

Women Behaving Badly: Actresses Playing Against Type

Do films do justice to women? Too often women play stereotypic roles such as the homemaker, the love interest, the helper, or a whore versus an angel. They are submissive, in low status jobs and in roles where they have little or no agency over their own lives. Notably, they almost always look attractive. Even when a woman is the main protagonist, her success often depends on a man to help her succeed, rescue her, or marry her. Is it fair for films to represent women this way? Is it accurate? Does it matter? How should films represent women?

In this course we will watch five award winning Australian films across different genres. Each film features a woman in an atypical leading role including solo explorer, fighter, and revenge seeker, who forges ahead despite physical, emotional, and especially societal challenges against her. Through guided class discussion supplemented with additional material, we will consider in what ways women are or are not treated realistically and fairly in these films and ponder questions of representation by women in key production roles.

Films: My Brilliant Career (1979), The Nightingale (2018), The Dressmaker (2015), Shame (1987), Tracks (2013). All the films are readily accessible on a streaming service and YouTube for free or for a nominal fee. Many are also available through a library network.