be rooted only in her inability to lose weight and a feeling of uselessness after her child-rearing days are over, a malaise that is only exacerbated by an unappreciative husband. The novel, however, details various reasons why Evelyn feels trapped, and one of them is the obligatory emulation of the idealized, pure image of the Southern lady: she realizes at the age of forty-eight that "all that struggle to stay pure, the fear of being touched, the fear of driving a boy mad with passion by any gesture, and the ultimate fear – getting pregnant – all that wasted energy was for nothing" (Flagg 42). Flagg overtly criticizes the real-life consequences of this legacy manifesting themselves as late as the 1980s:

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[1] Nóra Séllei presents the Hungarian variant on the formula via a comparative analysis of Fielding's novel and the major bestseller inspired by the character of Bridget Jones, titled *Állítsátok meg Terézanyut!* (*Stop Mammatheresa!*) by Zsuzsa Rácz (2002), focussing on the social, political, and economic context of post-communist cultural production and reception in "Bridget Jones and Hungarian Chicklit."

> She had stayed a virgin so she wouldn't be called a tramp or a slut; had married so she wouldn't be called an old maid; faked orgasms so she wouldn't be called frigid; had children so she wouldn't be called barren; had not been a feminist because she didn't want to be called queer and a man hater; never nagged or raised her voice so she wouldn't be called a bitch… (Flagg 236–7)

Unsurprisingly, the film skips any reference to this, as well as to Evelyn's well-articulated and undeniably feminist conclusion: "all that mattered in this world was the fact that you had balls" which opened the door to everything and led her to regret being "ball-less forever" (276–7).

Oddly enough, the character who acts upon this realization is one of the protagonists of the 1920s and 30s storyline: the reader's expectations are subverted, as there are far more rebellious characters in Ninny's youth who, at the same time, deconstruct the nostalgic image of the past. Going by Ninny's memories, the Threadgoode household functioned as an idyllic Southern home and family, complete with stock characters: the spoilt belle, the naïve and kind mother, the benevolent and charitable father, and various devoted black characters working for the family. The youngest daughter, Idgie is a tomboy, and, surprisingly, the traditional small-town community puts no pressure on her to conform to gender expectations and she actually grows into a person who functions as a man in the community, as if she has acquired some balls – a possibility Evelyn only fantasizes about. Idgie dresses like a man, talks, shoots, drinks like a man, and even falls in love with a woman, Ruth, the perfect Southern lady, who happens to love her back and abandons her abusive husband to set up house together. What is more, no one is surprised in the community when Ruth's baby, born after her separation from her husband, is named Buddy Threadgoode, and Idgie receives money from her father, just like a son would, to start a business to be able to provide for Ruth and her son, which leads to the founding of the Whistle Stop Café. In the novel, this far-from-ordinary family arrangement coexists with traditional but happy marriages, such as that of the Threadgoode parents and Ninny's own, along with failed marriages, like Ruth's, providing a more multifaceted representation of the South than what the Plantation myth allows for.

Despite the tolerant community Flagg portrays in her novel, the film chooses to include some pressure on Idgie to conform, on the one hand, via a marriage proposal by her best mate, the sheriff, Grady Kilgore, and on the other hand, through a new scene when Ruth attempts to teach Idgie to cook. The domestication of Idgie, however, turns into a homoerotic food fight between the two, which the rejected suitor disapproves of, but his complaints and commands to stop are simply ignored by the two women. Ten years later, a more mature Idgie definitely shows Ruth's influence: she is wearing more ladylike clothes, while Ruth also discards the long skirt and petticoats that tripped her up in her youth in favour of pants, a rather daring choice in a small town in the 1930s. The matching outfits function well as a visual signal of their closeness, but present a tamer and more gender-conforming Idgie than expected, going by the novel, which points out that she remains a tomboy to the last: in her old age, only Idgie’s voice betrays that she is not a man.

In “Cinemyths: Contemporary Films as Gender Myth,” Ted Tollefson draws attention to a series of films that “traces the amorous relations of Lilith and Eve, the wild woman and the domesticated woman,” several of which are set in the rural South (113). Although he praises the friendship, passion, and compassion that are present in these relationships and act as liberating and transforming agents, he laments that “all these films lack the courage to deal openly with sexual love between women” (114). Interestingly, Roger Fischer maintains that “Avnet’s film imposes a sense of structural discipline on Flagg’s novel and mutes adroitly its lesbian overlay and cloying sentimentality” (185), which statement is suspicious on two counts: on the one hand, the novel is even more reticent about Idgie and Ruth’s sexuality, probably due to the elderly woman’s first-person narration, and having placed the focus on their charismatic personalities. On the other hand, it can be argued that it is the film that becomes more sentimental due to the generic conventions that require a depoliticized atmosphere, thus reducing Evelyn’s awakening feminist consciousness to an occasion for comedy.

Despite the fact that the monolithic image of white Southern femininity is challenged in the film in the storyline set during the Depression, Evelyn’s mental state is presented as far less concerning. The fat woman, traditionally a comic character on the stage and in cinema, is troubled by a bad case of menopause and there is no hint at Evelyn’s crippling fear of doctors or the severity of her depression that is overtly described in the novel: “the quiet hysteria and awful despair had started when she finally began to realize that nothing was ever going to change, that nobody would be coming to take her away. She began to feel as if she were at the bottom of a well, screaming, no one to hear.” Her sense of failure makes her suicidal, as “it wasn’t death she was afraid of. It was this life of hers that was beginning to remind her of that grey intensive care waiting room” (Flagg 63) where she had to agree to take her mother off life support.

Her meeting with Ninny turns her life around and Evelyn, who has been on a decade of unsuccessful diets, receives the final push to slim down to lead a healthier life from a community of women at a “fat farm,” gaining back her self-esteem. This fact is also omitted from the film, which thus avoids having to present the fact that the Southern norms of domestic femininity did not work out for Evelyn and her support group and fulfilling relationships come from outside of the family. Fischer, contradictorily, praises “the prevalence of feminist ideology and strong, sympathetic female characters” (185), and criticizes the portrayal of “southern women as nurturing goddesses, blacks as objects, and most white men as reptilian slime or contemptuous cretins” at the same time (187). By labelling *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Thelma and Louise* “shrill man-bashing,” as well as missing male characters “of the heroic stature of Clark Gable’s Rhett Butler or Gregory Peck’s Atticus Finch” (188), Fisher clearly demonstrates that he has completely missed the basics: chick flicks simply do not revolve around a male protagonist.

Fisher is, nevertheless, right about the treatment of black characters, whose integration into the Threadgoode family is toned down in the film. Firstly, the life stories of several African American characters that intersect Flagg's narrative independently of the Ruth-Idgie plotline are not included, leading to the stereotypical on-screen presence of the devoted servant. It is through these characters, for instance, that Slagtown, "Birmingham's own Harlem of the South" comes to life, only a block away from segregated white Birmingham, whose residents are "completely unaware that this exotic sepia spot even existed" (Flagg 118–9).

Secondly, agency is denied to black characters in the film in literally life-or-death matters which affect the white protagonists. For instance, when Ruth's no-good husband comes to steal their baby boy, he is killed accidentally with a skillet by Sipsey, a wizened old granny, and the body is disposed of by her son, Big George, without the knowledge of white characters, whereas in the film they ask Idgie for help, and it is her idea to barbecue Frank's remains. The same mechanism is present when Ruth is dying of cancer: her black friend, Onzell, moves into her room and nurses her non-stop, saving tiny amounts of morphine in the process, and giving her a lethal dose when the pain becomes unbearable. In the film, it is Ruth who makes the decision, and Sipsey complies, while Ruth's last moments are turned into a tear-jerking scene with Idgie instead of a quiet and peaceful passing in the company of her black friend, who sings spirituals to her.

Finally, Idgie and Ruth's supportive attitude towards the whole of the black community is downgraded into a scene of youthful bravado, when Idgie convinces Ruth to throw a federal shipment of food off the train for the inhabitants of Troutville, the tiny black town adjacent to Whistle Stop. The novel, however, includes the doings of a mysterious character called Railroad Bill, wanted by the railroad company for regularly looting shipments of food and coal on the trains passing Troutville at the height of Depression. As it is revealed to the reader, Idgie is the one risking life and limb for the black members of her community with Ruth's support, while in the film, Idgie's loyalty stretches only as far as her childhood caretaker and friend, Big George, when the black man is accused of killing Ruth's husband.

Compared to this level of trust and intimacy, Evelyn's experience in a desegregated South is confined to the stereotypical view of African Americans, which aligns with McPherson's lenticular logic. Evelyn considers the black section of Birmingham exotic, and the only black person she knew was her parents' maid, but her point of view is balanced by Ninny's, who has been "around colored people all my life," and is not in the least patronizing. She does not generalize, stating she "cain't speak for all of them" (Flagg 284), and is genuinely shocked to hear Evelyn wish she were black, because Ninny is fully aware that African Americans have always been treated as second-class citizens. Evelyn romanticizes and infantilizes them: "they just seem to fit in with each other … have more of a good time, or something. […] they always look like they're having so much fun" (302), and claims she would like to be "free and open like they are" (303). Flagg's novel successfully counters these stereotypes via realistic African American characters who are part of the narrative in their own right, but turns expectations upside down by challenging lenticular logic in the Depression era storyline instead of Evelyn’s, set in the 1980s.

Evelyn herself is finally able to transcend lenticular logic in the novel when she manages to overcome the Southern rape complex and attends a sermon in a black church in Birmingham, after nearly having a panic attack, this being “the first time in her life she had ever been surrounded by only blacks” (Flagg 309). Though not a religious person, she comes away with a spiritual experience that gives her the strength to put down “the heavy burden and resentment” and feels “free; just like these people […], who had come through all that suffering and had not let hate and fear kill their spirit of love” (313). Another lesson she learns is that all her life she was incapable of seeing past the surface when it came to African Americans:

> As she left the church, she turned at the door and looked back one last time. Maybe she had come today hoping she could find out what it was like to be black. Now she realized she could never know, any more than her friends here could know what it felt like to be white. She knew she would never come back. This was their place. But for the first time in her life, she had felt joy. Real joy. (Flagg 313)

The film, sadly, downgrades the turning point when Evelyn understands that white and black womanhood and manhood are inextricably linked into a ‘local color’ scene: she takes Ninny to a black church to listen to the choir a bit reluctantly, presumably at the elderly woman’s request. They are made feel welcome, but the film does not explore race relations in the 1980s at all, promoting a nostalgic view of decent white folk who stood up for their black friends against the KKK in the Jim Crow South.

This attitude informs the ending of the film, too: in the novel, Ninny passes away while Evelyn is at the fat farm in Florida, finding her place in the world, but the film does not allow her to die, nor does it let Evelyn leave her home for months on end. Flagg closes her novel with the image of an independent, successful Evelyn, who makes her own money, lives a much more fulfilling life with her husband, and is planning to work with a mental health group at the request of the university hospital, having successfully beaten depression. The film not only keeps Ninny alive, but has her move into Evelyn’s home, despite her husband’s protests, as the old house in Whistle Stop was declared too dangerous to live in, practically turning the old woman into a surrogate mother. This turn of events gives Evelyn the opportunity to assert herself in her own household, but definitely curtails her autonomy: she declares she is ready to devote her time to the care of her elderly friend, which has been women’s task from time immemorial. Instead of standing on her own two feet in the present, she takes home a piece of the past: Ninny and her stories of female bonding.

In conclusion, the adaptation of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* definitely bears the sign of the generic traits of the chick flick, as the lives of black characters are neglected in favour of the white female protagonists, and African Americans are represented in the traditional menial roles, lacking agency and failing to provide the viewer any insight into the workings of the black community. By treating Evelyn's dissatisfaction with her life and serious depression as an occasion for comedy, the myth of Southern femininity and domesticity is portrayed as less problematic. It is also essential to mention that there is no overt feminist agenda in her storyline, which keeps clear of "the villainous, feminist career woman of the 1980s films," the antithesis of the figure of the white southern lady, brought to life by backlash against second wave feminism (Barker 93). Thus, Evelyn embraces an older, but more inclusive form of female bonding, which seems less dangerous partly because its narrative is safely set a lifetime earlier, and partly because Ruth and Idgie's unconventional existence is depoliticized and, therefore, means no threat to the current status quo. All in all, in keeping with the postfeminist ideas that condition chick flick as a genre, Avnet's *Fried Green Tomatoes* does portray the positive power of female bonding among white Southern women, but, regrettably, fails to explore those aspects of the novel that supersede the lenticular logic, thus continuing to normalize some elements of the conventional Southern status quo and presenting power and race relations in the 1980s timeline as unproblematic.

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