

Understanding Oppression

by

Dean Allen Clark

A PROJECT

submitted to

Oregon State University

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degree of

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Institutionalized oppression is a large multifaceted system that is regularly unrecognized and misunderstood. Marilyn Frye's birdcage analogy of oppression (1983) demonstrates why this complex system is often invisible, yet always immobilizing. In this analogy, Frye relates the various manifestations of oppressions to the wires of a birdcage, demonstrating that it is not the singular aspect of oppression (one wire), but the combination of numerous systematically related barriers (the birdcage), that make this structure so restricting.

The written portion of my project explores Frye's analogy along with the responses and criticisms this theory has received. This includes: clarifying what institutionalized oppression entails; establishing that men are not oppressed *as men*; examining the pedagogical potential of viewing oppression generally as singular (oppression), instead of many (racism, sexism, classism, etc.); and inspecting variables that render oppression "invisible." Also included is an analysis of movies that discuss oppression, and a script for acting and directing purposes. Finally, through a series of short clips and informative narration, I have created a short film illustrating Frye's concept of oppression that I plan to distribute on the internet.

Key Words: Oppression, Marilyn, Frye, Birdcage, Sexism.
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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Dean Allen Clark, Author

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To Dr. Jon Lewis, for mentally preparing me for how long it would take to produce this movie. His advice was to double the amount of time I thought it would take to shoot the movie, then triple the amount of time I thought it would take to edit. I naïvely believed I had a decent grasp on what it took to create a five minute film because I have compiled clips from silly camera phone footage. Turns out Dr. Lewis' suggestions were pretty spot on.

To Dr. Lani Roberts for first introducing me to Frye's rhetoric back in 2009, and continuing to be a powerful influence and ally in my life. For helping me even when retired, and for keeping me in check when I'm wrong.

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Dedicated to my friends and family who think oppression
does not exist or is no longer relevant.
Contact me if you want a
friendly debate.

Understanding Oppression

Chapter 1 Introduction

Understanding institutionalized oppression can be difficult to say the least. At first glance a single instance of oppression may appear simple, reducible, and obvious. However, upon further examination I've found this problem to be increasingly intricate, complicated, and interwoven in a way that creates a mutually self-reinforcing system.¹ To clarify, Cheney et al. define institutionalized oppression as "the systematic mistreatment of people within a social identity group, [extensively] supported and enforced by the society and its institutions, solely based on the person's membership in the social identity group."² Notwithstanding, feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye devised an elegantly straightforward, yet profound analogy for how the system of institutionalized oppression³ operates within society. For individuals who are unfamiliar with this phenomenon, Frye's analogy is an ideal model for communicating why oppression is often invisible, yet always immobilizing.

¹ Lani Roberts, "One Oppression or Many?" *Journal for Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, Vol. No. 1 & 2 (1997): 5.

² Carol Cheney et al., "Institutionalized Oppression Definitions," *Tri-County Domestic & Sexual Violence Intervention Network Anti-Oppression Training for Trainers* (2006): accessed July 19, 2012. <http://www.pcc.edu/resources/illumination/documents/institutionalized-oppression-definitions.pdf>.

³ From here on I will use the word "oppression" to be synonymous with "institutionalized oppression." This is a common assumption within the context of sociology, philosophy, psychology, and liberal studies.

In this analogy Frye relates the various manifestations of oppression to the wires of a birdcage, demonstrating that it is not the singular disadvantage of oppression (one wire), but the combination of numerous systematically related barriers (the birdcage) that make this structure so restricting. Throughout her explanation, Frye remarks on the misuse of “oppression” which results in this term being “stretched to meaninglessness.”⁴ By more clearly defining what it means to be oppressed, Frye establishes that mere suffering does not constitute oppression, and consequently clarifies that only some social groups are oppressed.⁵ Additionally, Frye argues that when appraising the individual barriers of oppression microscopically, we fail to understand the true detrimental capacity this system inflicts as a whole, macroscopically.⁶

While Frye’s theory serves as a great introduction to oppression, this system requires much more clarification in order to be more fully understood. Within this thesis, I examine the responses, criticisms, and clarification that Frye’s analogy has received. This includes defining who is oppressed, establishing the difference between a sexist judgment and institutionalized sexism, and examining what oppression entails.

I also explore the positive effects of viewing oppression generally as singular (oppression), instead of many (racism, sexism, classism, etc.). In the context of Frye’s analogy, this would consist of adding additional wires that

⁴ Marilyn Frye, “Oppression,” in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 1.

⁵ Ibid. 1-16.

⁶ Ibid. 4-7.

represent other oppressive disadvantages, along with the original wires representing sexism. Doing this emphasizes the common features of oppression and facilitates an understanding of how individuals can be oppressed through multiple aspects of their identity. Finally, feminist philosopher Lani Roberts demonstrates that understanding oppression as one problem increases alliances and has a pedagogical benefit as well.

I also critique different variables that effectively render oppression “invisible.” As was briefly mentioned in Frye’s essay, appraising the individual barriers of oppression can make this system appear insignificant and inconsequential. Understanding this system as a whole is essentially why Frye’s analogy is so useful, powerful, and enlightening. Roberts argues that when appraising oppression through its individual barriers (microscopically), victim blaming is a common consequence. Similarly, when the social standings of oppressed individuals are understood microscopically, institutional advantages, like affirmative action, appear unfair and unjustified. Nevertheless, the significance of oppression, inappropriateness of victim blaming, and justification for affirmative action, are all remedied when oppression is understood holistically. Other events that render oppression “invisible” are the neglect or disregard of this topic due to the presence of successful minorities, or the claim that we are living in a post-feminist society where oppression is no longer relevant.

The next portion of my project examines how themes of oppression are treated within the medium of film. Select movies, documentaries, and shorts explicate, discuss, and examine the structures of oppression. While it is rare to

find an analysis of oppression in film that is as in depth and critical as Frye's treatment of the topic, the medium of film is an important and successful channel in educating about oppression.

The culmination of this project is a short movie that explicates and describes Frye's birdcage analogy of oppression. To assist with acting and directing purposes, I wrote a script. Finally, through a series of short clips and informative narration I created a quick film illustrating Frye's concept of oppression that I intend to distribute on the internet.

For individuals who are unfamiliar with this topic, I have included in the footnotes and glossary various definitions and explanations of jargon, acronyms, or phrases that may be misleading or unclear. Please consult these if you are confused about any of the language being used. Terms that are defined and discussed in the glossary (located on page 41) are highlighted in **bold**.

Chapter 2

Marilyn Frye's Birdcage: An Analogy of Oppression

The sociological system of **institutionalized oppression** is a multifaceted structure that influences the lives of the majority of people in this world. However, this system is largely unrecognized and misunderstood. In her chapter "Oppression," Frye offers an analogy that makes the concept of oppression comprehensible to the layperson, by demonstrating why this system is often unexamined yet always disadvantageous.

Frye begins her essay by arguing that the word "oppression" is widely misused.⁷ For instance, it is commonly claimed that the act of oppressing is oppressive to the oppressors, as well as to those they oppress.⁸ Along with Frye, I'm not denying that oppressing is *harmful* to the oppressors, but it is certainly not oppressive. Frye discusses this point in terms of the oft-cited example that men are commonly discouraged from crying.⁹ This restriction on men's emotional expression may indeed be an unfortunate consequence of the oppression of women, insofar as sexist oppression demands that men be strong and women weak. However, the suggestion that men are oppressed as a result of this sexist restriction dilutes the significance of "oppression" to the point of rendering it essentially meaningless.¹⁰ For one thing, this restriction on men is largely policed

⁷ Marilyn Frye, "Oppression," in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 1.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

by men, not women.¹¹ Additionally, Frye argues, “it is perfectly consistent to deny that a person or group is oppressed without denying that they have feelings or that they suffer.”¹² Men as a group may be the victims of bias, bigotry, and hate, however, they are not oppressed, because societal systems and institutions do not conspire to enforce their mistreatment on a broad scale. Actually, it is quite the contrary; institutions are often tailored to cater to the needs and desires of some kinds of men who are beneficiaries of the dominant paradigm.¹³ For instance, in a traditional business setting, acting “professionally” is synonymous with acting “white” and “masculine.” Furthermore, there is rarely any incentive to address or confront these unearned privileges, simply because being part of the privileged class does not require or encourage the recognition of oppressive structures, and how this influences the lives of the oppressed.

Frye dissects the word “oppression” in order to define and describe the word as clearly as possible. The root word, “press,” means to mold or flatten. “Something that is pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or

¹¹ Marilyn Frye, “Oppression,” in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ In the US today those with the most institutional power are typically white (light skinned and phenotypically caucasian), wealthy, heterosexual, temporarily able-bodied, young, Protestant, and male. That is to say, when individuals who are identified as members of these social categories experience oppression, it will not be because of their membership in those categories. Part of what it means to say that these identities bring institutional power is to argue that these categories are a mark of privilege rather than oppression.

prevent the thing's motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce.”¹⁴ This definition is central to Frye's analogy.

The condition of being molded, immobilized, and reduced is elegantly demonstrated in the experience of the double bind, which is a ubiquitous feature in the lives of the oppressed. Double binds are situations in which individuals are “stuck between a rock and a hard place,” or are “damned if they do, and damned if they don't.” For example, Frye shows that women in the US are often faced with the complex task of negotiating an acceptable “happy medium” surrounding their perceived (hetero)sexuality. If a woman is heterosexually active, she is seen as “loose,” “unprincipled,” or “slutty,” —descriptions that results in social punishments such as verbal criticism and scorn. Furthermore, this stigma may result in women hiding their sexual behavior from friends and family members, while attempting to manage the risks of unplanned pregnancies, and dangerous contraceptives. Moreover, if a sexually-active woman is raped, it is often inferred that, given her licentious past, she probably “liked it.”¹⁵

On the other hand, if a woman is sexually conservative, she can be criticized as “frigid,” “uptight,” a “man-hating” lesbian, or a “bitch.”¹⁶ The same parents who might disapprove of her promiscuity may now worry that her sexual inactivity is a sign of lesbianism or unpopularity.¹⁷ As Frye explains, in this case if

¹⁴ Marilyn Frye, “Oppression,” in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

a sexually conservative woman is raped, some people assume that she “liked it,” since it probably helped her “sexual repression and frustration”¹⁸ or cured her lesbianism.

Both sexual activity and non-activity result in social condemnation and can be used as evidence that rape victims wanted sex, and were thus not *really* raped at all.¹⁹ Frye argues that these double binds result in, “situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation.”²⁰ If a woman dresses in short skirts, she is assumed to be advertising her sexual availability; if she dresses in pants, she can be described as unfeminine—in neither situation can she win.

Frye uses the analogy of a birdcage to clarify how these double-binds contribute to the limiting and comprehensive effects of oppression. An up-close examination of one wire in a birdcage would keep you from seeing the other wires. From this microscopic perspective you would not understand how a bird could ever be contained by such a futile device. Inspecting the wire from all angles, up and down, you would assume that a bird would simply avoid this wire if it was in its way. Furthermore, you could even inspect multiple wires from this microscopic perspective and still conclude that this device has no bearing on a

¹⁸ Marilyn Frye, “Oppression,” in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 3.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 2.

bird's mobility. After all, there is *nothing* about any one of these singular wires that would compromise the bird's mobility, except in the most accidental way.²¹

It is only when you take a step back and view the cage from a macroscopic perspective that you see the wires as a network of systematically related barriers, working together to contain the bird. Frye describes this insight as instantaneous: "It will require no great subtlety of mental powers. It is perfectly *obvious*...[these barriers] are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon [italics in the original]." ²²

Similarly, the elements of an oppressive structure can be systematically studied with great care without comprehending the confining aspects that this structure imposes as a whole.²³ Frye argues, "Just as the cageness of the birdcage is a macroscopic phenomenon, the oppressiveness of the situations in which women live their various and different lives is a macroscopic phenomenon."²⁴ Studying oppression microscopically results in a fruitless or ineffective understanding of oppression. It is only by taking the macroscopic standpoint that we can comprehend how the systematically-related forces and barriers conspire to create the harmful and restricting system that is oppression.

²¹ Marilyn Frye, "Oppression," in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

Chapter 3

Responses to & Criticism of Frye's Birdcage Analogy

Most of the responses to Frye's Birdcage analogy have been in the form of praise, celebration, and elaboration. A condensed version of Frye's original article²⁵ is a succinct three pages effectively introducing **institutionalized oppression**. However, this complicated phenomenon demands far more attention in order to be more fully understood.

Miscellaneous Clarification

In "Oppression and Resistance: Frye's Politics of Reality," Claudia Card (Frye's mentor) emphasizes that while some men are oppressed through certain aspects of their identity, they are, according to the definition, never oppressed as *men*.²⁶ As I have discussed above, some men may be the victims of unpleasant sexist assumptions; however, this does not entail oppression, because these assumptions are not institutionally reinforced on a large scale. Nevertheless, men can be oppressed through other aspects of their identity, or perceived identity, such as their socioeconomic class or sexual orientation.²⁷ Furthermore, suggesting that men are oppressed is a misleading statement given that their status as men is an unimportant and obsolete factor in this circumstance. It

²⁵ Marilyn Frye, "Oppression," in *Race, Class, & Gender*, edited by Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (2007): 29-32.

²⁶ Claudia Card, "Oppression and Resistance: Frye's Politics of Reality," *Hypatia*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (1986): 158.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

would be far more clear, accurate, and straightforward to declare that differently-abled people are oppressed, and some of these people happen to be men.

Card also elaborates on the distinction between individual experiences of sexism and institutionalized sexism. Card observes that the distinction between sexist judgments and widespread institutionalized sexism (oppression) is pertinent to Frye's project, because it is often a variable that inhibits people from understanding the powerful capacity of oppression. For instance, young men often pay higher car insurance rates than do young women. Operating on the earlier definition of **institutionalized oppression**,²⁸ this would qualify men as an oppressed class, except for the key premise that this oppression is not reinforced on a large scale. Therefore, the minor inconvenience of paying higher car insurance premiums for multiple years is trivial, compared to all of the other unearned privileges men benefit from in society (known as "male privilege").²⁹ For instance, men face far less social and economic consequences for being overweight or unattractive,³⁰ men are promoted at a rate that is significantly higher than their equivalent female counterparts,³¹ and men are far less likely to

²⁸ "Institutionalized oppression is the systematic mistreatment of people within a social identity group, [extensively] supported and enforced by the society and its institutions, solely based on the person's membership in the social identity group."

²⁹ Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege," in *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*, ed. Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 75-82.

³⁰ Jayne Stake and Monica L. Lauer, "The consequences of being overweight: A controlled study of gender differences," *Sex Roles*. Vol. 17, No. 1 & 2 (1987): 31-47.

³¹ Herminia Ibarra, et al., "Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women," *Harvard Business Review*, (2010): 80-85.

be the victim of rape,³² to name a few. In the grand scheme of things the innumerable male privileges largely outweigh this individual inconvenience. Additionally, in this case, insurance rightfully discriminates insofar as this discrimination is based on accurate statistical generalizations. We tend to consider it fair that men pay more for car insurance during a brief period of their life, because, in general, young men contribute to a disproportionate number of car crashes.³³ Similarly, people with cancer, AIDS, or other terminal diseases pay more for health insurance due to increased medical needs. Insurance is a system that is exempt from receiving moral condemnation for treating individuals like their statistical stereotypes.

Card continues by arguing that sexist *oppression* is invisible to many because “sexist institutions are not easy to identify when those who administer and participate in them are not particularly prejudiced. It is also, however, that many people think they have identified sexism when all they have identified is sexist prejudice in individuals, and they may rightly judge that such *prejudice* is not necessarily oppressive [italics in the original].”³⁴ This explanation effectively highlights Frye’s main position that it is the overarching system and framework, instead of any particular act, that makes oppression so influential and debilitating. Card notes that one encouraging conclusion of this argument is that the

³² “Who are the Victims?” *RAINN Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network*, Accessed July 30, 2012. <http://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/sexual-assault-victims>.

³³ Jill Gaubling, “Race, Sex, and Genetic Discrimination In Insurance: What’s Fair?” *Cornell Law Review*, Vol. 80 (1995): 1652.

³⁴ Claudia Card, “Oppression and Resistance: Frye’s Politics of Reality,” *Hypatia*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (1986): 159.

eradication of **institutionalized oppression** may not require the eradication of prejudice.³⁵ This is comforting because personal prejudice may prove much more difficult to eliminate than a system that has been institutionalized.³⁶

One Oppression

The original intent of Frye's birdcage analogy was to explain the restricting aspects of sexism; however, based on the materials I've read, I argue that Frye's model can be easily extrapolated to include other forms of oppression such as racism, classism, and lookism.³⁷ In the context of her original analogy each wire of the birdcage is meant to represent an oppressive facet of sexism. For instance, women earning 77 cents for every dollar a man makes for similar work (known as the "gender wage gap") would constitute one wire of this oppressive birdcage.³⁸ Another wire would be that women are held to a sexual double standard.

Under my broader interpretation of the birdcage, there would be additional wires that represented barriers of racism, classism, heterosexism, lookism, ageism, and ableism. A wire that would represent an instance of racism would be the fact that in the US, darker skinned people are routinely picked up less often

³⁵ Claudia Card, "Oppression and Resistance: Frye's Politics of Reality," *Hypatia*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (1986): 159.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Julius L. (JJ) Young, "The Expanded Cage," PHL 280 Class Note, Ed. Staff. Corvallis. 106-107.

³⁸ US Department of Commerce, US Census Bureau, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010* (Washington, DC, 2011), 12.

by cab drivers than people who are lighter skinned.³⁹ Each individual wire represents an aspect of oppression that could be assigned to a particular form of oppression (racism, classism, lookism, etc.), but the whole cage in general would represent the entire system of oppression. Furthermore, some wires would be applicable to multiple forms of oppression. For instance, in the US certain public places are effectively off limits to women and people from the queer community due to violence or the threat of violence.⁴⁰ This broader birdcage model is useful because it helps articulate how people can be oppressed through multiple aspects of their identity.

Frye's analogy can be used to explain oppression experienced at the individual level. For instance, not all women will suffer every aspect of sexism, thus, only certain wires of the birdcage that represent institutionalized sexism will be relevant to any particular woman. Additionally, individuals can be oppressed through multiple aspects of their identity, which can then alter their experience of oppression. For instance, the oppressive circumstances of an Asian, differently abled, economically challenged man, will be very different than a wealthy, Arab, transgendered woman.

It is important to note that these different aspects of people's identities are related in complex ways that don't necessarily compound each other resulting in a more heavily oppressed individual, or a more restraining, wire-populated birdcage. For instance, in the US, sexism and racism interact in ways that

³⁹ Lounry, Glenn C. "The Anatomy of Racial Inequality: The Author's Account," *The Review of Black Political Economy*, Vol. 32 No. 2 (2004): 77.

⁴⁰ Suzanne Pharr, "The Common Elements of Oppression," in *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, (Berkley, California: Chardon Press, 1997), 53-64.

typically benefit Hispanic and black women more than Hispanic and black men (e.g., more lenient incarceration rates).⁴¹ That being said, racism and sexism do, however, negatively impact women of color in other ways. It remains an ongoing sociological project to more fully explain the complex ways in which these oppressive identity markers intersect.

I have argued that Frye's birdcage can be easily extrapolated to include all forms of oppression.⁴² In her essay, "One Oppression or Many?" Lani Roberts argues that all of what she calls the "-isms" (e.g. racism, classism, sexism, etc.) share common features.⁴³ Roberts uses Frye's birdcage analogy to argue that we should view oppression as a singular system rather than a multi-faceted system. For instance, Roberts, relying on Suzanne Pharr's work, outlines four common experiences that are shared by oppressed groups including **internalized oppression, horizontal hostility, assimilation, and tokenism.** The common experiences of oppression are significant because although we tend to think of the "-isms" as separate and distinct issues, they share oppressive features. In the context of Frye's birdcage analogy, these oppressive features would represent bars of the birdcage that are applicable to multiple oppressed groups.

⁴¹ Darrell Steffensmeir et al., "Does Gender Modify the Effects of Race-ethnicity on Criminal Sanctioning? Sentences for Male and Female White, Black, and Hispanic Defendants," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, Vol. 22 No. 3 (2003): 259.

⁴² Julius L. (JJ) Young, "The Expanded Cage," PHL 280 Class Note. Ed. Staff. Corvallis. 106-107.

⁴³ Lani Roberts, "One Oppression or Many?" *Journal for Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, Vol. No. 1 & 2 (1997): 1-15.

Roberts also demonstrates that there are two positive consequences of viewing oppression as singular instead of many. First off, in viewing oppression as different for singular distinct classes, there is little possibility of these groups forging alliances to challenge their shared condition. Recognizing the intersectionalities between these conditions not only encourages alliances, but also stimulates progression towards liberation and equality. Roberts recognizes that these alliances could prove to be of monumental importance given that, “the oppressed are far greater in number than the oppressors and, in a democracy, this theoretically counts for a lot.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, the failure to recognize a common experience often results in individuals in these groups being pitted against each other, instead of working toward a common goal (a phenomenon that is also known as **horizontal hostility**).

The second positive consequence of viewing oppression as one instead of many is its pedagogical potential. Roberts writes from the perspective of a philosophy professor who regularly lectures on oppression. She notes that it is common for students to receive formal education surrounding racism in elementary school, but many of her students lament that they were not introduced to theories outlining the larger system of oppression (including sexism, classism, and ableism) until their early twenties.⁴⁵ By pairing these two lessons together, students could become more critical, sympathetic, and knowledgeable in understanding how social disadvantage and privilege operate,

⁴⁴ Lani Roberts, “One Oppression or Many?” *Journal for Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, Vol. No. 1 & 2 (1997): 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

which could also restrain the negative social programming that begins at birth. In other words, students would learn that racism is part of a larger oppressive project, as opposed to a distinct individual problem.

Events that Render the Birdcage “Invisible”

As I have argued, people often focus their appraisal of oppression selectively and microscopically, which results in an incomplete comprehension of how this complex system operates on a macroscopic level. In *Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye’s “Oppression,”* Alison Bailey emphasizes the importance of understanding oppression from a macroscopic perspective. Bailey notes, “one of the reasons people fail to see oppression is that they focus on particular events, attitudes, and actions that strike them as harmful, but they do not place these incidents in the context of historical, social, and political *systems* [italics in the original].”⁴⁶ For instance, acknowledging that it is unfortunate that certain public spaces are effectively off limits to women due to violence or the threat of violence is important,⁴⁷ but, without placing this in the larger structure of oppression, this disadvantage may seem mildly unfavorable, and therefore insignificant. Bailey continues, “When the effects of sexism, for example, are not understood macroscopically as the products of systemic injustices, they are understood microscopically as the exclusive problems of particular women who

⁴⁶ Alison Bailey, “Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye’s ‘Oppression,’” *Journal of Social Philosophy*. Vol. 29 No. 3 (1998): 105.

⁴⁷ Suzanne Pharr, “The Common Elements of Oppression,” in *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, (Berkley, California: Chardon Press, 1997), 53-64.

have made bad choices, have poor attitudes, are too sensitive, or who are overreacting to a random incident.”⁴⁸ Oppression is not debilitating because women feel, or are, unsafe walking around at night. It is this threat *and* the gender wage gap, the sexual double standard, disproportionate rates of rape and abuse, as well as the numerous other instances of institutionalized sexism.

In other words, losing a dollar is unfortunate and mildly unfavorable. It happens, but it doesn't often ruin your day. Losing one hundred or a thousand dollars, on the other hand, can make you feel sick to your stomach. Evaluating particular aspects of oppression from a microscopic perspective is like realizing that you lost a dollar, without acknowledging that this dollar was part of the thousand dollars that you *actually* lost. From a microscopic or dollar standpoint, the events of oppression or monetary loss appear only slightly unfortunate, and in the grand scheme of things inconsequential. It is only from the macroscopic standpoint that losing a thousand dollars or the system of oppression will appear significant and debilitating.

Based on Frye's insights, Roberts observed that the microscopic appraisal of oppression commonly results in victim blaming. She recounts how, in a typical instance of classism, we tell people who are homeless or on welfare to, “just get a job.”⁴⁹ In this instance, the single wire of the birdcage would be unemployment. With Frye, Roberts argues that, from the microscopic perspective of the economically privileged, the only problem is the individual's lack of employment.

⁴⁸ Alison Bailey, “Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye's ‘Oppression,’” *Journal of Social Philosophy*. Vol. 29 No. 3 (1998): 105.

⁴⁹ Lani Roberts, “One Oppression or Many?” *Journal for Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, Vol. No. 1 & 2 (1997): 5.

However, a simple shift in perspective demonstrates that the barriers a homeless person faces are far more numerous and debilitating than simply asking for a job. The fallacy of the American dream, which suggests it is possible to go from rags to riches, falls under criticism when this ideal fails to evaluate the numerous barriers that an individual in this circumstance must overcome to get the job. These barriers include having an address or phone number, appropriate clothing, bathing facilities, child care, the resources to write and print a resume, reliable transportation, previous work experience, proper identity documentation, etc. Roberts argues that, "If we were to take a broader view, we could see that there are many complex, interwoven, mutually self-reinforcing aspects of poverty and, together, they are systematically arranged in such a way that 'pulling oneself up by the bootstraps' becomes no more than a faint possibility at best."⁵⁰ When observing poverty from the macroscopic perspective it is easier to be sympathetic to an individual's position and will make one less likely to judge or blame a victim for her/his circumstance.

Microscopically appraising oppression by focusing on the social policies from which oppressed groups benefit from can lead individuals to assume that oppression is not only unimportant, but that belonging to an oppressed group is actually advantageous. There are social systems that exist to benefit oppressed individuals; affirmative action is one of them. However, selectively and microscopically evaluating someone's social condition through this one policy and judging that they are not only not oppressed, but actually have an advantage

⁵⁰ Lani Roberts, "One Oppression or Many?" *Journal for Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, Vol. No. 1 & 2 (1997): 5.

in society, fails to acknowledge the various other barriers that these individuals must overcome. In fact, it is the presence of these often invisible or unexamined barriers that justify affirmative action policies. Affirmative action is permitted based on the logic that, in general, oppressed individuals must overcome additional barriers in order to achieve the status of “equally qualified” for a position; thus, oppressed individuals have therefore worked harder and are often more deserving of the job or school opening. Additionally, affirmative action policies continue to exist because the benefit of this one program has not yet exceeded the numerous disadvantages that **institutionalized oppression** imposes. Assuming that affirmative action is reverse racism or an unfair and unjust program is similar to evaluating a birdcage through one wire. Assessing all of the barriers that an oppressed individual must overcome (i.e., assessing the entire birdcage), makes the presence of affirmative action policies not only understandable, but morally imperative.

Some people argue that oppression is a problem of the past and cite exceptionally successful individuals like Oprah Winfrey or President Obama as justification for this claim. While it is true that, in the contemporary US, many structural features of oppression have been eradicated, we are still very far from achieving an acceptable level of equality. Over the past five hundred years, people identified as women or as people of color have gained the right to vote, own property, and marry whom they choose; slavery has been abolished; and anti-discrimination laws have been approved. Nevertheless, these anti-

discrimination laws are incomplete⁵¹ and often violated;⁵² queer marriage is still largely illegal, and the gender wage gap still exists.⁵³ In the words of former President Bill Clinton, “We can be proud of this progress, but 75 cents on the dollar is still only three-quarters of the way there...”⁵⁴

It would be silly to conclude that just because a handful of individuals overcame some obstacles, that those obstacles no longer exist or are irrelevant to people’s lives. A dark skinned man may be the president of the United States and a woman of color may be one of the richest people in the world; nevertheless, people with darker skin are continually denied housing or jobs based on stereotypical assumptions about their behavior or character.⁵⁵ The impulse to emphasize Obama or Oprah and assume that oppression is irrelevant is often caused by the psychological phenomenon of confirmation bias. This bias suggests that people will often pay more attention to information that confirms their beliefs whilst ignoring or disregarding evidence to the contrary. While significant progress has been made in achieving equality and particular

⁵¹ Jack M. Battaglia, “Religion, Sexual Orientation, and Self-Realization: First Amendment Principles and Anti-Discrimination Laws,” *University of Detroit Mercy Law Review*, Vol. 76 No. 2 (1999): 189.

⁵² Chad A. Readler, “Local Government Anti-Discrimination Laws: Do They Make A Difference?” *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform*, Vol. 31 (1998): 777-1007.

⁵³ US Department of Commerce. US Census Bureau. *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010* (Washington, DC, 2011), 12.

⁵⁴ Associated Press, “Clinton Aims to Close Wage Gap Between Sexes,” *Los Angeles Times* (1999): accessed July 8, 2012. <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/jan/31/news/mn-3532>.

⁵⁵ Colleen M. Farrell, “Housing discrimination continues in U.S.,” *The Daily Record*, (Rochester, NY), Accessed June 24, 2009.

individuals have transcended their circumstances, oppression is still a very consequential and relevant problem.

Chapter 4

Film & Oppression

I now turn to an examination of how themes of oppression are treated in the medium of film. Too often, popular films serve to reinforce stereotypes and support an oppressive status quo as opposed to confront and deconstruct these harmful generalizations. Nevertheless, a few select films and short movies have effectively addressed many of the problems and complexities surrounding oppression. While it is rare to find a Hollywood movie that critiques race and gender relations, there are a few, as well as a variety of independently made documentaries.

The most popular Hollywood movie to address oppression, especially in terms of race and gender relations, is the 2004 Academy Award winning film *Crash*.⁵⁶ This movie successfully explicates many of the complex intersections of race and gender relations, including **internalized oppression**, **self-fulfilling prophecies**, **horizontal hostility**, and **assimilation**. For instance, in one scene two darker skinned males receive poor service from a waitress who (not shown) is also described as “black.” The men in this scene attribute the waitress’ actions to her stereotypical assumption that they are “black, and black people don’t tip.”⁵⁷ This is an example of **horizontal hostility**: a form of prejudice against members of a similar minority group.⁵⁸ Furthermore, their subsequent decision to refuse a

⁵⁶ Paul Haggis, *Crash*, DVD. Directed by Paul Haggis. Los Angeles: (2004).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Judith B. White and Ellen J. Langer, “Horizontal Hostility: Relations Between Similar Minority Groups,” *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 55 No. 3 (1999): 537.

tip for this service (or lack thereof) probably served to confirm the waitress' stereotype about black people not tipping. This exchange illustrates a **self-fulfilling prophecy**: "a phenomenon whereby expectations of how others will act or behave, affects interactions and elicits the anticipated response".⁵⁹ The waitress assumed that these men would not tip, and therefore provided them with poor service. These men didn't tip because they received poor service. Despite their justification for refusing to tip, the waitress was likely to attribute their lack of a tip to their status as black men, as opposed to her poor service. Events like this are a common way in which stereotypes and oppression are perpetuated.

My only criticism of this film is that just because something is demonstrated in a movie does not mean that it is explicitly understood by its audience. Furthermore, if this film wasn't comprehended through a critical lens, it is possible that this movie could simply re-instantiate common stereotypes. Nevertheless, an attempt to critique race and gender relations is better than simply neglecting the topic completely.

Some documentaries addressing oppression have been made available for free viewing on the video sharing website YouTube. I also plan to publish my film to the internet with the intent that this movie may introduce the topic of oppression and catalyze further conversation surrounding these issues. Similarly, Media Education Foundation distributes documentaries that critically discuss oppression in relation to politics, sports, rap, pop-culture, advertising, and

⁵⁹ "Psychology Dictionary," *ITS*, Accessed July 31, 2012. <http://www.tuition.com.hk/psychology/o.htm>.

capitalism.⁶⁰ This distribution method allows for ideas to spread in a very democratic, extensive, and revolutionary way.

Another popular sequence of movies that discuss oppression is the “It Gets Better Project” interviews.⁶¹ These self-made shorts feature different LGBTQQIAAOPP2S⁶² individuals discussing bullying, hardships, coming out stories, and how their circumstance has improved, thus providing hope and encouragement for other queer individuals who may be in a similar circumstance. Though these personal testimonies are often moving, inspiring, or encouraging, and an important part of deconstructing oppression, they seldom discuss theories of oppression in manner that is as sophisticated as Frye’s treatment of the topic.

Turning now to the script for my own film, there are a couple of general concepts that I want to convey and some I want to avoid. In working for equality, I try not to perpetuate or re-instantiate stereotypes. For this reason I pay particular attention to the demographics of the characters I cast. For instance, I’ve found that some people regard domestic violence as a phenomenon restricted to families that are less economically privileged and/or non-white. For this reason, in the segments of my film focused on domestic violence, I chose two people who would be perceived as white, and upper-middle class. Despite this

⁶⁰ Media Education Foundation, Accessed July 8, 2012. <http://www.mediaed.org/>

⁶¹ Dan Savage, “IT GETS BETTER PROJECT,” *Savage Love*, 2010-2012. Accessed July 26, 2012. <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/>.

⁶² This is an inclusive acronym for the queer community that is broken down as follows: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Ally, Omnisexual, Pansexual, Polyamorous, Two-Spirit.

stereotype, I would like to point out that domestic violence is a serious problem that transcends race, class, ability, age, sexuality, and gender.⁶³

I also want to acknowledge that taking the macroscopic view of oppression can result in a feeling of being overwhelmed or helpless in the face of large, hegemonic institutional forces. These feelings can discourage us from working to surmount or dismantle the various obstacles that oppression imposes. In this sense the macroscopic perspective can be a double edged sword. For individuals who are newly discovering the oppressive features of our society, the macroscopic perspective can facilitate their understanding of how this structure can be so restricting. However, for individuals who are trying to overcome or dismantle the barriers of oppression, the overwhelming macroscopic standpoint can feel defeating, resulting in a dangerous passivity and acceptance of the status quo. To avoid this phenomenon, commonly referred to as “feminist fatigue,” methodically tackling the barriers of oppression one by one, microscopically, may be advisable and beneficial. In my own film I try to address this concern by offering local and national services that can assist individuals whom are having issues with domestic violence.

A search on YouTube for “domestic violence” will return a long list of testimonials, documentaries, student films, or public service announcements. Most of these videos discuss statistics, raising awareness, the cyclical aspects of abuse, or plead for an end to this problem (sometimes without offering any services). While these videos are informative and emotionally provocative, few

⁶³ “Domestic Violence Common Myths,” Last modified 2009, Accessed July 8, 2012, <http://www.domesticviolence.org/common-myths/>.

give insight into the numerous structural barriers that must be overcome in order to escape domestic violence. One of the reasons Frye's metaphor is so powerful is because of the overwhelming amount of barriers that oppressed individuals confront on a daily basis. Recognizing that it is not just a singular instance of oppression, but the frequent presence of oppressive circumstances is one of the goals of my film, and why I have chosen to represent numerous reasons for why the main character Nora doesn't leave her abusive husband. These include (but are not limited to) not having a safe place to escape to, the hope that maybe the abuse will stop, the fear that upon leaving the abuse will transfer to her children or that she may never see her kids again, being financially dependent on her husband (an effect that is compounded when we factor in that she doesn't have a job, income, or relevant work experience), the very real concern that leaving will result in an outburst that resolves violently or fatally, the complicated and confusing love that she has for her abuser, and the inability to get a divorce due to religious constraints.

My intent for this film is that it be succinct, informative, poignant, and enlightening. I've found that when studying different social atrocities, we often look at the circumstance from the perspective of numbers and facts, which can be dehumanizing and emotionally void. This, at times, is helpful to prevent a sort of emotional exhaustion or "feminist fatigue"; however, these feelings are also appropriate and can help motivate change.

Frye's metaphor is basic enough that even a young audience will be able to grasp its significance. As a philosophy major, I often find myself reading

dozens of pages of convoluted and confusing material, only to turn around and explain the theory in a short, succinct, and simple way to a person without any philosophical background, whilst maintaining the theory's significance. I believe much of what we learn in philosophy is very important, but it can also be incomprehensible to the layperson. This isn't to say that at times philosophical texts are complex because the theory itself is equally as intricate. Nevertheless, my film will add to the conversation surrounding oppression by communicating Frye's metaphor in a simple, entertaining, and concise fashion.

Chapter 5 Script

Cast

- Nora-Wife and mother in an abusive relationship. Age 25-40.
- Oscar-Nora's husband and abuser. Relatively similar age to Nora.
- Sarah-Nora's friend similar age.
- Person looking closely at the birdcage.
- Person of color who is denied a job due to stereotypical assumptions about their behavior.
- Racist who denies person of color the job.
- Gay man denied from seeing spouse in hospital.
- Hospital receptionist.
- Doctor who refuses to let gay man see his husband.
- Friend who can't take Nora into their home.

Scene 1

This scene is set at a coffee shop where two middle-aged women are catching up. It's mid-morning. Sarah and Nora speak some insignificant chit chat, as the two catch up on life. There is a close up shot of Nora's hands (her wedding ring is visible here). A shot of the wire coffee table is a subtle allusion to the cage of oppression that will be described later.

Nora: "Oscar hit me again."

Sarah: *flustered and fed up* "Nora, just, just leave."

A quick montage of scenes shot later in the movie are flashed very quickly (sort of foreshadowing why it isn't so simple to "just leave") along with the sound of Nora taking a deep inhalation superimposed over this with the beginning of the soundtrack.

Scene 2

Shot of person whose face is right up against the birdcage.

Narrator: "Looking closely at one wire of a birdcage will prevent you from seeing its surrounding wires."

Macro shot of birdcage so that only one wire is visible. Close up with a low aperture (f-stop at its lowest so there is a lot of blur between the shot of the wire and the background, rendering the other wires indecipherable).

Narrator: "From this microscopic perspective it would appear that the birdcage is a futile device that could never contain or restrain a bird."

Zoom out and adjust focus so that the whole cage can be seen. Move around the cage, and show it from different angles.

Narrator: "It is only when you step back and see the cage as a whole, macroscopically, that you will understand why this structure is so constraining.

Oppression is like this birdcage."

Scene 3

Scene consists of a man's hand and a woman's hand. One receives 1 dollar, and the other receives 77 cents.

Narrator: "You may recognize the individual barriers of oppression. Such as the gender wage gap which dictates that, on average, women are still paid 77 cents for every dollar a man makes."

Scene 4

Scene consists of a person of color walking into a business and being told in a condescending tone that the position was just filled.

Narrator: "That people of color are continually denied housing and jobs based on stereotypical assumptions about their character."

White person: "You know what, the position just filled. Sorry."

Scene 5

Scene consists of a man wanting to go into a hospital room to see his dying husband and the doctor won't let him.

Narrator: "Or that people in same-sex relationships have fewer or no marriage benefits."

Doctor: "I'm sorry sir, but you can't go in there."

Husband: "But that's my husband."

Scene 6

Shots of the micro and macro birdcage.

Narrator: "But without understanding these disadvantages in relation to the larger context of oppression, they appear mildly unfavorable, and in the grand scheme of things unimportant. It is only when you appraise all of the barriers that an oppressed group is burdened with, that you'll understand why this system is so limiting."

Scene 7

Shot consists of single wire, Nora with the baby, and Sarah's earlier scene where she urges Nora to "just leave."

Narrator: "From a microscopic perspective, Nora's decision between leaving her husband or staying in this abusive relationship is simple; she should, **Flash a shot of Sarah saying, "Just leave."**

"Unfortunately, leaving is only one of the barriers that Nora must confront in order to escape this abusive nightmare. Looking at the wider context of oppression or domestic violence we would find that this problem is exceedingly complex, systemic, and multifaceted, making the prospect of leaving far more complicated than it appears. For instance...

Scene 8

Shot consists of Nora and Oscar (her husband) kissing and hugging after an argument. There are tears in their eyes (bring eyedrops to the set for this day) as they finish their conversation after the fight. They are facing each other on a bench or couch. Nora is crying, shaking her head, they hug, and she kisses him with tears streaming down her face.

Narrator: "Nora may love her husband and his promise to seek help may inspire hope that this time things actually will get better... although that's what he said last time. But this time he really means it."

Oscar: "I promise I'll get better, I really mean it"

Oscar's dialogue overlaps with the narration

Scene 9

Scene consists of a close up shot with a bible where the passage "divorce is strictly forbidden" is shown.

Narrator: "Her place of worship may strictly forbid her from a divorce and if she followed through her family and social network may disown her."

Scene 10

Scene consists of Nora packing her stuff and Oscar grabbing her hand as she puts something in the bag, then he throws the bag across the room. Next shot is of him grabbing a knife. Maybe a shot of Nora's feet on the ground with Oscar standing over her out of breath, blood on the knife and his hand. As he wipes his brow some of the blood smears on his face.

Narrator: "Statistically, leaving her husband and the time soon after is the most dangerous part of an abusive relationship which results in outbursts that often end violently. Sometimes fatally."

Scene 11

Scene consists of a door slamming, coffee cup shattering, “shut up” being screamed as we do a close up of Oscar’s mouth, one arm struggling against the other with “let go of me” being screamed by Nora, “Look what you made me do,” and “you’re worthless” being shouted by Oscar all in quick sequences one after another, signifying the 7 different times that she tried to leave before.

Narrator: “Additionally, it takes an average of 7 times for a survivor to leave an abusive partner for good.”

Scene 12

Shot consists of baby or small child in crib, or being grabbed violently by the shoulder. Or a kid with a black eye backing out of focus then turning and walking away. Blur the background of the scene with a low f-stop. Or simply a shot of a baby in a crib. Also a shot of a Canadian passport.

Narrator: “She may worry that upon leaving, the abuse will transfer to her children or that she may never see her kids again. In fact, kids and immigration status are often used as leverage in domestically violent relationships.”

Scene 13

Shot consists of Oscar opening his wallet and giving Nora the money.

Narrator: “She may be financially dependent on her partner, an effect that is compounded when taking into account that she doesn’t have a job, income, or relevant work experience.”

Scene 14

Scene consists of her friend regretfully closing the door on her after she says, “There’s just no room.” Accomplished through an over the shoulder shot of her friend shutting the door.

Narrator: “She may not have anyone who is willing to take her into their home and the local shelter may be full or unavailable to accept children. Additionally, abusers often isolate their victims, making it more difficult to find available friends or resources that would help her escape.”

Friend: “I’m sorry, I just can’t, our house is already full.”

Scene 15

Scene consists of Nora doing some paper work, then putting a hand to her forehead due to a feeling of exhaustion.

Narrator: “Constant verbal abuse may chip away at her self-esteem resulting in a feeling of low self-worth, fear that she’ll never find another partner, or a lack of autonomy, making it extremely difficult to devise an effective safety plan.”

Scene 16

Scene consists of an economically underprivileged person being told to, "Just get a job." The scene of Sarah saying, "Just leave." More artistic scenes of the birdcage, with an end of the macro birdcage spinning in the air (use fishing line and a broomstick for this shot so it looks like the birdcage is floating mid-air).

Narrator: "When appraised microscopically, oppression is blatantly misunderstood. In order to truly comprehend the harm that this system inflicts, you must understand this system macroscopically, with all of the disadvantages that an oppressed group is confronted with.

Scene 17

The narrator reads this title card.

If you, or someone you know, is struggling with domestic violence please call the confidential national hotline at:

1-800-799 SAFE (7233)

Or

TTY 1-800-787-3224

The trained specialists can assist with advice, a safety plan, support, and different advocacy options.

Credits

Written, Directed, Shot, & Edited by: Dean A. Clark
 Nora.....Silvia Swanson
 Oscar.....Travis Swanson
 Baby.....Doug Swanson
 Sarah (Nora's Friend).....Sadie Davis
 Man looking at cage.....Dean A. Clark
 Narrator.....David Scott Arnold
 Boss's Hand..... Claire Younger
 Woman's hand.....Lynn Cordes
 Man's Hand.....Dave Haskell
 Job Applicant.....Milikaleakona Tonga Hopoi
 Racist Receptionist.....Toni Dondero
 Husband.....Steven Leider
 Hospital Receptionist.....Jo Holbrook
 Doctor.....Debbie Gerber
 Friend with no room.....Dean A. Clark

Chapter 6

Results & Discussion

One of the challenges of this thesis was finding an appropriate boundary regarding what I should discuss and what I should omit. Oppression is a very broad topic of which I have barely scraped the surface, both in this thesis and in my four years at university. Undertaking this project in a span that is shorter than average is partially responsible for this. Nevertheless, keeping the movie and written portion succinct was a tactic of mine in order to increase the amount of traffic it will see on the internet. If you are interested in additional material regarding this topic, I have provided at the end of the bibliography a list of essays that are commonly used as introductory material when studying oppression.⁶⁴

If I was not restricted by time and resources, I would ideally create a movie for each of the “-isms.” I believe this would be useful because some people regard oppression as a problem that only influences particular social groups. For instance, in the sophisticated graffiti of an Oregon State stall (sarcasm intended), I found an inscription that read, “FUCK OSU OPPRESSION STATE U.”⁶⁵ Below this message in different writing someone responded, “We’re sorry Blacks,” as if oppression is a system that only influences black people or is even restricted by race. Making a movie for each of the “-isms” would provide viewers with insight regarding how oppression influences the lives of differently

⁶⁴ This list was compiled with the help of an authority figure on this topic and my mentor, Dr. Lani Roberts.

⁶⁵ Engraving in Milam Hall at Oregon State University, 2520 SW Campus Way, Corvallis, OR 97331. Room 125 (men’s bathroom) first stall on the right as you enter.

oppressed groups. I attempted to remedy this concern by using domestic violence to explicate Frye's theory, whilst also generalizing the concept to apply to other oppressed groups. This was accomplished by saying things like, "oppression is like this birdcage," instead of "*domestic violence* is like this birdcage." Additionally, if this movie is successfully intriguing, people will be inclined to read this essay (which I will also publish to the internet), and at this time they will understand that I'm discussing oppression in relation to race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, and age, instead of just domestic violence.

I found the example of domestic violence particularly potent in illustrating Frye's microscopic/macrosopic distinction.⁶⁶ I specifically appreciate this example because I think it is a common circumstance where victims are blamed. Not that victim blaming doesn't occur in other oppressive circumstances at epidemic proportions, but I feel as though it is particularly widespread within violent relationships. The abused are accused of provoking the assault or told that it was their fault for not leaving; I believe this misplaced blame is a direct consequence of misunderstanding the larger context of domestic violence and the various barriers preventing escape. By displaying Nora's friend's first reaction, that Nora should "Just leave," I tried to create a scene that some people could relate to (either victims or victim blamers). It is very attractive and simple to encourage someone to just leave a significant other. On the face of it, this alternative seems logical and straightforward. However, by demonstrating why

⁶⁶ I would like to give credit to Dr. Lani Roberts who first introduced me to Frye's rhetoric in her class, "PHL 280-The Ethics of Diversity," during Winter term in 2009. Lani used the example of domestic violence to illustrate the barriers of Frye's birdcage when discussing this theory, and therefore influenced my decision to use abuse for the example in this movie.

this proposal is so difficult and complicated, I hope to expose our prejudices, which could potentially prevent victim blaming from occurring in similar situations.

As a novice filmmaker, this experience was both challenging and enlightening. Working with non-professional actors⁶⁷ forced me to make particular choices with the script and editing. It was for this reason that I chose to explicate most of the scenes with heavy narration, few lines, almost no character building, and very little acting. I also attempted to avoid shots of the actors' faces, which was accomplished by shooting their hands, bodies, or surrounding scenery. Nevertheless, I learned some valuable insight regarding what it takes to write, direct, shoot, and edit a short film. I anticipated this movie to be succinct, informative, and poignant. However, as I've learned through the instruction of Dr. Jon Lewis, student-made dramas are far less successful than comedies. Therefore, while this movie wasn't as emotionally provocative and engaging as I originally intended, it succeeded in communicating Frye's metaphor, which was my primary goal.

One lesson I learned in this process was that translating a philosophical message into the medium of film is more difficult than it appears. Philosophers are generally very particular with the language they use, thus writing may serve as an ideal medium for communicating their message. While my movie was quick and succinct, it may be too quick for communicating some of the subtleties of

⁶⁷ I am consciously using "actors" here to refer to a mixed gendered group. "Actors" can be used as both a male-gendered and gender-neutral word; I am using it here as the latter. The progression towards gender-neutral language makes society more inclusive for people who identify as transgendered. Furthermore, language is a subtle way in which the white, heteropatriarchal norm is perpetuated. For more on this subject, see the "Racist Stereotyping in the English Language" article by Robert B. Moore in the "Suggested Reading" section of the bibliography.

Frye's theory. I also learned through this process some basic film lessons. For instance, getting a 10-second shot correct while in the field, with little background noise, the correct dialogue, and acceptable acting, can save you literally dozens of hours in post-production. Finally, I also taught myself through this process how to work various filming equipment, and editing software.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

Recognizing a problem is the first step to solving it. Unfortunately, despite its invasive and systemic characteristics, oppression is a problem that is commonly unrecognized, wrongfully discredited, or blatantly misunderstood. Even when primed with the best intentions, people will blame victims for their circumstances, ignore injustice, and emphasize equal opportunity policies as “unfair.” While it is appealing to believe we all have roughly the same chance at achieving success, the presence of **institutionalized oppression** makes this ideology naïve.

Through relating the mutually self-reinforcing⁶⁸ barriers and double binds of oppression to the wires of a birdcage, Marilyn Frye elegantly explains why this structure is so overwhelming, harmful, and restricting. Additionally, in discerning the difference between the trivial singular barriers of oppression, and the debilitating overarching structure of oppression, Frye effectively demonstrates why this system is often unrecognized, yet always immobilizing. Furthermore, by establishing that oppression is more than mere suffering, Frye helps distinguish what social groups are oppressed, and that while men may endure certain effects of oppression, they are never oppressed *as men*.

While Frye’s theory is a great introduction to understanding oppression, additional time and information is needed to more fully grasp how this complex

⁶⁸ Lani Roberts, “One Oppression or Many?” *Journal for Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, Vol. No. 1 & 2 (1997): 5.

system of domination⁶⁹ operates within society. Claudia Card continues Frye's discourse by further clarifying that while men are not oppressed *as men*, they can be oppressed through other aspects of their identity such as their race or physical abilities. Card also defines the difference between individual sexist judgments and widespread, institutionalized sexism (oppression).

Understanding oppression as a single systematic phenomenon instead of many individual problems results in multiple benefits for combating social inequality. By adding additional "wires" to Frye's original birdcage of sexism, we can better understand how people can be oppressed through multiple aspects of their identity and see that certain barriers (such as the threat of violence making public spaces off-limits),⁷⁰ simultaneously oppress multiple groups of people. Roberts argues that this could help stimulate alliances between traditionally opposed groups, enabling them to challenge their shared, oppressed condition. Additionally, she demonstrates that there is a pedagogical advantage in this tactical move, which suggests that introducing theories about social disadvantage at an earlier age will help restrict the negative and stereotypical messages people affirm and perpetuate throughout life.

Misunderstanding oppression not only prolongs this problem, but also results in victim blaming. Recognizing the crucial difference between the micro- and macroscopic appraisal of oppression is, in my opinion, a critical factor preventing people from accurately understanding this phenomenon. Along with

⁶⁹ Alison Bailey, "Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye's 'Oppression,'" *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 29 No. 3 (1998): 105.

⁷⁰ Suzanne Pharr, "The Common Elements of Oppression," in *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, (Berkley, California: Chardon Press, 1997), 53-64.

this misunderstanding is the belief that feminism and oppression are irrelevant, which is erroneously justified through the presence of successful minorities such as President Obama.

The movie I created was successful in describing Frye's analysis of oppression in a short and informative fashion, yet was not as emotionally provocative as I originally intended. Nevertheless, this process has provided me with multiple valuable lessons regarding what it takes to write, direct, shoot, and edit a short movie. Only time will tell if this movie is intriguing enough to inspire people to read this thesis or continue the conversation regarding oppression.

Chapter 8

Glossary

Assimilation- “to drop one’s own culture and differences and become a mirror of the dominant culture. This process requires turning one’s back on one’s past and on one’s people.”⁷¹ Roberts points out that there is an important distinction between assimilation and acculturation, “the latter being the natural evolutionary blending of characteristics of cultures that come into contact with one another. Although many young African-Americans see speaking standard English as assimilation, calling those who do “sell outs” or “Oreos,” it is more likely a matter of acculturation.”⁷²

Horizontal Hostility- The result of people from oppressed groups enforcing the discrimination and oppression of the dominant group. “Horizontal hostility can occur between members of the same group or between members of different, targeted groups.”⁷³

Institutionalized Oppression- “is the systematic mistreatment of people within a social identity group, [extensively] supported and enforced by the society and its institutions, solely based on the person’s membership in the social identity group.”⁷⁴

Internalized Oppression- “is the manner in which an oppressed group comes to use against itself the methods of the oppressor... sometimes members of marginalized groups hold an oppressive view toward their own group, or start to believe in negative stereotypes of themselves.”⁷⁵ For instance, in elementary school when prompted to depict an image of their future, young black boys will often draw pictures of themselves in prison.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Suzanne Pharr, “The Common Elements of Oppression,” in *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, (Berkley, California: Chardon Press, 1997), 62.

⁷² Lani Roberts, “One Oppression or Many?” *Journal for Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, Vol. No. 1 & 2 (1997): 8.

⁷³ “Diversity Dictionary,” *Purchase College State University of New York*, Accessed July 31, 2012. <http://www.purchase.edu/Diversity/dictionary.aspx>.

⁷⁴ Carol Cheney et al., “Institutionalized Oppression Definitions,” *Tri-County Domestic & Sexual Violence Intervention Network Anti-Oppression Training for Trainers* (2006): accessed July 19, 2012. <http://www.pcc.edu/resources/illumination/documents/institutionalized-oppression-definitions.pdf>.

⁷⁵ “Internalized Oppression.” *Science Philosophy Chat Forums*. Accessed July 31, 2012. <http://www.sciencechatforum.com/viewtopic.php?f=82&t=20929>.

⁷⁶ Dan Dowhower, “Class Lecture,” (presentation, *H 312: AIDS and STI’s*, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR, Winter 2012).

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy- “a phenomenon whereby expectations of how others will act or behave, affects interactions and elicits the anticipated response.”⁷⁷ An example of this is described on page 21 by using a scene from the movie *Crash*.

Tokenism- “takes the brightest and best of the most assimilated, rewards them with position and money (though rarely genuine leadership and power), and then uses them as a model of what is necessary to succeed, even though there are often no more openings for others who may follow their model.”⁷⁸ Roberts notices that this ubiquitously leads to victim blaming, where by pointing to one or two tokens of a target group, others from that group are questioned as to why they too cannot succeed as well. ⁷⁹ Tokenism can also be used to, “create a false appearance of inclusiveness and deflect accusations of discrimination.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ “Psychology Dictionary,” ITS. Accessed July 31, 2012. <http://www.tuition.com.hk/psychology/o.htm>.

⁷⁸ Suzanne Pharr, “The Common Elements of Oppression,” in *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, (Berkley, California: Chardon Press, 1997), 63.

⁷⁹ Lani Roberts, “One Oppression or Many?” *Journal for Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, Vol. No. 1 & 2 (1997): 8.

⁸⁰ “Tokenism” *Wikipedia*. Last modified July 2, 2012. Accessed July 31, 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokenism#cite_note-hogg.26vaughan-2.

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