

Destabilizing Journeys: The Chicago Feminist Film Festival and *The Fits*

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Abstract: The Chicago Feminist Film Festival aims to decenter and destabilize Hollywood norms, including Hollywood's tendency to place cis-gendered white male protagonists at the center of films structured according to the hero's journey. Thus, *The Fits* (2016) was a natural opener to the inaugural festival, embodying many of the festival's values in destabilizing what constitutes "normal" ways of seeing the world. In particular, in centering black girlhood, *The Fits* subverts the white and male gaze. Main character Toni takes on the active gaze usually reserved for white and/or male characters, subverting the objectified status generally prescribed to female characters. *The Fits* also unsettles the heroine's journey by troubling Toni's transformative return. While it may seem that through "the fits" Toni is assimilated into normative gender relations, it is also possible to read Toni's transformation in the film as form of insubordination, a resistance to this assimilation.

Keywords: Feminist - Festival - Film - Transformation - Race - Heroine

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According to a 2018 study by Stacy L. Smith and the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at the University of Southern California, only one-third of the top 100 highest grossing American films between 2007 and 2017 featured female leads (Smith et al. 1). Those numbers decrease significantly in certain genres. For example, in the action and adventure genre, only a quarter of speaking characters are female (5). The unequal representation that we see on screen correlates to gender inequality behind the scenes. For example, only 4% of the 1,100 top-grossing American films between 2007 and 2017 were directed by women (1). Women are similarly under-represented in other creative production roles. Of the 1,100 top-grossing American films between 2007 and 2017, women made up only 10% of writers, 22% of producers, and less than 1% of composers (1). The men that dominate Hollywood, both on-screen and behind the scenes, are majority white.

Because Hollywood is centered around white masculinity, there is an implicit ideological bias that normalizes and privileges white masculinity at the expense of anyone else. This ideological bias is reflected in the way male heroes are often at the center of mainstream American film. Narratives by and about women, and films that center female heroines, are egregiously underrepresented. As a way to address this, many film festivals are taking the parity pledge, committing to more equal representation in film selection, selection committee members, board members, and festival leadership. This commitment highlights the importance of film festivals as leaders in correcting gender disparity in the film industry. Another way to address this is through the resurgence of feminist and women's film festivals, like the Chicago Feminist Film Festival. The Chicago Feminist Film Festival showcases independent films by and about women that often break from traditional cinematic narratives. The Chicago Feminist Film Festival was founded in 2016 to tell stories different from mainstream cinema and to provide more diverse representation. A key goal of the festival is to destabilize what constitutes "normal" ways of seeing the world and to recreate ways of seeing that are not so limited, rote, exclusive, or exclusionary.

Laura Mulvey argues in her well-known essay "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*," film reflects the patriarchal social unconscious, and this can be exemplified in the way women are frequently represented in film as the object of the male gaze. As Mulvey writes, "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness ... she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire" (62). Mulvey goes on to argue that typically women in Hollywood film are seen through the gaze of another character, frequently a male character. In this way, women come to be seen as the object of the male gaze but never as the active bearer of the look. Along with the male gaze, other scholars, such as Jane Gaines, have written about the way that black and brown characters are often the object of the white gaze in popular American film.

The Fits (2015) was the opening night film at the first Chicago Feminist Film Festival in 2016. *The Fits* embodies many of the festival's values in destabilizing what constitutes "normal" ways of seeing the world. Both an experimental dance film and a coming-of-age narrative, *The Fits* follows a young black girl, Toni (Royalty Hightower), as she navigates between the male-coded boxing gym and the all-girls dance team at her local community center. Made by the all-women production collective Yes Ma'am (Director and Co-Writer Anna Rose Holmer, Producer and Co-Writer Lisa Kjerulff, and Screenwriter Saela Davis),

The *Fits* fundamentally decenters and destabilizes the white and/or male gaze. In particular, the world constructed in *The Fits* is observed through the eyes of Toni, exemplifying what Patricia White calls the “feminist cinema of observation” (2009: 160). White notes this as a dominant mode of contemporary women’s cinema: modest and unhurried yet noteworthy and frequently critically acclaimed films where heroine-observers are at the heart of the narrative. Toni herself takes on the active gaze usually reserved for white and/or male characters, subverting the objectified status generally prescribed to female characters. Toni’s observing gaze even seemingly extends beyond the film’s diegesis to pierce in to the audience itself. As Rizvana Bradley notes of Toni’s gaze, “From the beginning, she unsettles the habitual dynamics of looking and being looked at, of seeing and being seen. The viewer is absorbed and troubled by Toni’s defiant outward gaze ... a determined stare that takes possession of, just as it dispossesses, the spectator’s line of sight” (15).

Patricia White points out the importance of the film for highlighting “the *matter*—the physical embodiment—of black girlhood” (2017: 26). Similarly, Rizvana Bradley writes that, “*The Fits* insists on reserving space for and making public the concerns of young, black teenage girls who have been silenced or neglected through the willful political dispensation of their lives” (2017: 16). Black girlhood is framed in the film as universal. This is powerful because narratives that feature adolescence often universalize boyhood while narratives that feature black experience are often from the viewpoint of black men. As Bradley further notes, “*The Fits* reverses the sociohistorical narrative that deprioritizes the lives of black adolescent girls, and Holmer’s artistic choice to bring the girls’ experience to the fore flies in the face of the representational erasure and stigmatization of black girlhood” (17). In this respect, in centering black girlhood, *The Fits* reconceptualizes what constitutes “normal” ways of seeing the world.

The Fits also unsettles the hero’s journey, or at least troubles Toni’s transformative return, the ending most associated with this narrative structure. The traditional hero’s journey focuses on a man who goes on an adventure, faces conflict victoriously, and returns home transformed. Sometimes the hero encounters death and rebirth in the course of his journey. For women, gender non-binary people, and people of color, the hero(ine)’s journey can simply constitute the everyday ways that marginalized bodies are impacted by patriarchal and white supremacist structures. In *The Fits*, Toni experiences conflict navigating everyday life as a black girl on the verge of adolescence. If read literally, Toni’s heroine’s journey ends in her own “fits,” a powerfully ecstatic scene at the end of the film in which she experiences a rebirth into adolescence and the experience of a homecoming, finding her place amongst the other girls on her dance team. The scene of Toni’s “fits” at the end of the film, her ecstatic rebirth into adolescence, is followed by several scenes of Toni leading her dance team, the Lionesses (played by the Q-Kidz community dance team) in a perfectly synced dance routine. Toni is brought “in formation” with her dance team, a representation of black girls’ dance team culture, e.g. majorette, step, and drill (White 2017: 27). But Toni is also brought “home” into an inclusive and collective movement of empowered black women with historical roots in the civil rights struggle.

It may seem that through “the fits” Toni is assimilated into normative gender relations. However, as Patricia White points out, “the film’s themes of girl cliques, contagion, and unruly bodies are queer ones” (2017: 29). Throughout the film, Toni repeatedly displays

ambivalence towards the markers of normative femininity, and Toni is the only character in the film that is able to cross the threshold between the male-coded boxing room and the female-coded dance gym. Throughout, *The Fits* establishes a pattern of scenes in which Toni attempts to fit in with the girls followed by visual representations of her either failing or succeeding to do so. After her initial tryout, Toni walks alone through the girls' changing room, which is littered with feminine accouterments. The music here reinforces her isolation from these artifacts before she returns to the boxing gym, where she assimilates quickly, her white and blue outfit blending seamlessly into the red, white, and blue space. In the scene that follows, Toni blends boxing moves with dancing, illustrating the liminal space she occupies. Later, Toni pulls a temporary tattoo from her skin that her friend and dance teammate Beezy (Alexis Neblett) has applied without asking, signifying both Beezy's inclusion of Toni into the group, and Toni's rejection of it. When Toni is measured for her Lioness costume, she is told she's "straight as a nail." Again, in the scene that follows, she returns to the boxing ring, where she and her body fit right in. (Beezy also at times calls her "guns" because of her muscles.) When Toni tries to take control of her femininity by piercing her ears (notably after a boy tells her she's "growing up fast"), she seems to meet the moment with ambiguity. The camera frames Toni in a medium close up, the boxing ring behind her, as she stares at the earrings like a curiosity rather than an accomplishment. Eventually she also paints her nails. In these moments, the camera frames her and the other young girls ("crabs") the most closely to one another, as Toni is starting to fit in. However, the camera also does not abandon the idea of heroine-observer, as she continues studying the other girls. For example, when Beezy imitates another girl's fits, the camera stays focused on Toni watching as she observes how to make "the fits" look real. Yet eventually Toni peels off her nail polish and returns to the boxing gym for comfort. She is scared of "the fits," of femininity and what it seems to mean and look like in this world. Throughout the film, Toni consistently rejects femininity—the tattoo, the earrings, the nail polish—and seeks solace in the boxing gym where, despite her gender, her "straight as a nail" body and "guns" fit without needing to "fit."

It is also possible, then, to read the ending of the film, Toni's "fits" and transformation, as a kind of "gender insubordination," to borrow a term from gender theorist Judith Butler. Toni's "fits" can be read as destabilizing the idea that Toni has crossed a threshold into femaleness and instead privileges the notion that she has learned to perform femininity while rejecting the embodiment of it. The patterns discussed above, depicting Toni's ambivalence towards the markers of normative femininity, again suggest that Toni's journey results in a transformative return that is performed but not internalized. The film ends with an extreme close up of Toni's face, upside down on screen, looking directly into the camera. She stays this way for several seconds before smiling at the camera as the film cuts to black. As previously mentioned, this shot follows several shots of the other Lionesses, in their costumes, dancing around her in both liminal and gender-coded spaces—a highway overpass Toni uses to practice her dancing and boxing, the gymnasium where the girls practice, the boxing ring associated with the boys, and the empty swimming pool where she and her other friend Maia (Lauren Gibson) had talked about "the fits," and where

Toni's episode begins. In the previous swimming pool scene, Maia expresses both fear and excitement about "the fits," which creates a divide between Maia, Toni, and Beezy. Maia and Beezy are ready to crossover, scary as it might be. The scene ends with Toni looking to the birds in the sky, one of very few shots in the film of nature outside the community center. It is notable, therefore, that Toni's "fits" begin while she is standing in the swimming pool looking up at the birds again, essentially giving herself over to them. In the next shot, Toni literally floats through the hallway of the community center. In this magical realist moment, the camera abandons Toni's perspective and instead follows her, first from the back before reversing perspective to the point of view of the other girls.

In all of Toni's other dances up until this moment in the film, she throws punches, sometimes abandoning dance entirely to box, showcasing her ambivalence of preference between dancing and boxing, or that which is coded female and male, respectively. This final "dance" is the only one Toni performs completely absent of punches. This might indicate that Toni's "fits" equate to her assimilation into normative femininity. However, during a conversation with Beezy about "the fits" earlier in the film, and in the only moment in the film where Toni expresses desire, Toni says she does not care about "the fits." She states, "I just want to compete." This desire, coupled with her awareness that rejecting "the fits" entirely means returning to isolation from the girls, with whom she has become friends and, frankly, where she has a better chance of competing, also awakens her to understanding the rules of fitting in and finding her best possible chance of achieving her goals. As such, Toni's final smile can be read as letting the audience in on her secret – a nod that she knows, and we know, she performed "the fits." But what else could she do? If this is the case, her heroine's journey is something of a resistance to or deviation from normative gender relations—a journey taken to achieve her goals, which do not fit neatly into her preference for a less rigidly gendered identity and lifestyle. Toni's ambiguousness about, if not ambivalence toward, girlhood suggests that she has reconceived the journey into something more akin to a queer trickster's birth rather than a traditional hero(ine)'s return. The Chicago Feminist Film Festival aims to decenter and destabilize Hollywood norms, including Hollywood's tendency to place cis-gendered white male protagonists at the center of films structured according to the hero's journey. Thus, *The Fits* was a natural opener to the inaugural festival. Moreover, the film continues embodying the festival's goal of creating screening opportunities for (both short and feature) films that do not adhere to Hollywood's historical tropes and narrative standards. As such, the festival is structured to allow audiences to have transformative viewing experiences—their own journeys, one might say—that make space for new stories to be told and for audience play in reimagined spaces of story, character, and aural and visual pleasure that subvert Hollywood's more clear-cut endings, takeaways, and even production histories. Until Hollywood becomes more inclusive, alternative spaces like the Chicago Feminist Film Festival will continue existing to showcase what else is out there. In the meantime, films like *The Fits* learn to play by certain of Hollywood's rules, not unlike Toni, and also refuse to abandon the fight until, ultimately, more diverse directors can maneuver their way in and change the game.

Note

1. As Judith Butler argues, gender is always already a “performance that *produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it *produces* on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth” (Butler 235). For Butler, gender is always already a kind of “necessary drag;” there is no inner essence that speaks to who we are in terms of gender identity. Rather, normative gender and sexuality “naturalizes itself through setting up certain illusions of continuity between sex, gender, and desire” (Butler 235).

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Resumen: El Festival de Cine Feminista de Chicago pretende descentralizar y desestabilizar las normas de Hollywood con su tendencia a narrar historias desde el punto de vista de protagonistas masculinos cisgénero y de raza blanca, y estructuradas según el periplo del héroe. Por lo tanto, la película *The Fits* (2016) fue un punto de partida natural para el evento inaugural, encarnando la misión del festival de desestabilizar lo que constituye la forma “normal” de ver al mundo. *The Fits* está enfocada en la niñez de Toni quien es de raza negra, y subvierte la tendencia de narrar exclusivamente la historia desde el punto de vista masculino, de raza blanca, y la objetivación generalmente asignada a los personajes femeninos. *The Fits* también descentra el viaje de la heroína con la transformación de Toni. Si bien puede parecer que a través de las convulsiones y desmayos que siente Toni el protagonista se asimila a las relaciones de género normativas, también es posible leer la transformación de Toni como una forma de insubordinación y una resistencia a esta asimilación.

Palabras claves: Feminista - Festival - Cine - Transformación - Raza - Heroína

Resumo: O Chicago Feminist Film Festival tem como objetivo descentralizar e desestabilizar as normas de Hollywood, incluindo a tendência de Hollywood de colocar protagonistas masculinos brancos no centro de filmes estruturados de acordo com a jornada do herói. Assim, *The Fits* (2016) foi uma abertura natural para o festival inaugural, incorporando muitos dos valores do evento ao desestabilizar o que constitui formas “normais” de ver o mundo. Em particular, ao centrar-se na infância de meninas negras, *The Fits* subverte a perspectiva branca e masculina. A personagem principal Toni assume o olhar ativo geralmente reservado para personagens brancos e/ou masculinos, subvertendo o status objetivado geralmente proscrito para personagens femininos. *The Fits* também perturba a jornada da heroína, ao impor desafios ao retorno transformador de Toni. Embora possa parecer que através dos “ataques” Toni é assimilada em relações de gênero normativas, também é possível ler a transformação de Toni no filme como uma forma de insubordinação, uma resistência a essa assimilação.

Palavras-chave: feminista, festival, cinema, transformação

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