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Courage conquers death – and even love: Feminist epistemology in Dorothy Arzner's *Christopher Strong*

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Abstract: In the 1990s, Laurie Shrage critiqued dominant semiotic and psycho-analytic approaches to film, advocating instead for a contextual analysis attentive to audience reception. Drawing on Dorothy Arzner's 1933 film *Christopher Strong*, Shrage demonstrated the film's capacity to 'disturb patriarchal sensibilities', particularly in its portrayal of women and marriage. This paper revisits Shrage's thesis to explore how the film addresses issues that remain relevant today, including female agency within and beyond the institution of marriage. I argue that while the film has been recognised for its narrative and dialogue, its engagement with themes such as women's employment, motherhood, and caregiving remains critically underexplored. Through a close reading that incorporates cinematic elements, such as costume design, I examine how these themes shape the protagonist's sense of autonomy and complicate traditional narratives of romantic drama. By situating the film within both its historical and contemporary contexts, I aim to demonstrate its enduring relevance and the significance of returning to questions of spectatorship—what we are meant to see and what we might learn to see anew through a critical, feminist lens.

I. DOROTHY ARZNER'S DIRECTORIAL STYLE

It is always time to rewatch Dorothy Arzner's films. Arzner was a successful 1920s Hollywood director and remained one of the most notorious woman directors, at least until Ida Lupino in the 1940s. She made big pictures that did well and were extensively reviewed by tabloid columnists and critics alike. And she was successful for over a decade, from 1927 when she directed *Fashions for Women* to 1943 with *First Comes Courage*. She made twenty films in total, from comedies to dramas to outstanding melodramas; melodramas meant to address a specific audience, women. Arzner made women's pictures: there is love, marriage, and motherhood. And yet, as feminist critics in the 1970s began to notice, the overarching themes are veined with disillusionment, criticism, and a very sharp point of view regarding what it was like to be a woman in the 1930s; or, as I found myself thinking as I re-watched some of her films, today.

My goal in this paper is to revive interest in Arzner's work by examining *Christopher Strong*, a 1933 melodrama, in the context of feminist philosophy. Not only do I aim to cement the status of the film as a feminist film, I want to use the framework of contemporary cognitive film analysis – as outlined in the work of both David Bordwell and Noël Carroll – to consider one aspect of the mise-en-scene that is often overlooked: costumes. It is through analysis of the role of costumes in the film that we not only better understand its feminist aims (both in Arzner's work and for today's audiences), but this also contributes to the debate on the possibility of film to 'do' philosophy – another strand in cognitive film analysis – and on how such philosophical content can be expressed through cinematic means.

Central to my analysis are two articles, both published in *Hypatia*. The first, published in 1990, is 'Feminist Film Aesthetics: A Contextualist Approach' by Laurie Shrage.¹ The second, by Peg Brand, is 'Feminist Art Epistemologies: Understanding Feminist Art'.² Both articles allow me to combine a contextualist approach with the tenets of feminist epistemology in a reading of *Christopher Strong* that aims at reassessing the role of Cynthia Darrington, the main heroine (played by Katherine Hepburn), in light of the conflicts she is facing as a single working woman, a mistress, and ultimately a mother.

In addition, and in conjunction with the two articles mentioned above, my reading of *Christopher Strong* is also indebted to Judith Mayne's *Directed by Dorothy Arzner*, a 1994 overture in the world of Arzner which acknowledges 1970s feminist readings of the film, while also suggesting a further avenue of research that looks at Arzner's films in relation to Arzner's image, not only the one projected by the tabloids, but also the one that emerges through her life, interviews, and interestingly, photographs. Mayne's angle in her reading of Arzner is unique and may run against the risks posed by what appears close to an *auteur* or even biographical reading of the director's work, but it is quite revealing if what we are looking at are epistemic and contextual issues and their weight in feminist film criticism.

In light of these articles, I argue that a contemporary feminist reading of

the film can benefit from the analysis of the film's costumes as evidenced by the characters' and Arzner's very directorial style. In fact, by examining costumes and analysing, them in a feminist context—what it means to *wear one*—we can gain philosophical insights into the film and the work of a director who remains as relevant today as she was during her career.

In the first section of this paper, I briefly summarise the articles mentioned above and outline my motivation for exploring both. The second section relies on the established theoretical background to explore the protagonist Cynthia Darrington's relationship with Sir Christopher Strong and his family, with an emphasis on the film's controversial finale (where Arzner's touch is especially visible). I then move to an analysis of the film's costumes and their role in cementing the film's message and its contribution to contemporary feminist criticism.

II. CONTEXTUALIST ANALYSIS AND FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGIES

1970s film criticism was primarily focused on the text. Critics applied semiotic, psychoanalytic, and at times political readings to films. Karyn Kay & Gerald Peary,³ Pam Cook,⁴ and Claire Johnston⁵ all pointed to the importance of feminine discourse in the patriarchal Hollywood society. Later accounts also recognised the director's ability to subvert the status quo, with critics such as Beverle Houston suggesting the erosion in Arzner's film of the male gaze, a gaze that she questioned and, at times, I must say, almost ridiculed.⁶

Laurie Shrage introduced a new angle. What she called for is a contextualist analysis of film, one that looks at film not only in light of its textual features but also in light and in virtue of its social and political context. It is a pluralist strategy that deals with both the film in question and its reception:

Contextual criticism should aim to describe features of the context of reception of a piece of art, and explicate how those features interact with some aspects of the artwork. In regard to film, some important features of the context of reception might include an audience's cinematic habits.⁷

Context is indeed important. Cinema is a world awash with prequels, relentless advertising campaigns, gossip, and Reddit threads. Context was no less important in the 1930s, when Arzner was directing. Grace Palladino notes that out of a population of 117 million, between 90 and 110 million people went to the films weekly, with the depression only making a dent in these numbers after going back up again.⁸ It is not just about numbers. films came with a swirl of interviews, lifestyle articles, and soon enough, as I will discuss later, with a marketing plan aiming to sell what was seen in the films (especially clothes) to the American public. Lastly, context was a crucial element of the success of Arzner, who was not shy about interviews and whose life was highly publicised. Described as an expert in women's psychology and lifestyle, Arzner's expertise aligned very

well, according to articles of that time, with a view of the American woman as not only working, but also ultimately devoted to her family as wife and mother. While women were allowed to vote, the War and the depression had halted progress toward a more equitable treatment of women. Getting married and starting a family were still seen as the main goals, and, at least on a superficial level, that's exactly what women in Arzner's films do: they are working women whose main goal is to leave their profession and find someone to marry.

The historical context, the portrayal of Arzner as an expert in women's issues (focused again on love, marriage, and children), and the booming film industry all influenced the reception of her work, shaping viewing habits and expectations. The audience's viewing habits, as mentioned, are also what interest Shrage and what she believes has obscured the subversive and unique potential of a film like *Christopher Strong*.

Arzner's fourteenth film, *Christopher Strong* is, as are most of her films, a melodrama about love, marriage and family which features the relationship between Sir Christopher Strong (Colin Clive), a married man and member of Parliament, and Lady Cynthia Darrington, an aviatrix, played by Katherine Hepburn, seen here in her first starring role. The film explores themes of desire, societal expectations, and the tragic consequences of forbidden love, set against the backdrop of interwar British high society.

A respected man known for his steadfast marriage, Christopher Strong met Cynthia Darrington at a society ball organised by his sister and attended by his daughter Monica and her boyfriend Harry. During the party's scavenger hunt, Monica nominates her father as a model of marital fidelity, while Harry, delayed by a car accident involving Cynthia, names Cynthia as a woman over twenty who has never known love. Despite Strong's devotion to his wife Elaine and the similarities in age between Cynthia and Monica, Christopher and Cynthia quickly fall in love, threatening the family's stability. Adding further complications, Monica and Cynthia become close friends.

Their affair leads Christopher to accept Harry—himself a married man involved with Monica—as Monica's future husband. With Monica's engagement and subsequent pregnancy, the affair between Cynthia and Christopher unravels. Both Elaine and Monica independently discover the romance, while Cynthia learns she is pregnant with Christopher's child. The film's emotional peak occurs at a family celebration: Monica furiously confronts Cynthia about the affair, but Elaine privately thanks Cynthia, acknowledging that the relationship helped persuade Christopher to accept Monica's engagement. Cynthia's actions, however scandalous, ultimately lead to Monica's happiness.

Alone and without an opportunity to reveal her pregnancy to Christopher, who chooses his family over her, Cynthia is left with few options. Returning to her career as a record-breaking aviatrix, she attempts a new altitude record. After surpassing it, she tragically removes her oxygen mask and dies by suicide.

A typical interpretation of the film considers Cynthia's suicide a sacrifice made to protect the happiness of the Strong family. She did it for Elaine, for

Monica, and also for Christopher, whom she recognises will not break his marital vows with Elaine to marry her. Such an interpretation is difficult to dislodge. Tabloids confirmed this view when the film first premiered, and Shrage experienced a similar reaction when she showed the film to her students decades later. Here, contextualist analysis proves useful: the interpretation is based more on viewing habits—adultery is wrong, marriage is good—than on the actual film. However, as Shrage demonstrates, such a reading is misguided, since it overlooks numerous details such as narrative cues, dialogue, and Arzner's cinematic techniques. Far from a trite rehearsal of the sanctity of marriage, *Christopher Strong* is a sharp critique of marriage—one that, Shrage argues, undermines patriarchal norms. I will return to this point in the next section and further assess the film's destabilising potential, while also highlighting contemporary changes in context and viewing habits. Before doing so, I want to explore the connection between Shrage's article and two feminist works: Peg Brand's notion of feminist art epistemology and Mayne's analysis of Arzner's archive.

Shrage's focus on context, both regarding viewing habits and her interpretation of the film, closely aligns with Brand's emphasis on the importance of applying a feminist art epistemology framework when analyzing feminist works. Brand concentrates on works that parody the traditionally white and male canons of art history, but her ideas also apply to *Christopher Strong*. Specifically, her suggestion aligns with an analysis that emphasises the filmmaker behind the film: Arzner. Brand claims that ignorance of an artist's identity and sex sometimes diminishes a viewer's experience. Feminist works often 'show empathy for women's lived experiences', which actively contributes to the value of a work, in conjunction with but also aside from the work's aesthetic value.⁹

Brand's insistence on the epistemic contribution of a feminist perspective and the role an artist's identity can play in how a work is received, understood, and appreciated is central in Arzner's case. Importantly, this also aligns with a point I mentioned earlier: the type of reception Arzner's work received, along with the coverage of her persona in the press. As noted, Arzner, a Hollywood favourite, was regarded as an expert on women's lives and issues. However, Mayne's careful examination of Arzner's archive, photos, and interviews reveals details and clues that present a more complex, nuanced, and enigmatic picture of the director.

Arzner was a lesbian, and it was not a secret. She shared her Hollywood home with her partner, Marion Morgan, a dancer and choreographer, for 21 years, leaving only after her passing. In the chapter 'Looking for Dorothy', Mayne examines dozens of interviews and pictures, the great majority of which are filled with conflicting details that both mask and reveal her identity. In virtually every interview, reporters describe Arzner as having short hair and thick, unplucked eyebrows and make frequent comments about her style, which was similar to the one associated with the New Woman (also often seen as a sign of lesbianism). But as if fearful of such a characterisation, the press routinely balanced masculine details with feminine ones. The following passage serves as an example: 'The graceful lines and gentle curves of her slender figure would excite the envy of many a model.

And the admiration of many a man. She wears her clothes with boyish ease, and despite an apparent distaste for the usual frills and frothy furbelows of femininity, there is a softness in the very severity of her appearance, which is very appealing'. Later publications focused on her butch persona (without committing to any claims about Arzner's sexual orientations) and cartoons emphasised her masculine features. But what persists is a certain hesitation, a complex balancing game of adjectives, an aesthetics of masking. Although Arzner was not the only woman director in Hollywood, she was unique, and many struggled to describe her.¹⁰

Let us pause on the three accounts briefly summarised in the previous section. Laurie Shrage, Peg Brand, and Judith Mayne each advance feminist approaches that shift film analysis from textual isolation to a rich engagement with context, identity, and reception. Shrage argues for a contextualist analysis that situates films not only in relation to their formal features, but also within the lived habits, expectations, and cultural norms of their audiences. She critiques limited readings of *Christopher Strong* that see Cynthia's suicide merely as a reaffirmation of patriarchal values, explaining that these interpretations arise more from ingrained audience expectations than from the narrative and cinematic complexities that Arzner weaves into the film. This approach closely parallels Peg Brand's framework of feminist art epistemology, which asserts that understanding the creator's identity—particularly gender—can significantly shape interpretation and value. Brand notes that feminist works often foreground women's lived experiences, thus neglecting the artist's identity risks marginalizing the epistemic and affective impact such works can have on their audiences. Both approaches merge and inform Judith Mayne's archival research into Arzner's authorial voice and figure.

Arzner was perceived and presented in the press as an enigmatic and singular figure, both conforming to and subverting gender expectations. Through examination of interviews and public images, Mayne shows how Arzner's public persona played with both masculine and feminine markers, reflecting broader tensions in the era's gender discourse and complicating how her films have been received.

In drawing together these perspectives, we see a confluence of three approaches that collectively bring force to a feminist analysis of *Christopher Strong*. Shrage's call for contextualist criticism, Brand's insistence on the epistemic significance of the artist's identity, and Mayne's attention to the role of the creator's public image all converge into an analysis that advances feminist theory by looking at the nuances of authorial identity and historical reception. To further flesh out the implications of this confluence of arguments, as well as their relevance to contemporary debates and film scholarship, I next analyse the uniqueness and style of the film's lead character Cynthia Darrington.

III. LADY CYNTHIA DARRINGTON

Much has been written about how female desire drives the narrative of Arzner's films. Women are not subordinate: their passion, energy, and wit are a tidal wave against the bastions of a male-driven society. Arzner's women endure hardships. They work, struggle, and suffer. At times, their allegiance—we don't just have women in her films, we have a community of women—brings respite, but Arzner, while celebrating *some* female friendships, also demonstrates how friendship can devolve into competitiveness and betrayal. What she excels at, though, is showing women thinking, thinking alone in a world that cannot cease to ask them to perform. Cynthia is one of them.

Cynthia enters the film as the *only* woman older than 20 who has never been in love. But signs of her unique status, of what it is like to be alone, but also somehow one and only, are visible throughout the film. We learn, when she first meets Christopher, that her father is dead (she fondly remembers a kind note that Christopher sent to her when he passed), she is an aviatrix, and there is not much social life going on as she is sitting in her plane, thousands of feet up in the sky. She lives alone. She has no close friends that we know of, or none aside from the newly met Monica, Christopher's daughter.

But is Monica even a friend? For the most part, the two live parallel lives in opposing ways and as Monica notes, they both enjoy risk, but a different kind of risk, and their very relationship ultimately tends toward a certain vampirism, for, in the end, Monica needs Cynthia for her own goals (primarily marriage). Cynthia is alone when she realises she is pregnant, and, as we know, she dies alone. Importantly, she is very much alone even when in the company of Christopher.

It is interesting to this extent that Christopher owns the title of the film, with no allusion to his relationship with Cynthia or to the fact that she is most definitely the lead character—let me say, the *strong* one. The relationship between the two brings them together while always clearly setting them apart. She is courageous, he is cautious.

Much of their dynamics—and contrast—can be observed in one of the most famous scenes in the film, which almost borders on avant-garde film-making.¹¹ Cynthia has returned from a dangerous and exhausting trip around the world during which she had embarked on the hope of forgetting Christopher, only to realise by its end that she needs him close to her. Reunited, the scene finds them in bed after their first sexual encounter.

Cynthia's hand occupies the entire screen. As the camera closes in on her wrist, highlighting a bracelet Christopher has gifted her, we hear her say, 'I have never cared a button for jewelry, and now I am shackled'. A portion of Cynthia admits, from the start, that the bracelet, which Christopher gifted as a sign of his love, as if to cement their relationship, is also, fundamentally, a handcuff. Cynthia begins here to carve her own path, not without pain, but away from Christopher. She is beginning to contemplate what it means to be shackled and whether she wants this. She is, after all, the courageous one.

Courage is indeed a key term here, staying physically next to the bracelet/handcuff.

Moving from Cynthia's wrist to her fingers, we see that she also wears a ring, her ring. Unlike the bracelet, she continues wearing the ring, all the way to the very end, as she embarks on the risky trip where she takes her life. She reads the ring's engraving aloud to Christopher, 'Courage conquers death', and then, murmurs, almost as an afterthought, 'But not love'. Both accessories play a significant role in the film: they do not simply complement the character, they serve as narrative propellers.

The next time we see a bracelet is on Elaine. Significantly, she is sitting at her boudoir, consumed by her awareness that Christopher is having an affair. Marriage as she knows it is changing. Elaine likes to be married because she likes being old-fashioned, shackled in bracelets: old-fashioned and shackled is what you become when you marry and have children. Old-fashioned is also what she wants her daughter to become, as her monologue to Cynthia, which I mentioned above, clearly states.

But can Cynthia be shackled? Can she be old-fashioned? Can she find herself at that boudoir in a large, empty home? No, and in this too, she is alone in her choice to flee domestic duties and a shackled life.

IV. A FEMINIST COSTUME

In my introduction, I expressed a desire to combine an interest in feminist film analysis with what are traditionally called cognitive approaches to film. Moving away from film studies traditions that interpret the philosophical capacity of film as simply reflecting existing ideas in fields like semiology, psychoanalysis, Marxist theory, and others, scholars such as David Bordwell and Noël Carroll have promoted an analysis that explores the philosophical potential inherent in cinematic techniques. In other words, instead of imposing a theory onto a film, cognitive scholars focus on how audiences understand, respond emotionally, and evaluate film based on film elements and *mise-en-scène*. In this way, film goes beyond recounting or summarising existing theories: it fosters an independent philosophical dialogue.

A key feature of the debate on whether film can or cannot do philosophy on its own—what Aaron Smuts called the epistemic criterion—concerns its ability to contribute something innovative to the philosophical debate by means specific to cinema. The latter requirement, which Smuts labeled the 'aesthetic criterion', requires film to express a concept of thought through filmic means such as narrative, cinematography, mood, camera angles, editing, etc.¹² I next explore how Arzner's films deploy the cinematic means of costumes to communicate and engage in a conversation on feminist cinema and philosophy that is hardly, or at least insufficiently, explored in philosophy and film studies.

That Arzner paid attention to costumes is a known fact. She worked on costumes alongside her partner, who, in addition to choreographing dance scenes, also provided wardrobe and makeup advice. Without fail, Arzner realised that costumes drive the film's character development and the film's narrative. What's

also noteworthy, and a point Mayne emphasises in her study of Arzner's career, is that Arzner's own fashion choices mattered. Arzner not only openly refused the somewhat frilly styles of the 1930s, but she moved away from traditional feminine standards, provoking change, and her provocation led to significant shifts in the way actresses, and then women, dressed. She understood the power of clothing; of dressing up or down, and wearing a costume.

You can read the entire *The Bride Wore Red* in light of its costumes (an aside, the red dress worn by Joan Crawford, was designed by Adrian, one of the most notable costume designers in the history of fashion and film). But *Christopher Strong* is not to be forgotten.

To understand Arzner's use of costumes, it can be helpful to turn for a moment to the fashion industry and its growth in the 1930s. While a standard account of American fashion sees it as starting in the 1940s, when the War halted the supply of European models and American designers such as Claire MacCardell, Elizabeth Hawes, Rudi Gernreich, and others began to sign their creations, fashion reigned in the 1930s as part of a world Arzner knew very well: Hollywood, where costume designers dictated trends thanks, also, to large production budgets.¹³

Initially, what was worn on screen was rarely seen in the streets, where conservative mores and a sense of modesty still shaped most production and distribution. The clothes seen today on yesteryear's film stars, the ones they wore when photographed in their lavish Hollywood homes, country clubs, and sapphire blue pools, initially did not travel far. And if they did, it was merely in the imagination of people who, as we have seen, regularly attended films and marvelled at a world that, well, was strictly Hollywood.

By the 1930s, the success of Hollywood fashion made it clear that films could influence sales more than the allure previously exercised by much-coveted Parisian designs. This led to collaborations. Soon after a film's release, department stores started selling copies of the lead actress's dress. Sometimes, the release coincided with the film itself—a win-win for both industries. Many have heard of the Letty Lynton dress (and the Letty Lynton effect). Designed by Adrian with huge puffed shoulders that emphasised Joan Crawford's broad shoulders while slimming her waist, the dress became a sensation. Stores could not keep enough copies in stock, and imitations quickly flooded the market. Suddenly, little Joan Crawfords appeared everywhere.¹⁴

Cynthia Darrington was only Katherine Hepburn's second screen performance, yet it set up Hepburn's iconic look. Like Darrington, Hepburn wore pants, walked barefoot, and was sporty, capable, and notoriously strong-willed. Importantly, from the beginning, she played roles that complemented and highlighted her personality and style. Hepburn's costumes helped establish her as the Hollywood icon we all so clearly recognise. Hepburn's persona is in all the pants she wears as Cynthia, in the berets, in her ring. Never is her look more noticeable than in its juxtaposition with the feminine dresses, worn by Elaine and Monica, which Cynthia also wears during social occasions with the Strong family. One

minute she wears a gala gown, and a pilot suit another. But the most striking outfit worn by Hepburn is neither pants nor a gown: it is a costume—a moth costume. Designed by Howard Green, who for a long time was head of the costume department at Paramount, the moth costume is striking, sexy, and entirely out of place.

Arzner loved to put her actors in costumes. Wearing a costume can be seen as akin to wearing a mask. More often than not, Arzner's costumes do not hide: they rather reveal what cannot be said. In the *The Bride Wore Red*, which I mentioned earlier, Joan Crawford traverses different and opposing identities as she moves from the infamous red dress—beautiful, but too bold for the high society she had begun to mingle with—to a peasant costume she wears to a fair, a costume that nonetheless reappropriates her identity. In *Christopher Strong*, the moth costume signals both the beginning of Cynthia's relationship with Christopher and the inevitability of its end. The silver lamé costume virtually surprises Christopher, as Cynthia re-emerges from her closet wearing it, ready to attend a ball, which we never see her attend. It has a mantel and antennae and comes with a tight cap that envelopes her entire head. And Christopher cannot stop looking at her.

Cynthia is exquisitely different, a bug living a solitary life. A bug that flies—her plane, needless to say is called the Silver Moth—and it is with the Silver Moth that she breaks an altitude record and soon after takes her life during the film's last scene.

On the Silver Moth, Cynthia wears her ring and an oxygen mask that covers her entire face except for her eyes, making her look more insect-like than human. Her oxygen mask, we are led to believe, is yet another costume—one that lets her revisit the important moments of her relationship with Christopher—a kind of time machine. As the scene shifts between her eyes and a rotation of the film's key moments, a hypnotic spiral slowly fills the screen. She removes her mask. Before heading to her plane and her death, she had written Christopher the note: 'Courage can conquer even love'.

The moth costume, the ring, and the oxygen mask worn while trying to break the altitude record are closely tied together. Cynthia is different. When wearing a moth costume or an oxygen mask, she becomes what she is: courageous. And courage, more than love, is what she relies on. She needs a costume to be who she really is: someone who is not a wife and cannot be a mother. You need a lot of courage to be in her shoes.

I focused on Hepburn, but the reader will recall that Hepburn is not the only one who chose a style that rebelled against the traditional feminine canon. Arzner, behind the camera, was wearing pants, too. And she did know what it was like to be the only woman wearing pants. In fact, she wanted to show it, and she did through dozens of interviews and photographs, but also, not without courage, through her disproportionate success as a filmmaker.

It is in this corner of costume design crossing Arzner, Hepburn, Cynthia, and the very history of American fashion in the 1930s—one in which, as seen, Hollywood was central—that we encounter the need for a feminist point of view,

an epistemology looking at choices, changes, dynamics, and artworks from the perspective of a director, and I echo Brand here, whose gender matters. Using costumes, Arzner established a connection between the costumes in a film—what a character ends up being—and the costumes women wore and were, metaphorically, wearing. The parts they are supposed to play. The difficulty of balancing a job and being a wife, the uneven distribution of domestic responsibilities, and oppressive beauty standards are reflected in the way women dress, wear pants, use jewelry, and apply makeup. Arzner understood the problem and allowed Cynthia to move forward.

V. CYNTHIA'S DEATH AND A NEW BEGINNING

When describing Cynthia, I remarked how impossibly lonely—but also strong and tenacious she seemed to me on a recent viewing of the film. I have also noticed how moments where women are alone, caught in a moment of thought, tend to be some of the most poignant in Arzner's films. To conclude, let us turn to the contemporary audience.

Shrage pointed to how habits in the audience's reception have pushed a reading of Cynthia's death as an attempt to preserve Christopher's family—the S/strong family. In the end, audiences saw her as a mistress and not a wife, one who could hurt loving Elaine and tamper with the joy that Monica's child would bring to the family. Moving away from such a reading, Shrage's analysis reveals that, instead, Cynthia's actions destabilise the patriarchal view of family and marriage, since they show how superficial it is, since it relies on dogmas that have little to do with love.

It is easy to agree with Shrage's interpretation and highlight the feminist potential of the film. However, it is important that, beyond being correct about her conclusions, Shrage is also correct about her method and the importance of contextual analysis. With context in mind, we can see how changes are becoming noticeable and how alternative interpretations are emerging.

It should be noted, in this respect, that analyses of *Christopher Strong* rarely explore another aspect of Cynthia: the fact that she is a mother—or at least that she is destined to become one. It is an interesting angle to examine, especially since it was something Arzner thought about quite a bit as a director. Struggling mothers and the very topic of motherhood are central in *Dance Girl Dance* (1940), *Sarah and Son* (1930), and *Merrily We Go to Hell* (1932), and they are also important topics of conversation today, where 80% of single parents in the U.S. are women.

Single mothers in the United States tend to be homeowners at a higher rate than men.¹⁵ They also appear to be more organised. A recent New York Times article examines Mommunes, where single mothers live together with their children as an alternative to marriage, a way to save costs, and a practical solution to the expenses of childcare and the demands of work.¹⁶ As such, context does matter, and it is likely to affect contemporary viewings of the film.

Cynthia learns about her pregnancy late in the film. She had agreed to stop

flying, something Christopher had asked her to give up, yet she feels somewhat resentful of her decision. ‘I am getting soft’, she says to Christopher as they lunch at The Silver Trout. While they are seeing each other, her life has lost almost everything else: she is, she tells us, just eating, drinking, and waiting around for him. She remarks, ‘You have everything, I only have you’. She misses flying, how much she loved it, and the reputation she had built as a daring aviatrix.

Hoping to return to flying, she visits a doctor for a check-up. And that is when she learns about her pregnancy. And she is ecstatic. The mooney Cynthia, missing oil in her hands and hair, appears thrilled, to tell him the news over the phone. She is thrilled because now she has a reason, her future child, not to fly, and it does seem like the right reason, a solid reason to forgo a dangerous career. And yet, as we know, Cynthia never gets the chance to inform Christopher of her pregnancy, for he is too busy with the news of his daughter’s pregnancy and her marriage, with what they mean in the society they live in, to have time for Cynthia. He is, after all, the cautious one.

But I wonder, can she stop thinking about it? I find it hard to believe that she can. Being alone with a child has never been easy. Arzner knew that, and I would like to speculate that Cynthia knows it too. She is not married. She is an aviatrix and she has no relatives or close friends. What would having a child mean for her and her child?

There is a brief moment—really just a second—in which Cynthia, after removing her mask, tries to put it back on. I kept thinking about that moment long after the film ended. I admit that, in films, there is sometimes the risk of over-elaboration. Still, it is a risk we like to take, and maybe one we should allow ourselves to take because without it—and without the lively conversations that follow a film—we might not love films as much as we do. So, let me wonder whether, at that instant, a second before death, Cynthia finds herself hesitating, not as Christopher’s mistress but as a future mother.

Thirty-five years after Shrage’s article was published, the context has changed yet again. Contemporary contextual analysis needs to continue examining reception, but the current reception of Christopher Strong and several of Arzner’s other films is likely to share concerns about Cynthia’s status not only as a mistress but also as a mother who faces the challenges of being a single mother. Contemporary audience reception is likely to be more attentive to the frequency with which the word ‘courage’ appears in the movie and to what courage signifies in Cynthia’s case. It takes courage to pilot a plane, courage in relationships, and courage in sending a message, like the one Cynthia leaves for Christopher before her last flight. Courage, in the movie, conquers death and even love. It is the mark of a woman whose life’s dramatic changes we can only sympathise with.

A contemporary feminist analysis of Cynthia is likely to benefit today from an analysis that moves past marriage and the power of patriarchy and into the status of women as professionals and mothers who do-it-all. This is a message that resonates more today than it did in the past, but one that Arzner, the director, clearly emphasised. Arzner was a professional who weaved working mothers, and

the difficulty of being one, into many of her films. Through changes in context and continuous attention to such changes, we are invited to rediscover and underscore elements of Arzner's films, especially her attention to motherhood that earlier feminist literature sidelined in favour of issues of marriage and patriarchy. The importance of context, as emphasised by Shrage, and Brand's attention to the author's identity remain relevant. They do so by allowing us to move a step ahead.

As I conclude this paper, I want to emphasise the role played by costumes in the making, analysis, and interpretation of film. This, I believe, poses a fruitful avenue of discussion for both the philosophy of motion pictures and feminist philosophy, and quite frankly suggests a way for the two to collaborate and actively inform one another. Examining Cynthia's costumes reveals an understanding of her character that extends far beyond her movie character, and most definitely beyond an understanding of her actions as a form of sacrifice to the patriarchal order. Examining costumes in film from a feminist perspective, considering various and evolving feminist epistemologies, and acknowledging the context in which women live—and watch films—enhances film analysis.

The analysis of *Christopher Strong* advanced in this paper thus contributes to a feminist philosophy of film by foregrounding costumes as vehicles of epistemic agency. It invites a broader reconsideration of how film stages feminist epistemological and moral questions through aesthetic design. Costumes reveal much about a character—indeed, at times, they define a character—but they also convey significant information about the body, relationships, friendships, fears, and the multifaceted ways women have expressed their viewpoints, both on film and in life.

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NOTES

1. Shrage, 'Feminist Film Aesthetics: A Contextual Approach'.

2. Brand, 'Feminist Art Epistemologies: Understanding Feminist Art'.

3. Kay and Peary, 'Women and the Cinema'.

4. Cook, 'Approaching the Work of Dorothy Arzner'.

5. Johnston, *The Work of Dorothy Arzner: Towards a Feminist Cinema*.

6. Houston, 'Missing in Action: Notes on Dorothy Arzner'.

7. Shrage, 'Feminist Film Aesthetics: A Contextual Approach', 140–141.

8. Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History*.

9. Brand, 'Feminist Art Epistemologies: Understanding Feminist Art', 168.

10. Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner*.

11. Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner*; Casella, 'What Women Want: The Complex World of Dorothy Arzner and Her Cinematic Women'.

12. Smuts, 'Film as Philosophy: In Defense of a Bold Thesis'.

13. It should be noted, however, that the costume designer's role was ignored until the Oscar for Costume Design arose in 1949.

14. Campbell Warner, 'Twentieth-

Century American Fashion’.

15. Kolomatsky, ‘Single Women Own More Homes Than Single Men’.

16. Of course, childcare still primarily falls on women Kamin, ‘Mommunes: Mothers are Living Single Together’.

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