Master’s Thesis

Capes of Equality

The female superhero in modern solo superhero films

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Introduction

> "Heroines are becoming more prevalent with more varied representations/portrayals in films, television shows, and video games. Heroines are sometimes simultaneously worshipped as goddesses, reviled as villainesses, raped and beaten as victims, lusted after as sex objects, placed on pedestals as positive role models, and of course rescued as damsels. Some fight with brute strength and weapons, while others seduce, love, lead, and resist nation. As women were excluded from the hero's journey, their roles and embodied meanings are, at times, traditional, ambiguous, contested, and even controversial" (Jones et al. IX-X).

Myths, legends, epics, television series, movies, and comic books. Heroes have been part of the stories we tell each other for millennia. From the Mediterranean Sea of Classical Greece to the streets of New York in the 20th century; the hero remains recognisable. In present day, the hero can largely be found on the big screen in the form of characters who have become icons themselves. Iron Man, Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man, each with their own individual stories, characteristics, and abilities. Portrayals of female lead superhero solo films are scarce, however, to the degree of celebration once *Wonder Woman* premiered in 2017, and again two years later, when *Captain Marvel* (2019) entered the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Since what Jason Dittmer describes as a "superhero cinema boom" (Dittmer 115) post the events of 9/11, only two additional female led superhero films have premiered, *Catwoman* (2004) and *Elektra* (2005). In the midst of the now decade old franchises established with the two most recognisable superhero comic names, DC and Marvel, it is perhaps somewhat surprising to find trilogies of Batman, Captain America, and Spider-Man films, some of which have experienced reboots more than once since 2000, but no female superheroes aside from those appearing in ensemble films or as support of the male hero. What is seen of the female superhero or superheroine on screen fall into certain tropes and/or stereotypes both in character and narrative, and the portrayal tends to lean into the male gaze. *Catwoman*, *Elektra*, *Wonder Woman*, and *Captain Marvel*, although being the only options of post 2000 female lead superhero films, provide insight to a shift in the genre, where the female superhero has become more than what she is on screen alone, and where the conversation about this type of hero is veering towards progressive change rather than stereotypical tendencies. Using a combination of feminist film theory and Campbell's and

Murdock's Journey models, this paper is intended to examine the way in which four female superheroes Catwoman, Elektra, Wonder Woman, and Captain Marvel are portrayed in narrative and representation in their individual films. The effects of such narrative and representation on the female body and mind will then be discussed in combination with the topic of male objectification and the inclusion of political discourse and/or messages in superhero films.

The Hero

The concept and definition of a hero has varied and changed through oral and written history, even more so when the differences of mythical, epic, fictional, and real heroes are taken into consideration. Consulting modern dictionaries of the word *hero* will give a variety of definitions. In Cambridge online dictionary, a hero is "a person who is admired for having done something very brave or having achieved something great" and "the main character or the main male character in a book or film, who is usually good" ("Hero" Cambridge Dictionary). In Merriam Webster, a hero is defined similarly as "a mythological or legendary figure often of divine descent endowed with great strength or ability," "an illustrious warrior," "a person admired for achievements and noble qualities," "one who shows great courage," and "the principal character in a literary or dramatic work —used specifically of a principal male character especially when contrasted with *heroine*" ("Hero" Merriam-Webster). The variety of definitions in and of themselves provide a window into the duality of *the hero* as something both fictional or mythological and real, where the conditions and characteristics that are needed to be fulfilled for the character or individual to be classified as a hero change, depending. Additionally, one definition in Merriam Webster emphasises that a *hero* is contrasted with the *heroine*, while *hero* is commonly used to refer to both genders in modern settings. As will be explored, the differences of a *hero* and a *heroine* are indeed still present, despite how these characters and individuals are referred to.

Furthermore, the very concept of what a hero is has changed with time. According to Phillip G. Zimbardo et al., what is considered heroism is historically, culturally, and situationally determined, "thus heroes of one era may prove to be villains in another time.." (Zimbardo et al. 99). For instance, while Achilles of Homer's *Iliad* could be categorised among modern superheroes such as Wonder Woman or Captain America based on his prowess and partially divine origin, Achilles' other characteristics and actions would not be considered 'noble' or

'good' by the standards of a modern setting, the hero's rage and the dragging of Hector's body around Troy, for example. Taking such circumstances into consideration regarding characters such as Captain America, changes in this character's viewpoints and actions have been made within the past century to continuously fit into the mould and standards required of a modern hero. Corresponding with the notion that "heroism is a social contribution, never a personal one," (Zimbardo et al. 99) which implies, to an extent, that heroes and heroines must, in one way or another, not only act in a way that is considered heroic in the setting of their narrative, but likewise in the setting of real life. Hero characters can then only be considered heroes, if they are considered heroes by the society who is at current experiencing their narratives. Regarding popular culture, this notion must then apply to representation of character as well as narrative, since both are inseparably intertwined.

Hero's Journey

The first attempt to categorise the heroes of myth into an archetype is attributed to Lord Raglan with the book *The Hero, A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* from 1936, in which Raglan proposes a list of 22 elements and traits based on hero myths from several different cultures and religions to form the archetype of the mythic hero (Lord Raglan 178-179). Not all 22 traits must be present, and not all are among every hero given as examples of this archetype in Lord Raglan's book, who includes Oedipus, Perseus, Moses, Watu Gunung, Sigurd/Siegfried, and Robin Hood. While Raglan does not deny the possibility that the origins of the hero myths could be real, it is made clear several times that Raglan is convinced that such myths are indeed overexaggerated, usually to emphasise a certain element in the narrative (Lord Raglan 178-179). In addition, Lord Raglan states that the more traits are present, the greater the chance is of the hero being mythical (Lord Raglan 189), and that when a hero "go beyond" the pattern presented in his book, they may simply follow another, meaning diversion from the traits and pattern does not indicate a historical hero (Lord Raglan 201). Otto Rank had proposed 12 traits in his 1909 book *Der Mythus von der Geburt des Helden*, different from Raglan's in that Rank's are based in Freudian psychoanalysis, and thus only apply to the first half of the hero's life, involving the hero's birth, adolescence, and young adulthood (Rank (intro essay by Segal) ix). The concept of the mythic hero, or the hero archetype, based on Rank and Raglan's narrative patterns is known

as the *Rank-Raglan mythotype*, and precedes the concept of the *Hero's Journey*, or the *monomyth*, as proposed by Joseph Campbell in his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Campbell's model is described as based on comparative mythology, and seeks, similarly, to Rank and Raglan's models, to propose traits of the archetypical hero character's journey. Campbell's traits, or stages, differ from the preceding two proposals, as these take on a form closer to narrative beats rather than characteristics of the hero. That is, Campbell's stages are more closely intertwined with the structure of the myth than the hero, whereas both Rank and Raglan contribute much of the myth's structure to the character of the hero. For instance, who the hero's parents are, what interactions the hero has with their family, and other interpersonal relations such as children and spouse. These traits are tied to the narrative of the myth, however, in a way that implies that the traits are inseparable from the narrative beat they are tied to, even though it is made clear that not all traits must be present. Campbell proposes a model of stages that more closely resembles the three-act-structure in the sense that they represent a point in the narrative structure to which various occurrences can then be attached, depending on the nature of the myth.

The Hero's Journey consists of 17 stages, each representing a point in the narrative where the hero is challenged or achieves something. The first part of the journey is titled *Departure* and encompasses the first five stages, in which the adventure of the hero, and with it his eventual separation from his current life, begins. *The Call to Adventure* acts as the inciting incident, where an occurrence beyond the normal situation of the hero presents a call or opportunity for the hero to venture into the unknown. This stage is not necessarily characterised by fate, demand, or intention to have the hero begin the journey, but might equally be characterised by accident or force (Campbell 48). Nonetheless, if the hero has the option, the opportunity or call is often initially refused by the hero. Campbell notes that *Refusal of the Call* "converts the adventure into its negative," (Campbell 49) and whatever the hero chooses to do hereafter will only be a distancing of himself from "his Minotaur," (Campbell 49) and creates a situation that only spawns new problems for and a "gradual approach of his disintegration." (Campbell 49) To avoid this fate, the hero must commit to the call of adventure, either consciously or unconsciously, whereafter a mentor character will appear. This *Supernatural Aid* takes the shape of a benign magical guide, who will aid the hero through artefacts that will prove helpful later (Campbell 57), and through reassurance and promise that the journey is right and will present

reward to the hero once completed, thus encouraging the hero to continue (Campbell 59). With the aid and encouragement of the guide, the hero now traverses the boundaries of his known world in the *Crossing of the First Threshold*, which represents the true beginning of the journey into the unknown and the adventure. Here, the hero will meet the "threshold guardian," a representation of the danger that lies beyond (Campbell 64, 67-68). Finally, the hero is separated completely from his known world by entering the *Belly of the Whale*. This stage not only acts as a transition, but a willing "form of self-annihilation" (Campbell 77) leading to a metamorphosis or rebirth of some manner. Although the hero displays a willingness to proceed, this stage often involves a hindrance, and the hero, "instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died" (Campbell 74).

The second part of the journey is titled *Initiation* and consists of the next six stages with the *Road of Trials* beginning as the hero steps over the boundary of the known and unknown. Within this stage, the hero journeys through the unknown world and is faced with trials that must be completed, although not all are completed successfully. What advice or artefacts the hero received from the *Supernatural Aid* will prove useful, or the hero may discover a "benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage" (Campbell 81). The *Meeting with the Goddess* is the final trial where the hero finds himself "at the uttermost edge of the earth" or "within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart," where he meets the goddess, or the Queen Goddess of the World (Campbell 91). Campbell describes the goddess as "incarnate in every woman" (Campbell 99) and suggests that this character is a boon that must be won by the hero. Worth noting is, if the "adventurer" is a "maid" rather than a male hero, the adventurer's destiny is to "become the consort of an immortal. Then the heavenly husband descends to her and conducts her to his bed – whether she will or not" (Campbell 99). According to Maureen Murdock, Campbell expressed that a woman does not need to venture on a Hero's Journey, as the woman already finds herself in the place the hero is striving to be (Murdock 2).

Women are given another role in the next stage, which is named *Woman as the Temptress*, although the temptation the hero meets here does not necessarily take the form of a woman. Essentially, this stage presents a temptation of life, where the hero is disillusioned from a tendency to "perfume, whitewash, and reinterpret" and the perception that the unpleasant parts of reality is the fault of someone else (Campbell 102). The disillusion comes in the form of revulsion when the hero realises how "everything is tainted," (Campbell 102) which becomes a

revulsion of “life, the acts of life, the organs of life, woman in particular as the great symbol of life, become intolerable to the pure, the pure, pure soul” (Campbell 102). As the Hero’s Journey is presented as a spiritual journey, the physical becomes a temptation the hero must surpass to succeed. Here, as Campbell exemplifies, the woman becomes a metaphor for that physical temptation. In a similar yet very different way, the hero is then confronted with what Campbell calls the *father*, with whom the hero must atone, hence the name of the stage being *Atonement with the Father* or *Abyss*. To atone, the hero must surrender himself to the mercy of the terrifying father, a figure who holds incredible power, and through whose confrontation the hero will achieve an understanding of life, the abandonment of their ego, and the realisation that the father and mother are one and the same (Campbell 110). The mother referenced in this stage would be the same female figure who aided the hero earlier. In this stage, the hero can rely on the protection and comfort of the mother throughout the atonement with the father and in the case of the hero not being able to trust the mercy of the father, in which case they must trust the mother instead (Campbell 110). *Apotheosis,* which occurs after the atonement, will allow the hero to continue his journey and face greater challenges, which in turn allows the hero to achieve the goal of the journey, where he gains the *Ultimate Boon*. All previous trials have prepared the hero for this stage, as the boon is often something beyond even gods, and thus “its guardians dare release it only to the duly proven” (Campbell 155).

The third and final part of the Hero’s Journey revolves around the hero’s *Return* to the world they initially came from. Here, the first stage echoes the *Refusal of the Call* since the hero now experiences a *Refusal of the Return*. Campbell notes that since the hero has now achieved his triumph, his boon which may help or renew part of the community or world, he hesitates to return to the kingdom of humanity, in some cases doubting that the boon would be appreciated (Campbell 167, 170). In other instances, the hero is set into a *Magic Flight*, where he must escape with the boon, chased by its guardians who do not want the hero to escape and return to his own world. This type of flight “becomes a lively, often comical, pursuit,” which “may be complicated by marvels of magical obstruction and evasion.” (Campbell 170). *Rescue from Without* can occur both in the instance of *Refusal of the Return* and the *Magic Flight,* as “society is jealous of those who remain away from it.” (Campbell 178). If the hero refuses to return he “suffers an ugly shock,” but is rescued if he is merely delayed (Campbell 178). Upon the *Crossing of the Return Threshold*, the hero must retain the knowledge and experience he has

gained in the other world and accept the existence of such a "soul-satisfying" world, while also accepting the less satisfying realities of life. Returning with such knowledge may cause the hero to be viewed negatively by the community, he might "discover themselves playing the idiot before a jury of sober eyes" (Campbell 189). Instead of turning back, the hero must instead apply what he has gained to life in his own world. Becoming a *Master of the Two Worlds* encompasses the hero fully accepting and understanding the two worlds, often presented as spiritual and physical, involving the dissolvement of his ambitions, letting go of the fear of self-annihilation and personal limitations (Campbell 204-205). At last, at the final stage of the Hero's Journey, the hero has gained the *Freedom to Live* through the mastery. Largely, this involves the hero living without regretting the past or fearing the future (Campbell 209).

Heroine's Journey

Murdock states in the introduction to her book *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholesomeness* (1990) that "Women do have a quest at this time in our culture. It is the quest to fully embrace their feminine nature, learning how to value themselves as women and to heal the deep wound of the feminine" (Murdock 3). Murdock's own model is in part based on Campbell's (Murdock 3), but more specifically inspired from working as a therapist with women (Murdock 1), and does not exclusively apply to the lives of women, nor all women (Murdock 4). The Heroine's Journey is, however, based on and meant to reflect the experience of women. Murdock's book is moreover written as a self-help book, where Campbell sought to create a model based on comparison of myths. Thus, it is more of a challenge to apply Murdock's model to narratives since it was not initially developed to be utilised in such a way.

Like Campbell's Hero's Journey, Murdock's Heroine's Journey follows a progression of stages, none of which are required to be present in all cases of the journey. Additionally, several of the stages of the model proposed by Murdock can at times be experienced simultaneously or in differing orders (Murdock 4). The first stage for the heroine remains, however, the initiation process, the *Separation from the Feminine*. Beginning with a *Rejection of the Feminine* the heroine continuously experiences situations and completes acts, which separates her further and further from the feminine. Murdock argues that society is androcentric, and thus perceives the world from the perspective of men. In such a society, women will view themselves as lacking in

one or more ways when comparing themselves to men, and will, in an attempt at success, reject what is considered feminine and womanly (Murdock 13-14). The very beginning of the journey is “the heroine’s struggle to separate both physically and psychologically from her own mother and the mother archetype,” (Murdock 17) a process Murdock describes as particularly difficult, since it is, in a sense, equivalent to leaving a part of oneself behind. The steps that follow involve the role of the Mother and how the heroine is influenced by internalising all the negative feminine she experiences through her. *Rejected by the Mother* is the last step of this stage, where Murdock describes the heroine’s search “for what she never had,” (Murdock 26) as a result of the Mother’s lack of nurture or presence. If this rejection takes place, the heroine may find herself in a perpetual daughter role, “looking for approval, love, attention, and acceptance” from her Mother or another female role model (Murdock 26).

Identification with the Masculine is the second stage, wherein the heroine seeks approval from the Father, who acts as a further separation and freedom from the Mother and the feminine, which the heroine is working to reject. Here, heroines will be defined as *Daughters of the Father*, and the Father will be encouraging traits in the heroine that are typically praised in men, while discouraging feminine traits. During this, the second stage, after making the decision to distance herself from the feminine, the heroine “inevitably begins the traditional hero’s journey” (Murdock 36). This point is the *Gathering Allies*, where the heroine searches for role models and male allies. If this ally is positive the heroine can continue in a positive manner, if not then the heroine may get held back by perfectionism and overcompensation (Murdock 38).

The third stage is the *Road of Trials* where the heroine traverses the threshold in search for herself away from the safety and security of the known (Murdock 46). During this stage, the heroine will, similar to the *Road of Trials* in the Hero’s Journey, venture out to discover and learn of her strengths and weaknesses. Here, she cannot blame any of the people in her life any longer and must instead find her own path (Murdock 46). Different from the Hero’s Journey, the heroine will also face trials of inner conflict as well as external conflict. These types of trials will relate to the *Myth of Dependency*, need, the *Myth of Female Inferiority,* and the *Myth of Romantic Love*. At the end of this stage, the heroine will have experienced victories and encouragement which will lead her to the *Illusory Boon of Success*, where she achieves what she has been working towards. After having reached her goal, the heroine understands that she has sacrificed and betrayed her own values during the journey, that her achievement “have come at

too high of a price" (Murdock 69). The masculine traits she has learnt fail her and she feels betrayed, and she decides to turn away from the Father, a difficult decision because of the validation previously gained there (Murdock 84). A *Spiritual Aridity* is experienced where the loss of self happens (Murdock 74). Turning back begins the *Initiation and Descent to the Goddess*, a stage during which the heroine journeys to the belly of the whale, the underworld, often preceded by a life-changing loss (Murdock 87-88). "This journey to the underworld is often filled with confusion and grief, alienation and disillusion, rage and despair" (Murdock 88). In this place, the heroine meets a goddess character representing what positive feminine values she rejected, whereafter she can reconcile with it, which will inspire her to reconnect with those feminine values and traits, the *Urgent Yearning to Reconnect with the Feminine*. What the heroine has experienced on her journey thus far makes it impossible for her to return to her life as it was before. She will seek to reconnect with the feminine, "whether that be the Goddess, the Mother, or her little girl within" (Murdock 111). The *Healing of the Mother/Daughter Split,* the split from the feminine, is the next step, where the heroine reclaims the feminine, leading to the next stage, where she also needs to *Heal the Wounded Masculine*. Encompassed in this step is an inner conflict, the need for the heroine to understand the masculine parts of herself, to identify the traits that aided her on her quest and those who betrayed her. Finally, is the *Integration of Masculine and Feminine*, which echoes Campbell's final step in the sense that two worlds are understood and accepted, which enables the heroine to exist in balance.

The Stereotyped Woman

Can female heroes exist if they are simply heroines? Or will archetypes and stereotypes persist in their character and narrative? Male heroes seemingly tend to be more freely able to exist as heroes in and of themselves, without the element of being defined by anything other than that. Jones et al. and Jobé. contain examples of this observation with the cases of the Bride in the *Kill Bill* duology and Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* franchise. The Bride, who is only ever named as such, is presented as a masculine hero who uses her skill to enact violence in her quest for revenge yet is defined by her female body and eventual role as a mother. Maura Grady argues in Jones et al. that the Bride's actions are undermined by the character's victory, which is found in enacting revenge on those who wronged her and taking her place as a mother. Throughout most of the film, the Bride is allowed to "play at the role of a male hero," but is denied "the

agency that a male hero would have because her biology determines her fate more than her actions" (Jones et al. 66). Lara Croft is inspired by the character Indiana Jones, both of them are archaeologists venturing on dangerous journeys full of problems that are solved by their skill as archaeologists as well as adventurers. Yet, the character is also defined by her female body and her role as the daughter of a greater archaeologist, which is especially evident in the early 2000's films based on the videogames. The reboot series of the videogame franchise *Tomb Raider*, begun in 2013, introduces a less experienced, and less sexualised version of the protagonist, Lara Croft, who possesses more masculine traits in relation to violence. Still, the character is defined through the role of a daughter. Jobé proposes, in relation to the 2000's films, that this sexualisation of a character so similar in archetype to one that is not represented in the same manner, happens because Lara Croft cannot be an archaeologist without also being a supermodel. The character's appeal to the male gaze enables her to also be intelligent and capable (Jobé).

In more than one instance does the body of the female character decide the narrative of the character. The *Madonna-Whore Complex* is the very concept that a woman can only be placed in one or the other category, either in a position of the virgin (the *child*), or the whore (the *seductress*). While sex is not a part of this duality, it does force the character into a role of either or, where sexualisation and sex acts as unspoken or unseen traits of either virtue, passivity, benevolence, and chaste or vice, spite, appeal to the male gaze, and malevolence. No opportunity is left for the character to fill the archetype of the *wife*, where the characteristics of moral goodness and sexual activity exist alongside each other ("Madonna-Whore Complex"). The focus on female characters' bodies as defining features of their characters beyond being vessels of their personality is commonly seen in archetypes, including the Bond Girl, the Trophy Girlfriend, the Dirty Old Woman, Femme Fatale, and Damsel in Distress. In these cases, the character is often sexualised and/or utilises her body to manipulate or gain something from a male character, or, contrary, presented as undesirable and perhaps mentally unstable.

When a female character, usually a female action hero, is to succeed she goes through a process of "masculinization or defeminization" (Bampatzimopoulos 208), where the traits of the character are closer to stereotypical male traits. Additionally, they are physically closer to a neutral or masculine appearance, contrary to the sexualisation of characters such as Lara Croft.

This implies that women must give up part of their person in favour of something better suited for the action and challenges at hand, or become hypersexual in appeal to the male gaze, to be allowed their capability. The stereotypical passive role of female characters cannot be applied in the same manner in action films because the female character takes an active role to advance the plot (Bampatzimopoulos 207). Outside action films with a female protagonist, the male characters would be the active part who advances the plot, “while female characters function as a passive spectacle that pauses the narrative and offers pleasure both to the male gaze of the protagonist, as well as the patriarchal gaze of the audience” (Bampatzimopoulos 207). The very action of gazing can be considered a desire reserved for men, thus, whenever a woman holds that desire and attempts to gaze, it poses a threat “both to the male character and the male spectator, since they sense the symbolic danger of castration,” and the female character must therefore be “either punished or subjected to the male protagonist” (Bampatzimopoulos 207).

Four Waves of Feminism

Feminism as a term can be difficult to define, because as a movement, it can campaign for multitudes of issues and topics, including voting, maternity leave, work and earning, access to legal abortions, protection from sexual harassment and domestic violence amongst other, though the emphasis placed on these different issues and topics have varied throughout the history of the feminist movement. Modern western feminism is usually divided into generations or periods, or as it is more commonly acknowledged as, waves. At the current time, four waves have been recognized with the first wave having its beginning in the 19th century. The word itself derives from the French word *féminisme*, coined by French philosopher and socialist François Marie Charles Fourier in 1837 (Goldstein 92; “Feminism” 583). This does not mean that feminist thought and beliefs first started appearing after 1837, as earlier writers can be characterised as ‘feminist’ in the sense that they recognised and were opposed to the subordination and discrimination of women in society. One such example is Mary Wollstonecraft whose work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792 can be considered an early example of feminist philosophical work.

First wave

The first wave of feminism is usually placed somewhere from the mid-1800's to the 1920's in the United States and the United Kingdom (Gardner 19), though the beginning of modern feminism could arguably be set before, around the time of Wollstonecraft's publication of her literary work (Sanders 15). In this, Wollstonecraft argued for a rational woman. She did not ask for anything radical, such as the vote, nor did she imagine women leaving the domestic sphere. Wollstonecraft's feminism was concerned with the way in which femininity is constructed by society, emphasising the insufficient education of girls and women (Sanders 15). Her work was partially motivated by Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord's report to the French National Assembly in 1791 and Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* published in 1790 ("Mary Wollstonecraft 1759-1797." 209). The period in which Wollstonecraft published her work was greatly affected by the philosophy of the Age of Enlightenment, a time characterised by education and science, in which results from the sciences were used to question authorities, and key concepts such as reason, rationality, criticism, and the concept of the common good are used to describe this age. These principles became the theoretical basis for many feminist writers, Mary Wollstonecraft being an example of one such writer. The details of Wollstonecraft's personal life, as indicated in her husband William Godwin's work *Memoirs* (1798), tainted her reputation, resulting in her work being met unfavourably and finally it went out of print in 1844 (Sanders 15-16). The mid-19th century was a period of reactions against Wollstonecraft's beliefs as expressed by Sarah Ellis, Hannah More, Horace Walpole, and several periodicals including The British Critic, Anti-Jacobin Review, Gentleman's Magazine among others (Janes 294; Janes 298; Sanders 16). The period between Wollstonecraft's death in 1797 and the Custody of the Infants Act in 1839 was not without feminist activity, despite the reactionary attitude towards Wollstonecraft. One of this period's most prominent feminist works is the 1825 *Appeals of One-Half of the Human Race, Women, against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men* by William Thompson, a reply to James Mill's *Essay on Government* from 1821 who held the belief that women and the working class had no need for liberation, as their needs were already being taken care of. Opposite this belief, Thompson drew attention to the different problems different groups of women could face by dividing women into three categories: wives, adult daughters living with fathers, and lastly women who had neither husbands nor fathers. Thus, he recognised the private sufferings of women, even those who were

settled, privileged, and treated fairly by society. In the 1860's, John Ruskin and John Stuart Mill started the next debate regarding women's rights, though their approach to the topic diverged from one another. Ruskin upheld the notion of the separate spheres, and whilst he urged parents to educate their daughters, he no less believed them to become wives, "the helpmate of man" in the end (Lloyd 332; Sanders 17). Mill concentrated on the manner which women have been oppressed by society, blaming the "legal subordination of one sex to the other" (qtd. in Sanders 18), a subordination based on nothing other than the physical strength of men, Mill argued. Different from Ruskin in some respects, their thoughts were similar in others, such as the assumption that most women would ultimately become wives.

The status of the woman in the early 19th century was that of *femme covert*, literally 'covered woman'. As defined by William Blackstone in his *Commentary on the Laws of England* from 1765:

> "By marriage [...] the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing; [...] and her condition during her marriage is called her coverture" (Blackstone 284-285).

Caroline Norton's case in 1839 highlighted the injustice mothers faced in marriages, when her three sons were abducted by her husband George, who then attempted to divorce her. She researched her own legal position and with the help of Thomas Talfourd, a Whig barrister, the Infant Custody Act of 1839 was passed in parliament. The Infant Custody Act of 1839 was revolutionary for its time, yet it still positioned the father as the natural guardian of the children, since mothers "of good character" could only get custody of their children under the age of seven (Sanders 18). The Married Women's Property Act of 1882 altered laws regarding property rights of married women in the United Kingdom, which allowed married women to own and control their property ("Introduction." 1890). The women of the 19th century had demonstrated how efficiently they could campaign for specific reforms, such as those mentioned already that deal with matters such as marriage and divorce, child custody, property ownership among others. Yet, first wave feminism has come to be associated with the women's suffrage movement, the fight to

vote for women. This issue became a topic for debate from the 1830's, yet more frequently from the 1860's, with John Stuart Mill being the first member of parliament to propose granting women the vote, a proposition that was defeated by a large margin: 196 to 73 (Sanders 23). The fight for the vote continued until 1918, where women over the age of 30 won the right to vote, and in 1928 where women aged 21 and over got the vote ("Introduction." 1890; Sanders 23). In the United States, this campaigning began with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 and ended in 1920, when women in the United States were guaranteed the right to vote with the enactment of the 19th Amendment (Kolmar and Bartkowski 62; "American Literature 1914-1945." 4). Many of the individuals who became involved with the suffrage movement were already involved in radical and progressive politics and movements, most notably the abolitionist movement to end slavery (Sanders 21). The connection between the suffrage movement with other radical movements such as the campaigns for sexual integrity or birth control divided the suffragettes. A theoretical disagreement regarding women's similarity to men and difference from men and other women was the basis of these disputes. Where liberal feminists argued for access to the same legal rights on par with men, others considered the differences between men and women, arguing that women's "special roles and duties resulted in unique contributions but also required special protections" (Kolmar and Bartkowski 62).

The period right after 1920 might seem as a doldrum, a period in which femininst activity was at a standstill. It had become clear that even with the right for women to vote guaranteed, the outcome of elections was not radically altered, not many women voted, and when they did, they did so together with a male family member such as a father, a brother, or a husband. Yet despite the lack of activity concerning voting, feminist thinking had not ceased, and many feminist activities moved into organisations (Kolmar and Bartkowski 136). For instance, The League of Women Voters (LWV) which was founded in 1920 with the intention to help women "carry out their new responsibilities as voters" ("100 Years of LWV"), and the leader of The National Woman's Party Alice Paul drafted the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), an amendment that would guarantee equal rights for all American citizens regardless of sex, ending legal distinctions between men and women in matters such as property, divorce, and employment. ("Our Story"; Olson and Mendoza 200).

Second wave

The second wave feminism covers a period of feminist activity starting in the 1960's and ending in the 1980's, and the start of this wave is most often set in 1963 with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (Sanders 20), in which the opening lines of the first chapter sums up the themes of the book "The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States" (Kolmar and Bartkowski 198). It is an idea that many women of the time resonated with, a feeling of "is this all?", a question the woman in Friedan's opening lines asks herself, though the book has also been criticised for its limited focus on a highly privileged group of women (Cochrane "*All the Rebel Women*." 20). The response to the ways in which women were continuingly being oppressed in the 1960's and 1970's happened in different ways. One such way was the liberal feminism of the National Organization for Women (NOW) founded by Friedan in 1966, that campaigned for the equal rights of women in all aspects of society (Gardner xxvi; Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 25). Another way was the Women's Liberation Movement, a movement containing different loosely connected groups, and it was within these groups that the process of 'consciousness raising' became a central strategy, arguing that the personal is political, emphasising the connection between women's personal experiences and the larger political structures (Gardner xxvi; Kolmar and Bartkowski 196; Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 26). Women would meet up and share personal experiences, believing that common themes could be identified, and strategies for social and political change could then be attempted (Gardner xxvi). With the argument "personal is the political" as a defining characterisation of the second wave feminism, it is no wonder that many feminist issues of this period concerned those from the personal such as the nuclear family and family values, sexual practices, and child upbringing. In Britain, the emergence of the second wave happened through industrial militancy of women from the working-class, and where the American strand of the Women's Liberation Movement had their roots in liberalism, the British Women's Liberation Movement, alike its European equivalents, was based on Marxism (Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 26-27). In 1970, the first national Women's Liberation conference was held, and the four demands drafted by the conference, those being equal pay, equal education and opportunity, 24-hour nurseries, and free contraception and abortion on demand, showcased the double focus that characterises

the second wave: the oppression of women as a social group and the oppression of the female body (Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 27).

Both radical feminists and lesbian feminists were essential in the development of the period's feminist thought and theorisation, but there is no defining feminist theoretical perspective. A variety of perspectives were employed in order to analyse female oppression, its causes, and strategies to dispose of it. Where some of these theoretical perspectives have their roots in traditional western political theory such as liberalism and Marxism, others, such as socialist feminism, anarchist feminism, black feminism, radical feminism, etc., are considered products of the liberation movements itself (Gardner xxvii). Analysis of the sex/gender system, "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity" (Rubin 159), with an especial focus on female sexuality and reproduction being the root cause of female oppression, actualised the notion of the personal being political. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* published in 1949 is often credited as the beginning of much of the 1970's feminist theory, and she is also considered one of the first to analyse the phenomenon of gender oppression, its causes, and its effects (Gardner xxvii; Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 29). Her explanation of the construction of women as *Other* laid the foundations for much of the theoretical work in this decade. She writes: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (qtd. in Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 29). The *Other* is essential in the formation of human subjectivity, for it is in opposition to not-self (*Other*) that our sense of Self can be constructed. She argues that men have claimed the Self for themselves, assigning women to be the *Other*, rendering 'woman' to a projection of male fantasies, desires, and fears - the 'eternal feminine'. Since most of the representation available has been created by men, women have taken men's definitions to themselves, internalised them, and learned to see through the eyes of men. "Indeed, a 'true woman' is *required* to accept herself as *Other* for man: she must 'make herself object…renounce her autonomy'" (Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 29). Simone de Beauvoir's thoughts regarding the cultural construction of women as the *Other* being the reason for women's oppression "was taken up with varying degrees of theoretical sophistication by second wave feminist theorists" (Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 30). Friedan's *Feminie Mystique*, alike de Beauvoir, suggests a "drastic reshaping of the cultural image of femininity that will permit women to reach maturity, identity, completeness of self" (qtd. in Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 30).

Sexual Politics (1970) by Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) both emerged from the radical feminist movement. Millett's work broadened the definition of the term 'patriarchy' beyond its original meaning to mean the politically institutionalised oppression of all women by all men. Furthermore, she explained that without the elimination of the patriarchy other forms of oppression will continue, because patriarchy is the primary form of human oppression (Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 31), an oppression that is maintained through ideological control, and much like de Beauvoir, Millett argues that women have internalised the patriarchal ideology and with it the ideological belief of female inferiority. Unlike Friedan and de Beauvoir, Millett did not blame women for their position, and her writing of patriarchy as a politically oppressive system was pivotal in the progress of feminist theorisation and thinking (Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 31-32). Firestone argues that women's oppression is the oldest system in existence, based solely on reproductive differences between men and women leading to a sexual division of labour and the creation of a system based on differences in biology. Firestone, who employs the Marxist model in her work, argues that women's liberation requires "the revolt of the underclass (women) and the seizure of control of *reproduction*" (qtd. in Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 32). Where liberal feminism saw change possible within the prevailing socio-political structures, radical feminists maintained that a revolution was needed in order to bring forth significant changes.

British feminist theory saw its development not in radical or liberal feminism, but instead in socialist and psychoanalytic feminism. Juliet Mitchell, in her 1966 essay 'Women: The Longest Revolution' and her book *Women's Estate* from 1971, argues that Marxist theory perceives the liberation of women only as an addition to class analysis. Alike Firestone and Millett, Mitchell recognises the oppression of women as performing through ideology. According to Mitchell, if the liberation of women is to succeed, a transformation of disparate yet imbricated structures such as those of production, reproduction, sexuality, and the socialisation of children must occur (Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 33). The transformation of only one structure may simply lead to a shift in the form of oppression women are subjected to. Along the same lines, Sheila Rowbotham, in her 1973 work *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, argues that the emergence of a movement within the working-class women is key in the liberation of women, since the experiences of these women "spans production and reproduction, class exploitation and sex oppression" (qtd. in Thornham "Second Wave Feminism." 33). She

also draws from earlier authors such as Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf in her argument that a revolution in language and culture is needed to the same extent as a revolution in material structures. “Socialist feminists must seek to transform ‘the inner world’ of bodily experience, psychological colonisation and cultural silencing, as well as the outer world of material social conditions” (Thornham “Second Wave Feminism.” 33), and this idea of oppression happening through two structures is what led Mitchell towards an interest in psychoanalytic theory. Sigmund Freud’s concept of penis envy and his categorisation of femininity as passive became perceived as a key factor in the revolutions against first wave feminism. Mitchell recognised psychoanalytic theory as an explanatory tool, demonstrating how individuals procure sexed identities and how the identities are maintained, which would also elucidate the strength and pervasiveness of these sexed identities and also perceive them as culturally constructed, thus open to change (Thornham “Second Wave Feminism.” 33). This notion of psychoanalytic theory was taken up, not only by theorists with an interest in the construction of gender and gendered identity, but also by those who wished to explore how popular culture could construct gendered identities. Mitchell’s account of psychoanalysis and the power of patriarchy depended on notions of unconscious processes, and it was challenged, for others saw her explanation as denying the material basis of oppression of women, consequently undermining the feminist movement based on women as a social group.

Third wave

Within the third wave, there was a general division regarding feminism. Where some believed feminist thought and the feminist movement was still necessary, others insisted that equality had been achieved, holding the opinion that we were now in postfeminist times (Cochrane “*All the Rebel Women*.” 25), a term originating in the 1980’s news media. Gamble states that in the context of media, the term has been used as a “joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement” (Gamble 36). One example of the term’s use happens in Susan Faludi’s book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* published in 1991, where Faludi identifies postfeminism as hostile, though clandestinely, to the objectives of the women’s movement. Gamble explains:

> "For Faludi, postfeminism is the backlash, and its triumph lies in its ability to define itself as an ironic, pseudo-intellectual critique on the feminist movement, rather than an overtly hostile response to it. In a society which largely defines itself through media-inspired images, women are easily persuaded that feminism is unfashionable, passé, and therefore not worthy of serious consideration. "We're all 'post-feminist' now, they assert, meaning not that women have arrived at equal justice and moved beyond it, but simply that they themselves are beyond even pretending to care." (Gamble 38).

In 1999, Germaine Greer's book *The Whole Woman*, a sequel to the 1970 *The Female Eunuch* was published. With this publication, Greer makes it clear that her book is a reaction against the postfeminist ideology (Gamble 42) and that the debate regarding feminism was not yet over. In October 1991, law professor Anita Hill testified against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, who was her supervisor at the United States Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, in a case of sexual harassment. (Cochrane "*All the Rebel Women*." 23 "*All the Rebel Women*."; Jacobs). Shortly after Hill's hearings, Thomas was confirmed to the Supreme Court. While Thomas got the highest position in the United States, Hill's reputation was tarnished, and the credibility of her testimony questioned (Brock 1993; Thomas 2007; Jacobs; Cochrane "*All the Rebel Women*." 23). Rebecca Walker, American writer, feminist, and activist, pleaded to all women to let Clarence Thomas' confirmation and the treatment of Hill be a reminder that "the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power [...] I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave" (Walker, 80). Young feminists in their twenties and thirties distanced themselves from the politics and ideologies of postfeminism by identifying themselves as a part of the third wave (Gamble 43). It has been stated that one of the main differences between the second wave and the third wave is the ease feminists in the third wave felt with discrepancies (Gamble 43), acknowledging pluralism as a part of the movement. Liberal feminism has been criticised for not adequately addressing issues regarding class, race, and sexual orientation, but instead focusing mainly on the interests of upper- and middle-class, heterosexual white women. It has been highlighted that a significant number of women of African descent would trade their struggles with the lives of the dissatisfied women in Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (Tong and Botts 49). Classism has been an issue within liberal feminism. For example, Friedan assumed that most women were supported financially by men, overlooking

e.g. single mothers who had to financially support themselves and their children. Finally, there have been accusations against liberal feminism for being heterosexist, most significantly towards lesbians. The emphasis on plurality, as mentioned, has given way for women of colour to identify with feminism on their own terms. The predominantly white feminism of this time became increasingly challenged by black feminists, one being bell hooks, who, as early as 1984, argued against a homogenised feminism that was perceived more as a lifestyle than a political commitment (Gamble 44). At first, NOW largely ignored homophobia within society as a fear of the feminist movement becoming further alienated, even after lesbian women active in the Women's Liberation Movement stated their sexual identities publicly in the 1960's (Tong and Botts 50), but in 1984, NOW held its first Lesbian Rights Conference, and during the period of the third wave, the leadership of the organisation changed, becoming more diverse (Tong and Botts 44). Feminism thus took on an intersectional approach, holding the belief that women's oppression cannot be challenged without also challenging other oppressions based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. (Tong and Botts 43-44).

Fourth wave

There is disagreement regarding the beginning of the fourth wave. Where Cochrane puts the beginning of the wave in 2013, Jennifer Baumgardner was already writing about the fourth wave in 2011, dating it back to 2008 (Baumgardner 193). Cochrane's fourth wave is defined by technology, a way for women of today to gather and mobilise online, and according to her, the majority of feminist activists define themselves as intersectional, the approach that became popular in the feminist movement in the 1980's and onward (Cochrane "The Fourth Wave."). Jessica Valenti, co-founder of the blog Feministing, believes that the fourth wave is made up of numerous waves and movements, the common denominator being how much of the campaigning and organising happens online (Cochrane "*All the Rebel Women*." 40). Present day feminists are fighting on several fronts, with campaigns usually being started by either individuals or small groups (Cochrane "The Fourth Wave."), but according to Cochrane, the main issue that pushes women into feminist activity is rape culture (Cochrane "*All the Rebel Women*." 30). It seems that the term's first published use was in Noreen Connell and Cassandra Wilson's 1974 *Rape: The*

First Sourcebook for Women by New York Radical Feminists, Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men Women and Rape* from 1975, but it is the documentary film *Rape Culture* from 1975 that examines rape in the context of a cultural normalization of rape and violence, thus taking credit for defining the term. The concept is defined as

> "complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm" (qtd. in Rentschler 66).

Women are organising and campaigning against this culture where victims of rape culture have not been justly treated and to hold accountable those that are responsible, and the internet is used as a medium where they can start petitions and arrange demonstrations (Rentschler 67).

One example of such online campaigning is the petition for the South African government to take action against corrective rape in the country (Cochrane "*All the Rebel Women*." 34), which gained massive media coverage on ABC NEWS, The Mail & Guardian, Huffington Post amongst others (Hughes; Jadoo; "Africa's LGBT Rights Movement."). The SlutWalk movement from 2011 is an example of how rallies arranged online can spread internationally, becoming movements. The rally was a reaction to a Torontonian police officer who had given a safety talk on a university campus where he suggested that in order to prevent being victimised, women should stop dressing like sluts (Cochrane "*All the Rebel Women*." 35; Chamberlain 111). By the time the event was happening in Toronto, it was also happening in ten other cities, further spreading to other countries such as India, England, Australia, and South Korea within a few years (Cochrane "*All the Rebel Women*." 36; Chamberlain 112).

Arguably, one of the biggest movements to have been set in motion online in the past couple of years is the #MeToo movement. Initially, the phrase was coined in 2006 by activist Tarana Burke and used as a way of empowering and helping women who, like herself, had survived sexual violence (Ohlheiser). Mid October 2017, the phrase became a widespread hashtag on Twitter with the intention of revealing the extent of problems with sexual assault and sexual harassment put in motion by Alyssa Milano (@Alyssa_Milano). By the next day,

Milano's tweet had been tweeted more than 500.000 times (France), while on Facebook it had been used 4.7 million times in 24 hours (Santiago and Criss), uncovering 201 cases of sexual misconduct in the first year alone (Carlsen et al). These examples show how the second wave feminist's belief of "the personal is the political" persists even to this day, for though street harassment or workplace sexual harassment happens in the public sphere, it happens to individuals, thus it is situated within the sphere of the personal.

The mentioned examples above demonstrate the power of the internet and social media, a medium where women can efficiently and quickly mobilise, connecting with other feminists and becoming aware of issues from all over the world. Unfortunately, the internet is not a genderless space where both sex and gender have been rendered extraneous as feminists may have hoped. The possibility of anonymity and the ease with which fake accounts with fake names can be created has resulted in a culture of online trolling. Along the lines of rape culture, where women are made responsible for abuse, they might be subjected to, instances of women making their opinions known online, described by Laurie Penny as the "short skirt of the internet" (qtd. in Chamberlain 136), are often seen as invitations for threats and misogynistic comments (Chamberlain 136). Thus, while feminist activity happens online, it seems that, at the same time a backlash culture, "an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women" (qtd. in Chamberlain 136), to feminism occurs. This backlash was suggested by Faludi, who stated that once feminism reaches a certain stage, there will inevitably be reprisal from the opposition with the intention of undoing the progress that has been made over the decades (Chamberlain 136-137). Though it seems even if this wave of backlash happens online, the vigour and resistance from feminists increases accordingly. Feminist activists do not surrender to online trolling or backlash culture, which has risen directly as a result of feminist achievements, Chamberlain states (Chamberlain 138). The fourth wave requires its activists to directly engage with negativity online rather than (resort to the) 'don't feed the trolls' solution. This aspect of the fourth wave, together with female activists speaking out against rape culture, is characterised by anger and the refusal to be intimidated, both necessary for both feminist resistance and progress in Chamberlain's judgement (Chamberlain 139). While feminist activists of the fourth wave push forward for improvements, they must simultaneously resist the backlash culture that is developing, allowing "for a fourth wave that is dialogic, responsive and resistant" (Chamberlain 139).

Feminist Film Theory

The feminists of the second wave were aware that oppression of women needed to be challenged on various fronts, social, economic, psychological, etc. One front, where oppression also had to be challenged, was in regard to women's image in film and women's position in the film industry. This issue was taken up, firstly, by the American journal *Women and Film*, published first time in 1972. According to the editors of the journal, women are oppressed in the film industry where they hold positions such as receptionists, secretaries, prop girls, etc., women are oppressed by being reduced to stereotypes, sexualised, and victimised, and they are oppressed within film theory by (male) critics, who celebrate (male) directors for their complex works and for raising above the 'woman's picture' also known as 'weepies' (Thornham "Feminism and Film." 75). Simone de Beauvoir had perceived cinema as a crucial bearer of cultural myths, and, she argued, it is in these myths that we both interpret and experience our realities as men and women, and as most representational work is the work of men, it is created from their point of view, using their definitions and understandings, confounding it with absolute truth. Thus, women must perceive themselves through these representations (Thornham "Feminism and Film." 75).

The early writers were concerned with exposing how the image of women as offered by film was both limited and oppressive. Such accounts are present in works from feminists such as Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus* from 1973, Molly Haskell's 1974 *From Reverence to Rape*, or Sharon Smith's "The Image of Women in Film: Some Suggestions for Future Research" published in *Women and Film*. These early works were loosely based on sociological approach in their examination of women in cinema, and the sociological view is that Hollywood does not show real women but instead films resort to stereotyped images charged with 'femininity' (Smelik 8). This relation between cinema and reality is thought to be changeable, for by showing reality in its actuality both ideology and society can be changed. Female filmmakers must show the unglamorous 'real women' of reality instead of a stereotyped, eternal fantasy in order to liberate women (Smelik 8), for these feminist critics believed that a limited display of female characters and by resorting to stereotypes of female characters in media, goals and endeavours of real life women would decrease (Ruti 17). Yet, these works lacked a theoretical framework, but in order to develop a theoretical framework, it would require a shift of focus. Instead of focusing on the misrepresentation of women in cinema, the focus should be on how meaning and pleasure

is structured in such a way that it constructs and strengthens gendered identities (Thornham "Feminism and Film." 76). Thus, during the mid-1970's, psychoanalysis increasingly overtook the sociological approach to feminist film criticism (Ruti 18). The psychoanalytic discipline was established by Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud, who recognised sexuality not as a natural given, but as a process of sexualisation. He recognised that human actions, whether those being going to the bathroom, sitting down for dinner, or human sexual behaviour is influenced by cultural precepts. Freud viewed the Oedipus complex as a tool for socialisation, teaching girls and boys to perform normative femininity and masculinity. He was particularly interested in the female Oedipus complex "which seemed to demand some counterintuitive psychic manoeuvres" (Ruti 23), such as accepting an inferior position, summing up de Beauvoir's idea of "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". Using a psychoanalytic framework to decode films will make it possible to see the ways in which women have been positioned as the *Other* within the patriarchy (Kaplan 25) and using psychoanalysis as a tool in this process is relevant as it "unlocks the secrets of our socialization" in a patriarchal society (Kaplan 24). Signs in films express patriarchal ideology that constructs women in specific ways that in turn reflect the needs and the unconscious of the patriarchy.

Claire Johnston - and other British feminists - relied heavily on psychoanalysis in their approach to this area. She writes: "If film criticism is to have any use, it is that it should provide a greater understanding of how film operates which will ultimately feed back into film-making itself" (qtd. in Thornham "Feminism and Film." 77). Her work, and others like hers, draw on semiotics, which taught critics to analyse how cinematic techniques were crucial in the representation of sexual differences, Marxist concepts of ideology, and psychoanalytic theory, from which critics learned to analyse structures of desire and subjectivity, amongst others. Such approaches insist that film representation should not be viewed as reflections of reality, a view that was common in American sociological approach (Thornham "Feminism and Film." 77). Instead, films should be viewed as texts that produce specific meanings, texts that carry ideology, "that representational system, or 'way of seeing' the world which appears to us to be 'universal' or 'natural' but which is in fact the product of the specific power structures which constitute our society" (Thornham "Feminism and Film." 77). Feminist film theory increasingly shifted its focus from critique of films' content to the production of meaning (Kaplan 23; Smelik 9). According to Johnston, the sign 'woman' represents the meaning that she holds for men,

outside of that relation, ‘woman’ is defined as no-thing or not-male (Smelik 9). ‘Woman’ does not function as a signifier or a reflection for something that already has meaning, that is real women. Instead, its signification has been omitted to a sign that represents the male and patriarchal unconsciousness. Considering ‘woman’ obtains its meaning within a sexist and patriarchal ideology and structure, comparing representations of ‘woman’ generated under said ideology with the experiences of real women may show itself to be ineffective, as the reality of women is lived under the same ideology that generates representations and stereotypes of women. Instead, it is more beneficial to examine what meanings ‘woman’ in films is made to bear and what fantasies and fears it carries (Thornham “Feminism and Film.” 77).

The Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey’s essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ published in 1975, has become prominent within feminist film theory. Using psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey demonstrates the way the “unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (Mulvey 296), in which woman is constructed and signified as ‘not male’. She is constructed as something that gives meaning to the man therefore woman is the “bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey 297).

In her article, Mulvey attempts to understand the fascination of Hollywood Cinema, and through psychoanalytic theory she has developed the concept of the male gaze. The notion of scopophilia can explain the fascination with cinema, a notion that is sexual in origin is what keeps the audience stuck to the screen. The desire to look is stimulated by the integration of voyeuristic and narcissistic structures into the story and the visuals. The voyueristic visual pleasure is produced by perceiving another character or figure as an object, whereas narcissistic visual pleasure is produced through identification with an object (Smelik 9-10; Mulvey 299). Mulvey has analysed cinema as a structure functioning on an axis of activity and passivity, a gendered binary opposition, where men are deemed as active and women as passive (Mulvey 299). The narrative structure creates the male character as the powerful agent around whom the story revolves. He is the active subject who looks. Female characters, on the other hand, are the passive object of the gaze, whose desires are to be desired by men (Ruti 37). The camera films

from the optical point of view of the male character, and when the male character directs his gaze towards female characters, the spectator automatically and, most often, unconsciously identifies with the male character's gaze. The objectification of female characters and the creation of the voyeuristic visual pleasure thus happens on three levels; the gaze of the camera, the gaze of the (male) character, and lastly the gaze of the spectator (Smelik 10; Mulvey 301).

Mulvey explains narcissistic visual pleasure through the use of Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, where an infant can recognise its own image, identifying it as a more perfect and more complete mirror image from which it forms the ideal ego (Smelik 10; Mulvey 298). This image in cinema is provided through the hero whom the spectator can identify with the same way an infant identifies with its own perfect image. But representation of the more perfect and more complete male hero stands in antinomy to the female character, who is presented as an erotic spectacle. Where the male character embodies power and activity, the female character comes to present "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 299) and as the receiver of the male gaze, the function of the female character is to be sexually attractive: "The male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is stylised accordingly" (Mulvey 299). Thus, the spectator is made to identify with the male protagonist (Smelik 10-11), who, through power, controlling of events, and the gaze, gives the spectator a sense of control (Mulvey 300). The male protagonist's function in the narrative establishes him as the ideal ego and precludes him to be the target of sexual objectification (Mulvey 300). These two aspects of visual pleasure structured around the male gaze leave female spectators of cinema with two equally unsatisfactory choices; either they take up a voyeuristic visual narrative, regarding female characters through the male gaze, or they adopt a narcissistic visual pleasure, identifying with the passive and objectified female character on the screen, thereby accepting their own status as the passive objects of the male gaze.

The sexualisation and objectification of women is not only with eroticism as its purpose, for from a psychoanalytic perspective, it is devised to annihilate a threat the woman poses to the man (Kaplan 31). Mulvey's theory of the male gaze is built on the Freudian concept of male castration anxiety. Where the possessor of a penis has been coded as "having" something, the one that does not possess a penis has been coded as "lacking" something, thus, culturally, women's lack of a penis is regarded as a wound "as the kind of castration, deficiency, or deprivation that nothing can redeem" (Ruti 24). From this understanding, the progress to the

belief that the presence of a penis denotes an active subject, and the absence of a penis denotes a passive object is small. Lacking in phallus, the woman's presence provokes an unpleasant feeling in the male unconsciousness, becoming a source of deeper fears (Mulvey 300-301). Her presence on screen implies a threat of castration, a threat that is removed through one of two ways: voyeurism or scopophilic fetishism. Where the first notes that "pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt [...], asserting control, and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness," (Mulvey 301), this could be through death or marriage, the latter involves reducing the threat by oversexualising and disintegrating parts of her body, replacing her lack of a phallus with a fetish so much that it becomes reassuring rather than threatening (Mulvey 301). Fetishism relies on the physical aspects of the object/woman, focused mainly on the look alone. Voyeurism is related to sadism and fits well with narrative. "Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end" (Mulvey 301). Thus, in order to alleviate this feeling of unpleasantness, women are made into the passive objectified figure in media representation.

A Female Gaze?

Mulvey makes it clear in her concluding statement, that the voyeuristic active/passive mechanism in film derives any sort of pleasure for women as spectators "Women, whose image has continually been stolen and used for this end, cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret" (Mulvey 302). Mary Ann Doane, who in the 1980's sought to analyse the viewing pleasures offered in the so called 'woman's film' of the 1940's, a genre of films targeted at women, argues that films targeted specifically at women cannot rely on the same mechanisms as films addressed towards men. Doane's argument is based on the importance of the concepts 'proximity' and 'distance', stating that voyeurism occurs because there is both a physical and psychological distance between the subject and the object. The voyeuristic, narcissistic, and fetishist mechanisms utilised in films addressed towards men are used in order to protect the male psyche from the knowledge of woman's difference, her lack of phallus, and where the masculine viewing positioning is characterised by distance, the

'woman's film' is characterised by overidentification and a lack of distance considering she *is* the image presented. The female spectator is not offered "an eroticised image as object of her gaze, but instead an identification with herself as image, *as* object of desire or of suffering" (Thornham "Feminism and Film" 78).

Considering denials such as those from Mulvey and Doane regarding the female gaze, E. Ann Kaplan has, in her 1983 essay 'Is the Gaze Male?', speculated if the gaze is necessarily always male and if female voyeurism is at all a possibility. Kaplan explains that the patriarchal culture is so fixed on the difference between male and non-male, femininity and masculinity, that stepping outside of this binary system seems almost impossible (Kaplan 29). In Hollywood, this is seen when the gaze belongs to the female character, from which she objectifies a man. When this happens, the woman takes over a privilege that originally belonged only to the man, and thus she cannot stay in her feminine role and must instead take on a masculine position in order to become the 'owner' of the gaze and the initiator of the action. She does not lose her attractiveness, instead she loses traditionally feminine characteristics such as motherhood and kindness. This is where the female character takes on traditionally masculine characteristics such as cold, manipulative, and forceful (Kaplan 29). And even though the woman can become the carrier and the owner of the look, her look will carry no power: "This positioning of the two genders clearly privileges the male (through the mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism, which are male operations, and because his desire carries power/action, where woman's usually does not)" (Kaplan 29). Where the male gaze has had time to develop since the beginning of the film industry in the 20th century, the female gaze has had a much shorter time to be developed, defined, and utilized, most specifically because women do not have a significant position in the film industry. According to the "Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top U.S. Films of 2020", women amounted for 21% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers on the top 100 grossing films (Lauzen 1). Director Jill Soloway has spoken about the challenges of defining the female gaze, arguing that the female gaze is about using the presence of a female character on screen to emphasise the emotions and characters of the story ("Jill Soloway on The Female Gaze | MASTER CLASS | TIFF 2016."). Regarding films such as *Magic Mike* (2012) or *Baywatch* (2017), the latter that has been described as feminist because "the boys are just as objectified" ("Priyanka Chopra on Body Shamin and Why 'Baywatch' is Actually a Feminist Movie | Glamour."), the sexual

objectification of the male characters differ from the objectification of female characters in films such as *Star Trek Into Darkness* (2013), *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), *Transformers* (2007), or the *James Bond* franchise with its infamous 'bond girls'. For where the female body is disintegrated, fetishized, violated, and reduced to her body, the male body is glorified, cheered, and developed with personalities and backstories. Replacing the male lead character with a female lead may also not be representative of the female gaze if we consider a film such as *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), for even with the protagonist being a woman, the male gaze is nevertheless applied. According to Kaplan, switching the positions of the male and female characters have no real significance in the end, for nothing truly changes. Swapping one sex for another does not erase the connotations the bodies have been given over time, creating certain fixed boundaries for the roles. "Showing images of mere reversal may in fact provide a safety valve for social tensions that the women's movement has created by demanding a more dominant role for women" (Kaplan 29-30).

Analysis

Catwoman

With a story independent from the character of the same name from the DC comics, this Catwoman can pride itself as being the first superhero film in the 21st century with the title belonging to a female superhero. *Catwoman* concerns a female superheroine taking control of her life in a space that is male dominated, assuming a position of power in said space. She is an empowering image, a character who ends up living uncontained of society's rules, but underneath this feminist message is another narrative, that of the female sexuality and the struggle of its containment within the patriarchal structure. Her narrative conforms differently to the Hero's Journey and the Heroine's Journey respectively, for where the different steps of the Hero's Journey can be identified in her overall arc, the same cannot be said for the majority of the steps from the Heroine's Journey.

Patience Phillips' arc revolves around her newfound powers as Catwoman after her separation with her identity as Patience in the stage Belly of the Whale, but it is also about her

relationship to police officer Tom Lone, who becomes her love interest, her friendship with Sally, and most importantly her own self-discovery and figuring out who she is as both Patience and Catwoman. The last issue would fit quite well with the Heroine's Journey and the focus this has on the internal struggles of the heroine, but when put into the Heroine's Journey, too many steps seem to be absent. This does also fit with how, despite Patience having to come to terms with her new split persona as Catwoman, most of her struggles and the obstacles she undergoes in her Road of Trials are external obstacles.

Patience works as an artist and graphic designer at Hedare Beauty, a cosmetics company, where she, soon after the film's beginning and her Call to Adventure, discovers a conspiracy involving dangerous side effects from continuous use of the beauty products. Patience's job narrative and the villain, who is revealed to be Laurel Hedare, revolve around beauty and men in power. Patience's job narrative revolves around pleasing the male authority, George Hedare, who mocks her wardrobe, lack of manicure, and berates the work she has done. Even though she has done what he has asked of her, she still accepts redoing it, conforming to his wishes. This is partially also one of the only manners in which Heroine's Journey can be applied to Patience's arc, for this is where the heroine, having identified with the masculine, experiences a sense of loss or wrong, for she is not where she is supposed to be as a female protagonist "This was my life. Days blended together, consistently ordinary Thanks to a job that was the practical version of my passion" (Pitof 4:15-4:25). When she, later as a part of her Road of Trials, defends herself against George, he fires her for her attitude, initially showing that a woman standing up for herself in a male dominated workplace will face severe consequences. Laurel's motivation is based on her not being considered young and beautiful by her male peers anymore, resulting in her being replaced as the face of Hedare Beauty "I was everything they wanted me to be. I was never more beautiful, never more powerful. Then I turned 40 and they threw me away" (Pitof 1:18:15-1:18:30). The workplace has thus implemented patriarchal-like structures, where it is led by men, producing products targeted towards women with no concern for the consumers. Thus, where Patience tries to please the implemented patriarchal-like structures, Laurel is a complicit part of it.

The villain of the movie, Woman as the Temptress, is partially based on stereotypes. Firstly, as mentioned, her motivations are based on her beauty and getting revenge upon the men

who have cast her aside since she is not considered 'conventionally' beautiful enough to continue as a model for the beauty company. She is overly concerned with her own vanity, and where the villain is concerned with this earthly desire and pleasure, the Campbellian hero Patience is elevated above such topics. Laurel's motivation sourcing from beauty is not an unusual motivation amongst female villains. Considering the superhero genre, no villain, male nor female, with vanity and/or jealousy of someone being considered more beautiful as motive comes to mind, but outside of the superhero genre, this type of villain, especially female villains seem to appear more often than men. The Evil Queen in Snow White and the Seven Dwarves attempts to have Snow White killed in order to become the "fairest of all", Cinderella's wicked stepmother, Lady Tremaine is shown punishing and abusing Cinderella as motivated by Cinderella's beauty. In *Tangled*, mother Gothel abducts and hides Rapunzel away in a tower for years in order to stay young and beautiful herself. These are merely a few examples of female villains, whose motives are vanity and jealousy. According to a survey conducted by Debra Bradley, jealousy and vanity is one of the top motives for female villains (Sharmin and Sattar 55), and according to Sharmin and Sattar, female villains are most often depicted as masculinised, contrasting sharply with the over-feminised protagonist (55), and they are most often made to look unattractive and undesirable to the opposite sex. Laurel as a character cannot be, objectively, considered neither unattractive, undesirable, nor masculinised in the eyes of the general audience, but in the setting of the film and the patriarchal structure put in place in her workplace, she has become exactly those things. She is unattractive because she is too old and she has since become undesirable to her husband George, who instead shows interest in a much younger woman, whom Laurel is shown to be jealous of. It should be mentioned that villains with jealousy of someone considered better as motives do exist both in the superhero genre and outside, Loki being a prime example of such a villain within the superhero film genre. But where Laurel's jealousy stems from beauty and being cast aside by a man, Loki's jealousy is based on power and authority. Other villains, where looks are a major part of their character also exist. One such villain is Gaston and another, to remain with the superhero genre, is Black Mask, most specifically Black Mask from *Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* (2020). But where Laurel's looks, and those of the female villains mentioned further above, has become a prime source of their motives, the looks of Black Mask and Gaston are secondary to their character, at times even presented as comedic elements. Laurel and Patience

are the only two female characters shown to be physically strong, and where one is overly sexualised, the other is villainized. Thus, no physically capable women are left on the screen to be just that.

Considering Ophelia's description of the Catwoman as "Catwomen are not contained by the rules of society. You follow your own desires. This is both a blessing and a curse. You will often be alone and misunderstood, but you will experience a freedom other women will never know. [...] By accepting who you are, all of who you are, you can be free. And freedom is power" (Pitof 49:50-50:58) it may seem as if when Patience accepts her role as the Catwoman in her Apotheosis, she will inevitably become the Catwoman of Ophelia's description. In the film, Patience is also depicted as becoming confident, fierce, and at last, free, all traits that encompass the concept of a woman detached from and disinterested in patriarchal structures. Such claims of supposed 'complete freedom' can be refuted when Catwoman's physical appearance and the male gaze is taken into consideration.

Patience is a docile woman. She is quiet and obedient and the antithesis of Catwoman. The first time we meet Patience, she is wearing clothes that are considered unsightly and unstylish. She is most often seen wearing jeans, long sleeved shirts, oversized leather jackets, and flat shoes. She also does not wear any make-up, with the exception of the night of her and Tom's date. In contrast, Catwoman is candidly hypersexualised. Her suit is entirely made of what looks like black leather or latex, covering her breasts and leaving the rest of her torso unclothed, the pants are made to look as if they have been ripped by claws, the rips located on her upper thighs and glutes. She wears heels with open toes, opera gloves designed with claws made of diamonds, and wields a bullwhip. The personality of Catwoman is also strikingly different from that of Patience. Catwoman is stereotypically seductive in the way of movement, tone, and vocabulary, that is, the character both moves and speaks in an unrealistic manner that appeals to an androcentric phantasy.

When it comes to the male gaze, it seems as if there is a continuous pattern throughout the film. Whenever Patience/Catwoman acts more violent or in any way threatening, the male gaze is apparent. One of the first times the male gaze is utilised, is when Catwoman, after having shut down a neighbour's party, changes into her suit and steals a man's motorcycle (Pitof 41:30). When she does this, she is wearing heels, leather pants, and a leather jacket, with the leather

jacket zipped up so her stomach is on display, showing the audience that she is not wearing anything underneath the jacket. When sitting on the motorcycle, she does so in a sexually suggestive way, which in part opposes the message of female liberation. If the motorcycle is considered as a phallic object, then this action would suggest that Catwoman is, contrary to what the audience is told, a compliant, even willing, part of the very structures who are 'caging' her. What sexual and bodily freedom of expression the film is signalling through its dialogue is juxtaposed by the cinematography and direction which upholds the male gaze. This contradiction further implies that the characterisation of Catwoman is an appeal to the male part of the audience, rather than an example of a progressive character who is meant to empower the female part of the audience. Traditionally, motorcycling has been associated with masculinity, despite more and more women taking up riding (Thompson 58), whereas the role of women in traditional biker culture has been identified to be either 'mamas', 'sweetbutts', or 'old ladies':

> "*Mamas* [...] were considered to be the property of the club and [...] were expected to serve any and all members' needs— sexual and otherwise. *Sweetbutts* [...] were more likely to provide regular sexual services to only one, or in some cases a few members [...] An *old lady* was the exclusive property of one club member—her *old man*. [...] all members understood that she was ''off limits'' [...] unless he decided to trade her off or sell her services" (Thompson 59).

Thus, traditionally the association between women, bikes, and biker culture has generally been sexual in nature. This sexual association can be seen in films such as *Barb Wire* (1996), *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), and *Batman: The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), where the male gaze is applied when women are on a motorcycle. If we, psychoanalytically consider the motorcycle as a sexual symbol and an extension of the power between men's legs, then we could consider Catwoman stealing a man's motorcycle as her rendering him powerless, but the manner in which she sits upon it suggests a power dynamic in which the man still has power over her. This is partially due to the way in which she is fetishized and sexualised. Her bodily sexualisation and fetishization prevents her from claiming power from men.

Halfway through the film, Patience changes into her second Catwoman suit. The clothes are tight and revealing, leaving little to the imagination. According to Guéguen and Stefan, a woman's physical appearance and physical attractiveness is important when it comes to being

judged by her male peers (Guéguen and Stefan 416). Besides a woman's clothing and its colour, her make-up, her waist-to-hip ratio, or size of breast, heels are another element that affect men's judgement of women's attractiveness. According to their study, there is a relation between high heels and sexiness, considering the way which both magazines and adult films use female models wearing high heels, associating such footwear with sex appeal and attractiveness in women (Guénguen and Stefan 418). An experiment conducted by Morris et al. shows that male participants found targets wearing high heels significantly more attractive than targets without high heels (Guénguen and Stefan 419). Female characters in heels are a constant in media; Sienna Brook and Elizabeth Sinskey in *Inferno*, *Jurassic World*'s Claire Dearing, *Red Eye*'s Lisa Reisert, Juliet O'Hara in *Psych*, or if sticking to the superhero genre we can mention Harley Quinn in *Suicide Squad* (2016), and the popular wedge-heel worn by Gamora, Mantis, Nebula, Scarlet Witch, and Wonder Woman. When wearing high heels, the gait of the woman changes, "reducing stride length and increasing pelvis tilt and hip rotation" (Guéguen and Stefan 419). The heels Catwoman is wearing changes her gait, emphasising the swaying of her hips, giving the camera the opportunity to focus on her legs and pelvis area. When showing the audience her costume for the first time, the camera starts its focus on her exposed toes, panning further up her legs, but falling behind her so when the focus of the camera reaches her upper thighs, Catwoman is in front of the camera with her back to it. Thus, the audience has a clear view of her posterior, clad in tight leather pants that are ripped right underneath the derriere. With the camera focused on her back and stomach, both unclothed, high-heeled feet with red painted toes, a cleavage revealing leather bra, and buttocks clad in tight leather, her body becomes the sight for objectification. In the next scene, Catwoman jumps down from the roof she is on in order to slide down between two walls. Here, the camera is underneath her spread legs, looking directly up at her private parts. This almost gives the illusion that the audience is underneath her, in between her legs with access to the most private parts of her body.

The fight between Catwoman and Tom can be considered a form of power play. Multiple times during this scene, both Tom and Catwoman are seen to seize control of the fight, but in different ways. Catwoman uses her cat-like abilities, sexual appeal, and body in order to gain control, such as when she manages to disappear in seconds, just to reappear behind Tom, or when she swings herself from a wire and ends up straddling him, and in the next frame pulls Tom on top of her between her legs, licking his cheek. Tom, on the other hand, also uses his

body to gain control, but where Catwoman's technique was to disappear, reappear, and submit herself, Tom gains control by physically restraining Catwoman. Such is seen when he manages to hold her against him, her back against his chest with one of his hands around her, while she has one hand behind her back. A few seconds later, he has her in the same hold, but this time pushed up against the railing. The male gaze is not reserved only for when she is in her Catwoman costume. Take for example when Patience and Tom are playing basketball against each other. This scene echoes the playground fight between Matt Murdock/Daredevil and Elektra in *Daredevil* (2003), but where the fight between Murdock and Elektra gives a sense of two equals sizing each other up, the same cannot be said of this scene between Patience and Tom. The focus, instead of being on both individuals equally and showing Patience's newfound powers, strength, and skills, is on Patience's body and the physical proximity of erotic nature. At one point, Patience has her back towards Tom, dribbling the basketball. Here, Tom looks down at her buttocks, and the perspective changes to his point of view. The audience sees the scene from Tom's perspective, watching her behind as if they were him, standing behind Patience and admiring her posterior (Pitof 35:45). Patience is not dressed revealingly in this scene, nor does she act violent. She is showing competitive characteristics and she excels at the sport as a result of her newfound powers. When Sally tells Patience that a woman never "beat[s] a guy at sports. It messes him up" (Pitof 38:00), she is describing the reason for the male gaze of the scene. Patience may not have been violent the same way Catwoman is, but she still posed a threat to Tom while playing basketball. Thus, she needed to be sexualised in order to diminish that threat. These examples render Catwoman/Patience as a physically able female character who performs violence, to an object of desire and positions her in a state, where her objective is to-be-looked-at-ness. The message that the camera angles send is similarly one of objectification, where she is displayed through the lens of the camera in order to be gazed at by the audience. The narrative of the film and the showcasing of Patience's newfound powers become secondary to the above-mentioned subjects of objectification, body, eroticism, and sexualisation. In the end, Catwoman achieves the Ultimate Boon, succeeding in her quest of avenging her murder, and preventing the beauty products from being distributed. She is seen choosing a life of freedom apart from society and human existence, initially becoming Master of the two Worlds and achieving the Freedom to Live, the last two stages of the Hero's Journey. Arguably, Laurel Hedare and Tom Lone can be said to represent the restrictions of a patriarchal society in terms of beauty standards within a

male dominated environment and Tom perceiving Patience as a damsel in distress. Catwoman being distanced from the female restrictions, and in the end of the film choosing to leave the male restrictions behind in order to live outside of society's rules is considerably a powerful moment. Catwoman is actively choosing her own destiny and who she wants to be. But the sexualisation she has been subjected to throughout the film impedes her agency, for the scene is constructed for the male gaze and consumption. Catwoman is a symbolic threat that must be diminished, and this is where the hypersexualisation of her character comes into play. In order to minimise the threat she poses, she must be subjected to scopophilic fetishism, her body disintegrated and presented as parts instead of a whole person.

The imagery of the cat plays into the fetishization of the character. The creators of Catwoman, Bob Kane and Bill Finger, used cat imagery in the creation of Catwoman firstly because they perceived cats to be an antithesis to bats and secondly, they perceived women as feline creatures and men as canine creatures. Kane's understanding with associating women with feline creatures and men with canines was that dogs, and by association men, are more faithful, friendly, and generally warmer - fitting the description of dogs being man's best friend. Opposite this description, cats, and again by association women, are detached and unreliable, hard to understand. "Men feel more sure of themselves with a male friend than a woman. You always need to keep women at arm's length. We don't want anyone taking over our souls, and women have a habit of doing that" (Kane 107-108). According to Katherine Sullivan Barak, the nature of the cat is marked by ambivalence, which explains why the animal's position in Western iconography is so unique, for despite claims of domestication, the cat is still decisively independent (Barak 20). Depending on the historical context, both cats and women can be depicted as friend or foe, and the relationship between these two beings has existed for centuries and has been depicted in multiple ways. In ancient Egypt, the cat was considered a sacred animal, connected to multiple deities, and despite representing both male and female deities, cats were most often associated with women (Barak 25). Many of these female goddesses, such as Bastet the goddess Catwoman receives her powers from, are connected to the private sphere where their roles are linked to sex and sexuality with responsibilities within motherhood, childbearing, and childrearing (Barak 25). With the rise of Christianity, pagan religions became synonymous with devil worship (Barak 44), and their believers and sacred animals deemed heretics and practitioners of witchcraft with 80 % of individuals accused of witchcraft being

women (Barak 47). Hereafter, the connotations between cats and women transformed from devil worship and heresy to sex and sexuality, which was not a new connotation, considering the Egyptian goddesses, but the connection between lewdness and promiscuity "lent itself to subtle eroticism throughout the early modern period" (Barak 60), with connotations indicating vanity, sexual appetite, and natural instincts that cannot be changed (Barak 56-58). It is clear that the connection between cats and women is sexual in nature, based on gender roles with responsibilities connected to sex, sexuality, fertility, etc. Claiming that Catwoman becomes completely free of society's rules by accepting her dual personality seems precarious. The sensual side of Catwoman can be considered a sexual liberation where a woman takes control over her own sexuality, but when Catwoman/Patience reaches the last two stages of the Hero's Journey and also complete freedom and liberation, the gaze suggests otherwise, for even in the last scene, her liberating moment becomes a moment of visual consumption for the male audience and male gaze, removing the possibility of Catwoman/Patience taking control of her own sexuality and body, initially obstructing her agency. The feminist messages are negated as the feminist role model continuously becomes subjected to voyeurism and fetishization. While Catwoman and her narrative make a case for female independency, the cinematography and direction forces her to remain as an erotic spectacle for the male gaze.

Elektra

Elektra is another example of a film within the superhero genre starring a female main character. Similar to the *Catwoman* film from the previous year, the supposed heroine of *Elektra* can likewise be loosely classified as an antiheroine, since the character does not initially conform to the hero/heroine archetype. Elektra is an assassin for hire, and it is established early in the film, from before the first instance she is present on-screen, that she is extremely skilled and that she kills without remorse. The character herself acknowledges that this way of living is not one she wishes others to aspire to or be part of (Bowman 52:00 and 54:20), and it is implied through the mentor character, Stick, that Elektra has a "pure heart" (Bowman 1:07:00) but that she needed to discover it for herself.

Elektra's narrative is entirely driven by the trauma experienced in the title character's childhood, specifically trauma relating to her family, and even more so, her mother. During the course of the film, the main character is shown to experience six instances of flashbacks in the form of nightmares and visions. Early in the film, these instances are more frequent, with the first happening at 16:00, the second at 19:30, and the third at 30:00. While five of the instances are presented as dreams or flashbacks, one is presented similarly to a hallucination, where Elektra sees the character Abby Miller as her younger self (Bowman 51:00). Besides this example, it appears that the frequency of these flashbacks becomes lower the more time Elektra spends with Abby, a character whose relationship to Elektra is established as a mother-daughter relationship early in the film.

Elektra's narrative conforms both to the Hero's and Heroine's Journey, both simultaneously and separately. Notably, this only applies if one takes into consideration the memories and flashbacks experienced by the protagonist throughout the film. It appears that up until the moment Elektra makes the decision to protect Abby and Mark Miller instead of assassinating them or leaving them to be assassinated by someone else, the character had completed the first two stages of the Heroine's Journey. The character's Road of Trials begins, in both Hero's and Heroine's case, by returning to actively protect Abby and Mark. The contract itself acts as the Call to Adventure, which Elektra refuses multiple times; first when the contract is initially offered, where she eventually accepts it; and a second time when she refuses to kill Abby and Mark, thus carrying out the contract, to instead leave, thus placing her in the same position as before she had accepted the contract in the first place. By returning to aid the Millers, Elektra crosses the First Threshold, and the Road of Trials begin, which consists of keeping Abby and Mark from harm.

Because Elektra's flashbacks and memories are tied to traumatic events from her childhood, all which appear to have influence upon who and what Elektra has chosen to be in her adult life, it corresponds with the notion of the Heroine's Journey relating more to internal conflict, as opposed to the Hero's Journey and external conflict. While these parts of the protagonist's past are significant in its characterisation, they are not, as such, influencing or part of the current occurrences. If, however, the Heroine's Journey is applied rather than the Hero's Journey, the protagonist's past is in direct connection to what is occurring throughout the film,

and act more as an extension or foundation of the story, rather than a tragic background included in the film to explain or justify a character's behaviour. That is, the current story acts closer to a continuation, and not a separate one.

With the particular example of *Elektra*, it is not a question of which journey best conforms to the narrative, but rather the perspective on the presentation of the story. That is, whether the Heroine's or Hero's Journey best suit this film depends on the understanding of the protagonist and how much significance is committed to the sequences pertaining to the flashbacks. In addition hereto, it is perhaps worth considering, further, how exactly the content of Elektra's memories are understood or viewed. While the death of a parent would be considered a negative occurrence, could the same be said about the examples of extensive training by Elektra's father? Furthermore, much emphasis throughout the film is placed upon Elektra as a child, both via the flashbacks but also in the comparisons with Abby Miller, including when Abby cut and dyed her hair to resemble Elektra's, along with how Elektra was considered a "Treasure" as a child, a title which Abby has now been given. Other examples include a vision of Elektra as a child speaking directly to adult Elektra in her childhood home and the focus on Elektra's relationship to her mother.

If one considers the narrative purpose of the flashbacks, other than providing character background and motivation, they tie into Elektra's overarching journey, which revolves around her adopting a motherly role in relation to Abby. The very first interaction between the two characters involves Abby being caught in an attempt to steal a necklace that previously belonged to Elektra's deceased mother. Not long after this incident, Elektra corrects Abby at the same time and in the same manner as Abby's father does, when Abby curses at the dinner table, much like a parent would. Same night, Elektra and Mark take a romantic interest in one another, despite only having met on two occasions. In the conversation with Stick after reaching the Chaste camp, Elektra learns that he, her mentor character, planned the entire scenario from turning her away to the contract to assassinate Abby and Mark, including Elektra's choice to save the Millers instead of killing them. According to Stick, all this was done for the protagonist to learn that she does possess a "pure heart" and is capable of compassion, empathy, and to care about others, all traits typically associated with the role of a mother.

Elektra and Abby's interactions and the development of their relationship further emphasises how the task of protecting the father and daughter become more than a responsibility or feeling of obligation. Firstly, Abby exhibits concern for Elektra's well-being early in the film and several times to follow. Abby even refers to Elektra as her only friend (Bowman 50:12) when Mark questions this concern. Regarding Elektra, the few instances where the character does display emotion is when Abby is in danger or when these two characters share a moment together. This goes to the extent of Elektra only displaying little emotion when McCabe, her agent and arguably closest friend, chooses to sacrifice his life for the others to escape the antagonists, the Hand. The protagonist also actively avoids social interactions and situations, except those pertaining to Abby. Returning to the flashbacks, the first and second one occurs within fewer than four minutes within each other and occur right before and right after the scene where Elektra and Abby are first introduced to one another. The past of Abby is likewise characterised by the death of her own mother, even under similar conditions as Elektra's experience, bringing attention to the incomplete family and even Elektra's potential compatibility to fill the vacant space. Other instances that reference or allude to a family dynamic include Elektra's comment "I'm a soccer mom" (Bowman 47:48) in the car with Mark, Abby sitting on the back seat; Elektra watching Mark tuck Abby into bed (Bowman 28:15); Elektra telling Abby "Can you go to your bedroom for a minute, I need to talk to your dad." (Bowman 36:00); Elektra and Mark developing a romantic interest in one another early on; Elektra seeing Abby as her younger self, and the physical resemblance of the two characters; Elektra's wish for Abby to be better and live a better life than her, expressed on multiple occasions; and Elektra and Abby's final scene together, where Elektra lists mundane and domestic activities for Abby to do. Some of Abby and Elektra's parting words include a declaration of love, Abby: "You gave me my life back" Elektra: "You gave me mine." (Bowman 1:30:25), where they both position one another as a significant part of their individual lives, while Mark, Abby's father, watches from a distance.

Elektra's journey to happiness, her Ultimate Boon, and perhaps the character's true purpose as expressed by Stick, is presented as a discovery of a desire to enter a mother-role, or simply that she possesses the attributes required and associated with such a role, while presenting someone who cares about her in a similar fashion, thus confirming the legitimacy of both the

claim to the role and attributes. At the end of the story, however, Elektra must cross the Return Threshold and thereby leave the Millers behind.

An element of the film that works to somewhat negate the otherwise persistent theme of motherhood is the sexualisation of Elektra's character. Commonly, a character is presented as one or the other, referring to the idea of the *Madonna-Whore Complex*, but in this instance, Elektra appears to incorporate both to an extent. Presenting Elektra in a maternal performance while asserting the character in a masculine performing role works to display traditional gender roles. Elektra is initially introduced with focus on her capabilities as an assassin, a description that involves killing, martial arts, violence, and physically intense activities. This proficiency is exemplified in the opening sequence and subsequent training sequence, where the character is presented on-screen in a way that highlights and emphasises Elektra's physical body and strength through lighting and close-ups. Elektra's attire leaves her arms, and often her abdomen, bare during scenes where fighting or other physical activity occurs, bringing attention to her physique. At the same time, however, her costume consists of red silk pants and a red corset, and her long hair is usually hanging loose, visibly getting in her face and eyes several times during the first fight scene of the film. The protagonist, then, is subject to performative masculinity, objectification, sexualisation, and performing maternalism.

This duality of the character as feminine, but violent, sexy, but lethal, murderous, but motherly, can be interpreted as a transgression of traditional gender roles. Instead of confirming that a woman can either be one or the other, but never both, the film claims that a woman can exist outside this frame and these expectations and indeed be both maternal, feminine, and sexy, while embodying violence, physical strength, and lethality. This perspective is, however, undermined by the aforementioned elements of Elektra's presentation. Had the character been presented without appeal to the male gaze, and additions to the narrative that concern and manifest the relationship, or rather lack thereof, to family and motherhood, then the character risks threatening the male audience in terms of fear of castration. As Jeffrey A. Brown notes in *Dangerous Curves* (2011), "the eroticizing and idealizing of specific body parts (e.g., hair, legs, breasts) and/or the association of the female body with external erotic accoutrements (e.g., lingerie, whips, high heels) is an attempt to thwart male fears" (Brown 60). Arguably, the maternal performance of the protagonist further acts in this vein, as the dynamic of the

active/passive woman. While Brown utilises the idea of the housewife as an example in this regard, it is a role that can be substituted by that of a maternal figure who also takes interest in the paternal figure. Brown argues that "the consumption of fetishized women (as pinups, as models, as housewives, as sexual fantasy figures of every type) reinforces for men their association with the institutionalized phallus that is the state/patriarchy" (Brown 61), which, when applied to Elektra, signifies a fetishization of not only the physical female body, but likewise the passive role assigned through the character's care for Abby. The duality of assassin and maternal figure is not, then, in this instance an example of transgressing traditional gender roles, but rather an example of verifying the male gaze and fetish of a woman who is appealing in an exciting way, while posing no threat to the masculinity of the male audience.

Further examples of this could be the focus on Elektra's relationship to her own parents, as previously mentioned in regard to Murdock's Heroine's Journey. Moreover, is the final scene of the film, where the protagonist leaves Abby and Mark behind in her childhood home. Where most of the film has established the relationship between Abby and Elektra, this last scene exhibits the somewhat opposite, where the protagonist, who moments before declared her happiness in this regard, leaves what has been gained through the film in pursuit of a goal that is unknown to the audience. Perhaps this is Elektra choosing another path that does not involve Abby and Mark, but the final conversation between those characters would suggest otherwise. Perhaps it is demonstrating that Elektra cannot be both and therefore must choose. Or perhaps this can be read as a manner of maintaining the remaining mystery surrounding the character, of which some had partially been revealed.

Wonder Woman

Wonder Woman could pride itself with being the first superhero film in more than a decade with the title belonging to a female superhero. Although several female heroes, villains, and antiheroes had already been part of films based both on DC and Marvel characters, *Wonder Woman* was the first film whose narrative was a female hero's origin and story. Since the Marvel Cinematic Universe expanded to include characters beyond Tony Stark/Iron Man and Steve Rogers/Captain America, and DC/Warner Bros. films introduced the next incarnation of

Superman and later characters such as Harley Quinn and the Joker, several female characters have been introduced and been part of films within the genre who included an ensemble cast (*The Avengers* and *Suicide Squad*) or as part of the title-character's story (*Iron Man* and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*). The conversation around *Wonder Woman* is, to some extent, ignoring the *Elektra* and *Catwoman* films from the early 2000's, and those from the previous century, and some would refer to it as the first female superhero film overall. Arguably, popular culture currently finds itself in a renewed era of the superhero genre where changes in representation and new interpretations have been made both in comic books, video games, television series, and perhaps most notably in films. This era does not reflect the same concepts of superheroes, regardless of gender, that films such as *Elektra* and *Catwoman* were produced under. For instance, the campiness of predecessors from the previous decades or previous century is avoided in the most recent versions, such is the case of the *Dark Knight Trilogy* beginning with *Batman Begins* in 2005 compared to the series of films beginning in 1989 with *Batman*. In other cases, changes are seemingly made with the intention to establish a character in the context of current events. Wonder Woman has been considered a feminist icon for decades, earning the character a place as a United Nations Honorary Ambassador for the Empowerment of Women and Girls in 2016 ("Wonder Woman") (a title that was, however, later removed because of controversy), thus distancing the film from films and characters not viewed as positive representation or inclusion of women might indicate the distancing of those values and perspectives as well. Although, the Wonder Woman character has itself been presented in ways reminiscent of above mentioned hypersexualisation, fetishization, and pertaining to the male gaze, which places the character in a strange position. This duality, or rather adverse position, can be found in the 2017 film as well.

In a variety of ways, the themes and points in the 2017 *Wonder Woman* film take certain feminist and progressive characteristics, such as the questioning and critique of gender roles, racism, and lack of compassion towards others, especially in terms of international politics. Examples of these are found in connection to clothing, where Diana on several occasions act oblivious to the dress code and standards of 1918 London society and sees no issue in displaying her costume on the street, questioning: "What do these women wear into battle?" (Jenkins 48:00) when ushered to cover up again by Steve Trevor. Not long after, the protagonist inspects a corset in a retail store, asking: "Is this what passes for armour in your country?" (Jenkins 49:20), which

leads to a short dialogue between Diana and Etta Candy, Steve's secretary, about beauty standards and dress. It is clear from how the Amazons are presented and characterised that their view and understanding of clothing are based on practicality and purpose as opposed to that of beauty ideals and fashion as is seen in London. When present on screen, the Amazon women are dressed in armour, armour-like, or practical clothing, albeit decorated in multiple cases, for instance Queen Hippolyta's and Menalippe's armour, and to a lesser extent a character such as General Antiope's costume. The conflicting perspectives on clothing are further reflected in the scene where Diana and Etta are exploring clothing options in the previously mentioned London store. A segment of comic relief, Diana is shown questioning, experimenting with, and on one occasion ruining an outfit while Etta Candy assists and comments. During this is dialogue related to the suffrage movement and first wave feminism, which was concurrent with the First World War, specifically the women's right to vote. Although, these lines are assigned to the, arguably, only comic-relief character during the most light-hearted part of the film, thus in some way undermining the content and references of those interactions, both regarding Diana's questions and critique of fashion and body ideals, as well as Etta's commentary regarding women's rights. Furthermore, when being told about the conditions described, Diana neither comments nor questions the reason or causes behind them, despite showing evidence of being educated in several areas, including language, warfare, philosophy, and literature, and taking part in political affairs on her home island, Themyscira, herself.

In addition, is the subject of gender roles and gender norms brought to attention both before, during, and after the scene in the store. Particularly, Diana's experience of gender roles existing at all, as the character has been surrounded by women in a society isolated from the rest of the world, where no concept of gender appears to exist. The protagonist's understanding of the subject is clearer after she arrives in London, as this provides a setting in which the surrounding characters react and comment whenever she acts outside of the existing framework of their society. Supplementary to clothing ideals, Diana raises questions concerning marriage, women participating in the war, women participating in politics, and moreover criticises the men who hold political power for not living up to what she perceives as their duty, along with their capabilities once she displays competencies they lack, especially after being judged solely on her presence as a woman. Upon following Steve into a meeting with the Supreme War Council, those present who notice her demand that she is shown out. Later, with the same characters from

the meeting, Diana displays both disbelief and disgust with the council members' willingness to "knowingly sacrifice all those lives, as if they mean less than yours" (Jenkins 59:20) to "achieve peace at any cost" (Jenkins 55:25), that is, their goals regarding an armistice with Germany. When recruiting Sameer and Charlie, neither of them expect Diana to accompany them to the front in Belgium and are both reluctant and surprised once learning that she is, Charlie going as far as stating "Listen, sweetheart, I'm not going to get myself killed helping a wee lassie out of a ditch" (Jenkins 1:03:40). Once reaching the trenches at the front, several soldiers can be heard asking aloud, who brought a woman there. Although present, these examples are never direct in the sense that Diana interacts with or reacts to them, that is, Diana does not herself ask why this is, even though she is shown to be inherently curious about things she does not understand or know of.

Steve Trevor is the character who functions as a reminder of the human world's concepts and ideas regarding gender, as he continuously attempts to assert himself in ways of masculinity, confidence, and leadership. The character describes himself as "above average" (Jenkins 30:17), both in terms of character and appearance on several occasions, once unprompted (Jenkins 42:15), and despite showing respect towards Diana he further continues to tell her what to do and what not to do. Diana is very much a fish out of water, initially, but nonetheless exhibits capability, which to some extent could explain Steve's persistent supervision. Simultaneously, however, Diana is usually correct in her assumptions and observations, and usually refuses to listen to Steve's directions, when she is convinced of or determined on something different. In other cases, the same form of action more closely resembles the rebelliousness or disobedience of a child, curious and or naive, thus placing Steve in a role of guide, mentor, or other form of management rather than friend or ally. While Diana is focused on the war and stopping the Ancient Greek god of war Ares, occasionally being distracted by new and curious things, Steve remains at her side, ushering her on or away from situations she is approaching. On Themyscira, Steve orders Diana to remain hidden from the invading German troops, and she listens despite having just met him (Jenkins 20:42). In London, he pulls her away from an approaching car, from a group of men catcalling her, from an infant child, and guides her through the streets all the while answering her many questions. However, Diana is depicted as the character who is usually correct in situations of greater magnitude, most notably, when she insists on killing the German General Ludendorff, whom she believes is Ares in hiding and thus responsible for the

war. Steve prevents Diana from accompanying him to Ludendorff's location and goes by himself, then after Diana makes her own way there, Steve stops her at the last moment from killing the General, which leads to a nearby town being exposed to lethal gas at his command. This element of the two characters' relationship is an example of a juxtaposition present in the film, which will be further elaborated upon later. For now, this will serve as an example of Steve's attempts to not only manage their team as their leader, a position Diana herself appears to overtake at certain points, but to manage Diana in terms of his established concept of gender norms and masculinity. Even after having witnessed the Amazons fighting the German invaders on Themyscira, Steve insists upon protecting Diana whenever a dangerous situation arises. Only after displaying her abilities in combat multiple times (Jenkins 20:50, 53:16, 1:03:47, 1:14:17) does he recognise her capability. Outside of instances where combat is involved, Steve is eager to present himself as "above average" in situations where matters of character come into conversation. For instance, upon discussing sleeping arrangements with Diana, he replies with a chuckle that he *does* sleep with women (Jenkins 40:55-41:02) and does not hesitate to repeat that he is not just an average example of a man. In another scene, Steve is reluctant of Diana telling the rest of the team that she saved him. These instances are before the No Man's Land scene and subsequent sequence leading into the village (Jenkins 1:14:17-12:21:15), where Diana is shown as Wonder Woman for the first time during the film, and the first time both the team and the audience see the protagonist use her full abilities and skills. Before No Man's Land, there is still room and reason for the team to not believe Diana is anything but an ordinary, although strange, woman.

The character of Steve Trevor does not only fill the role of a man of the 1910s, but also acts as a character with whom the male members of the audience might identify themselves with in more than a single way. Firstly, is the subject of Steve's masculinity, and with it the threat of castration Diana comes to represent as she displays attributes that typically are associated with men, such as physical strength, training in combat, leadership, and a willingness if not eagerness to engage in war. Although Diana's motivation to get to the war is to stop the suffering of the people caught in it, she does not shy away from the prospects of battle and death. Additionally, is the competition of the leadership, between Diana and Steve alone, and when they engage with the team, later dubbed the Wonder Men. It is evident from the portrayal of the character, that Diana is viewing Steve as an ally who will assist her in getting to Ares, and to do so she must

follow his directions to an extent. At the same time, it is not implied that she views Steve as anything but a guide and ally of sorts, as characterised through her acting independently despite his directions, and more often directly opposing his directions. Leadership roles are commonly associated with men and taking the setting of the time period into consideration, it is not only likely but evident that Steve is in a position he is not used to being in, where a woman not only refuses his commands, but acts as a leader alongside him when she is not adopting the role of leader herself. The frankness and perspectives of Diana's character poses an additional threat as they not only oppose societal norms, but the narrative Steve believes and wants others to believe about himself as well.

Including Steve Trevor as a well-meaning, heroic, protective character, who eventually becomes the love interest, however briefly, of the title character, provides a point of reference and/or identification in a film that otherwise presents itself as a film about a female protagonist, the first of this kind, who encompasses female and feminist traits, beliefs, and values. The fact that Diana falls in love with Steve, who is the first man she has ever met, and within a short period of time serves, arguably, as an ideal fantasy. The same fantasy is implied by other members of the Wonder Men once they are told of Themyscira and what Steve had seen and experienced while there. Sameer comments, once hearing of Diana's home for the first time, "There is a whole island of women like her? And not a single man among them? How do we get there?" (Jenkins 1:30:25). Themyscira itself is soon enough given the name "Paradise Island" by Steve (Jenkins 1:25:00), which is then adopted by others. While the word paradise could imply many things, it is the fact that it is an island "full of women like her, and not a man around" that is brought up, not its nature, culture, or climate. Even presenting Diana as being correct in her assumptions and actions is in some way contributing to a form of male gaze, as she is shown leading up through those actions, and sometimes during them, acting more as a child than an adult, playing into the "woman-as-little-girl trope" (Al-Mahadin 247), which "can be part of androcentric fantasies" (Al-Mahadin 247).

Regarding the costume of Wonder Woman, arguments can be made of it pertaining to the male gaze, as this version incorporates features that emphasise the figure of Wonder Woman in similar fashion as the case of Elektra's costume. The chest piece is tight fitting with a so called 'boob-plate', and a low cut and partially exposed back, and features no means of keeping it in

place such as straps. The skirt is short, and the boot-like sandals feature a wedge heel, an element found in other female superhero costumes. Extensive analysis of the costume in regard to the *Wonder Woman* 2017 film appears irrelevant in and of itself, as this interpretation of the costume was introduced and established with the Wonder Woman character's first appearance in the 2016 film *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* which employed a different costume designer, Michael Wilkinson. It is, however, relevant in regard to the male gaze, or rather lack thereof, in *Wonder Woman* 2017, and furthermore in the discussion of female empowerment through a costume which appears, in some ways, to fall into the same category as sexualised examples. During the run of the film, despite settings and narrative providing apt opportunities, there are no apparent examples of the male gaze. The closest resemblance is found in the beginning of the No Man's Land scene, where the camera pans over and focuses on parts of Diana's equipment and attire, and another when the camera pans from the ground and up with Diana in focus. In the instance of No Man's Land, the close ups and pans do not capture Diana as the examples from *Elektra* and *Catwoman* might, but rather takes the time to show elements of the Wonder Woman costume; the shield, the tiara, the lasso, the bracers, pieces the audience would recognise as iconic pieces of Wonder Woman's character, before it is revealed in full for the first time. Once Diana climbs the ladder out of the trench, she becomes Wonder Woman, and the cinematography captures that through those close ups. This development and progression of character is confirmed once the emotionally loaded scene No Man's Land continues past the trenches, where a faster paced action sequence begins, and the Wonder Woman musical theme plays for the first time in the film. Wonder Woman's theme was first introduced in *Batman v Superman* and is then found throughout the 2017 film, hinting at what is to come. How the bodies of the characters, especially the female characters, exist in this film subtly subverts the classic feminine beauty in general. Diana and several others of the Amazons *look* athletic and physically strong, some have nasty scars, some are young, while others look older, all in ways that do not appear to attempt at being attractive in ways of popular beauty standards, but rather in a way that realistically and authentically reflect diverse female characters. Schubart describes Gal Gadot as "a 'tough' yet 'attainable' role model" ("Bulk, breast, and beauty" 169), that she neither reflects a "model with a body attained through 'abstinence', nor by an athlete who might have smashed the glass ceiling and strayed into a trauma zone of masculinity" ("Bulk, breast, and beauty" 169). Gadot's portrayal of Wonder Woman falls into an "emphasized femininity" ("Bulk, breast, and beauty"

169). Elektra and Catwoman are both presented closer to the model-like physique, even during instances where they are shown to engage in physical activity. In the case of *Captain Marvel*, a similar approach to that of *Wonder Woman* seems to be the case.

On one hand exists the argument that Wonder Woman's costume is an expression of female and women empowerment in terms of taking full ownership of one's own sexuality and body, instead of being sexualised and gazed upon by others. On the other hand, stands the argument that costumes such as this version of Wonder Woman's, simply appeal to the male gaze and sexualization of women and female characters. Here, the cinematography and direction suggest the intention of the former, but a third argument could be made that, when a costume is considered sexualised or has a certain quality or a resemblance to costumes that are, then it remains difficult or impossible to exclude the latter argument. If both sides of the argument are considered at once, an appeal to the female audience could exist in the former, while a visual appeal to the male audience could exist in the latter. As there is an evident lack of the visual male gaze, the film could utilise other elements to appeal to and/or attract a larger audience to a film and protagonist who have been promoted as feminist and women empowering. Already mentioned is Steve Trevor, where another element is the setting. Firstly, the wartime setting, specifically World War One, allows the film and narrative to adopt the rough, dark, gloomy, and serious aesthetic associated with such. Setting the film during the last part of World War One provides opportunities to include such aspects, thus catching and withholding the male audience's interests. World War One was contemporarily thought of as the worst conflict in human history, as new inventions of warfare such as tanks, aeroplanes, automatic weapons, and mustard gas, causing greater losses and more horrible destruction and injuries than any other war at the time. Chemical warfare plays a central role in the film, where the development of a new type of lethal gas is believed by Diana to be controlled by Ares, and whose intended release forces the team to advance without stagnation to the plot. The conviction that the "war to end all wars" (Jenkins 27:20) is caused by Ares, along with the setting depicting the horrors and consequences of war on soldiers and civilians alike, is also ideal concerning the questioning of the evil of humanity, which serves as the integral notion Diana has of the world; that humans are inherently good, and only evil because Ares corrupts them.

On another note, does the early 20th century setting highlight ideals in, criticism of, and messages concerning societal norms. Earlier mentioned has body and fashion ideals alongside gender roles and gender norms, whereto the progressive principles, opinions, and ideology of the protagonists can be added. By placing a character in a setting that does not coincide with their view of the world, any contrasts might appear starker to the audience, thus reinforcing the traits of both the character and world. Another side to this is the fact that what progressive positions presented would not have to be *as* progressive or radical as had the setting been in a period closer to present day. For instance, while not everyone considers themselves a feminist it is perhaps easier to agree that aspects of past dress code were restrictive, or that women should be allowed to vote. As exemplified through Etta Candy, such ideals can moreover be portrayed in comedic ways or as lighter offhand comments through dialogue. A juxtaposition appears to be present, where the film wishes to be viewed as progressive, as something that has been long awaited by women in particular, and which breaks the mould, not only for superhero films but female heroes/heroines in general. The promotional material includes the use of the song *Warriors* by the band Imagine Dragons in one of the trailers, and a promo featuring former Wonder Woman actress, Lynda Carter, alongside CW's Supergirl, who is the protagonist of a show targeted at women and who tackles issues of social and political sort through its narrative. The *Supergirl* promo further featured the song *These Boots Were Made For Walking* which is commonly recognised and used as a feminist piece. “Women only” screenings of the film also took place, which sold out in one place in less than an hour, and once criticised by mainly male viewers for gender discrimination, the response largely consisted of the argument that it was about creating a safe space for women to enjoy the film, more screenings of the same kind were then planned (Bahadur; “Women-only Wonder Woman showings sell out despite outcry”; Wittmer; Chow). All examples signalling the position of the film and its creators. However, the juxtaposition remains. Is Steve Trevor a critique of stereotypes and male or masculine behaviour regarding the subjects previously discussed? Or is the character an appeal to the male members of the audience? Does the film have a so-called *agenda* in terms of feminism and female empowerment, or does it remain within the framework of objectification and degrading tropes? Or is the juxtaposition an intentional element which allows the avoidance of certain criticisms, such as that seen in the case of the *Captain Marvel* film?

Diana's Hero's Journey suggests a journey of discovery and finding the truth of one's character. Diana's convictions and ideals, all with roots in empathy, protection, and justice, many considered and emphasised as feminine traits, are depicted as strengths rather than weaknesses, and the story of this hero emphasise the values connected hereto. Call to Adventure is not Steve crashing on the island, but the knowledge he brings of people suffering. Diana's Road of Trials is littered with people questioning her values and capabilities as a woman. Her Supernatural Aid, whip, sword, powers, training, and armour, all bear references to where she comes from, the Amazons, fierce warrior women tasked with the protection of humankind. But her Abyss begins with Steve's death, and ends with his words "I love you" (Jenkins 2:04:10). Steve Trevor, a man Diana has known only for a short period of time, and who has shown doubt towards her for most of that, becomes the crucial component of Diana's journey. The story of the first female superhero in modern cinema revolves, in part, around a man she has only just gotten to know.

Captain Marvel

After the box office success of DC's *Wonder Woman*, movie-goers and comic book enthusiasts could look forward to another superhero film with a titular female lead based on a Marvel comic book character.

Captain Marvel's narrative revolves around self-discovery, autonomy, and control over her own body and mind, and the way in which she is presented as a character fits the journey she is on in the film. Her narrative conforms both to the Hero's Journey and the Heroine's Journey. *Captain Marvel* does not focus on Carol discovering her powers, but rather it focuses on her discovering her identity, and deciding what kind of a hero she wants to be. In this way, this film resembles *Wonder Woman*, where Diana is already powered, but instead decides who and what she will fight for in the world of man. Carols' story is not one of metaphorical self-discovery. It is a literal self-discovery in the form of her piecing parts of her memory back together. Her quest is not one of fame and fortune, but instead it is one of the searches for a new, or in her case an old, life, rediscovery, and becoming her true self, and living by her own rules.

Carols' Hero's Journey begins in her ordinary world, which is her life on Hala, serving in the Kree military as a member of Starforce. Here, she is being taught by her mentor Yon-Rogg

and the Supreme Intelligence that she must control her powers, learning to make decisions with her head rather than her heart. When Starforce is sent on a mission to Torfa, Carol believes herself to be Vers and fully accepts the Kree dogma that the Skrull are a threat to the Kree empire. Her Call to Adventure, which she refuses, arrives when she is captured by the Skrulls, and by the time the Skrull spaceship reaches Earth, Carol Crosses the Threshold, leading her to begin her Road of Trials. According to Campbell, "the hero is helped by the supernatural helper (Campbell 89), and though Carol does get help in her trials, especially from Nick Fury, she is mainly alone. She is helped by Nick Fury in locating Project Pegasus, the project that she was a test pilot for. He also uses his security clearance because of his position in S.H.I.E.L.D to grant her access into the NASA United States Air Force facility. Though, this is where his aid stops. The rest of the time, she manages to overcome the obstacles on her own, such as finding Pancho's Bar using a computer. While escaping the United States Air Force facility, instead of leaving the location alone, something she would have been able to do easily considering her powers and physical strength, she instead goes back to help Fury escape as well after hearing that he is to be taken in dead or alive, this despite him having betrayed her trust. This is interestingly also a subversion of the damsel in distress trope, though instead of a female character being in distress, it is a male character that needs help from a situation that might result in his death. She shows herself to be capable, even without the use of her superpowers, using her experience as a test pilot to fly herself and Fury out to safety.

Where Carol's journey in the Hero's Journey begins in her known world Hala, leading her to become captured by the Skrulls, to lastly end up on Earth, her journey in the Heroine's Journey is different. In the Heroine's Journey, the heroine's progression centres on reconciling the feminine and the masculine forces in her life, forces that, at first, are split and in conflict. Carol's masculine force is represented through her Kree side, most especially through Yon-Rogg and the Supreme Intelligence and the values they seek to instil in her. Her connection to Earth, and her friendship with Maria Rambeau and mentorship by Doctor Wendy Lawson represents her feminine side. Over the course of the film, Carol succeeds in integrating these two dual aspects of her identity into a unity, becoming Carol Danvers and Captain Marvel, instead of only being known as either Vers or Carol Danvers. The Heroine's Journey emphasises the dual natures of masculinity and femininity, and in Carol's journey, we can prescribe her connection to Earth, Lawson, and the Rambeaus as her feminine force and her connection to Hala, the Kree,

Yon-Rogg, and the Supreme Intelligence as the masculine force. Thus, when Carol loses herself in the crash, a Separation from the feminine occurs. Identification with the Feminine and Gathering of Allies takes place when she is brought to Hala and becomes Vers, believing that she is Kree. Kree values and rules are instilled in her by Yon-Rogg, who wishes her to be the best version of herself (Boden and Fleck 04:37), a goal that can only be reached if she abides by rules and values decided and set by him and the Supreme Intelligence.

The Road of Trials of the Heroine's Journey resembles that of the Hero's Journey, but unlike Campbell's model, the trials of the Heroine's Journey are both external and internal. The external obstacles have already been mentioned above, leaving the internal obstacles to be considered. This is where Carol must face and overcome her own self-doubt, fears, and anxieties. These will relate to the *Myth of Dependency*, need, the *Myth of Female Inferiority,* and the *Myth of Romantic Love*. The *Myth of Romantic Love*, the idea that finding the right person will solve the heroine's problems, is removed from Carol's journey, for she is not a passive character waiting for, or wishing for others to solve her problems. The *Myth of Female Inferiority* is connected to the *Myth of Dependency*, for it is the dependency she has to Yon-Rogg and the Supreme Intelligence that places her in a position of inferiority. She is made to believe that the powers she possesses have been given to her, and that they can be taken from her again (Boden and Fleck 06:34), creating a dependency that is sourced in threats of powerlessness. Female inferiority can be understood in a literal sense, considering the many times she has been described as being 'not enough' or alienated because of her gender, but female inferiority can also be understood in the sense that Carol has rejected the feminine and instead identifies with the masculine. During her life, the heroine is shaped to fit a certain role determined by the expectations of her parents, friends, co-workers, coaches, etc., and in order to move beyond such expectation, she must remove herself from these people, leave her home, and overcome the obstacles in her way to the Illusory Boon of Success, which parallels the stage of Ultimate Boon in the Hero's Journey. Having a greater understanding of her past gives her a sense of self and a sense of autonomy and free will, having the opportunity to choose her own path.

In order to become her true self and reach her goal of self-discovery and autonomy, Carol must Heal the Split Between Feminine and Masculine. She must combine the masculine and feminine forces that are within her, making it possible for her to see through binaries and interact

with a world larger than her and her personal life and her geographical and cultural surroundings. She has been taught by the Kree to never let her emotions rule, initially taking up traditionally male characteristics where the character is emotionally distant. But only after accepting emotions as a part of her character, does Carol's powers truly show themselves. Only by following her instincts, does she find the truth about herself, but she does not separate from the masculine either. She keeps her Kree uniform, alas with different colours. She does not shy away from space, paralleling the step Refusal of the Return in the Hero's Journey, and she still remains connected to Earth and the people she has befriended. There is no separation between her body and mind, nor between Earth and Space. She is both and everything at the same time.

The film has been marketed as a feminist film, focusing on the female experience, female empowerment, and overcoming suppression ("Brie Larson On 'Captain Marvel' Success & Female Empowerment."; "Brie Larson Interview - Is "Captain Marvel" a Feminist Movie?"; "Captain Marvel: Brie Larson Interview."). The feminist message the film bears is also evident in certain scenes. Such a scene is when Carol repeatedly encounters sexism from a fellow male serviceman in the Air Force, who together with other members of the Air Force, undermine her strength and will, or another scene where he asks her if she knows why it is called a 'cockpit', implying that she, a woman, does not belong in the Air Force. Another scene is when we see her being berated by her father for driving a go-kart too fast, veering off the racetrack, and being there in the first place (Boden and Fleck 15:15-15:20). The female empowering message is evident in the overall journey of the character, whose mission is discovering her *self*, deciding her own path in life, distancing herself from the suppressing authority and control she has been exposed to. Moreover, the character of Carol/Captain Marvel does not fit into gender norms, and her journey conforming to both the Hero's Journey and the Heroine's Journey, and the integration of the masculine and feminine aspects of her life in the Heroine's Journey, establishes this. While on Hala, she is taught to be emotionless and stoic, whereas on Earth, she takes up her lost personality traits, showing more empathy and being more humoristic and gaining the freedom to feel and express emotions. Though, when in battle, she still makes use of her military training from Hala. This way, the film presents the character as someone who acts beyond binaries she has been exposed to.

The character not fitting traditional gender norms is also presented through her experience as a soldier on Hala and as a test pilot in the Air Force. Considering Carol being a part of the military on Hala and on Earth before she gained her superpowers, and considering the film taking place at a time when there is war between the Kree and the Skrulls, the film can be said to incorporate elements from the war film genre, though these are not necessarily central to the plot itself. According to Rikke Schubart, when the protagonist of such a film is male, no explanation is needed as to why he joins the army, and war is perceived almost as a natural part of the male experience and masculinity (Schubart *Super Bitches* 251). Same is not the case for female protagonists in war films, where the audience needs a clear explanation and reason as to why the woman chose to join a war. According to Schubart, the women who join the army do not actually enjoy war. Here she uses the films *Courage Under Fire* (1996) and *G.I. Jane* (1997) as examples, where the female soldiers are shown to either not enjoy war as is the case with Karen in *Courage Under Fire* or not choose the army out of her own volition as is the case with Jordan O'Neil in *G.I. Jane.* Carol, like O'Neil, did not choose to become a part of Starforce. Her manipulation by Yon-Rogg and the Supreme Intelligence has made her believe that Starforce is where she belongs, and it is who she should fight with. We are not told why she joined the United States Air Force but considering her determined and rebellious character as a child, who did not like being told what her limits were, it is not unimaginable that she chose to join the Air Force of her own volition. She has both the female experience where the choice was taken from her, and the male experience in the form of no explanation given as to why she joined the Air Force.

Where war films with a male protagonist changes the character, war films with a female protagonist lets the female soldier step into a character she already had all along. For example, Karen from *Courage Under Fire* has been taught to handle pain, not because of her training as a soldier, but because of her personal experience as a mother prior to joining the army. Parallel to this, it is seen how Carol does not change as a person when in the Kree army. Instead, she re-learns about her identity and the strength of the powers she is in possession of. She learns to step into character and identity, aspects of her that have been hidden from her for years. This experience resembles that of the female soldiers of other war films and the descriptions from Schubart. Her time in the army on Earth, instead, changed her character notably. Here, she became Captain Marvel, for without the superpowers she acquired in the plane crash, she would

not become a superhero later in her journey. This experience resembles that of the male soldiers, who instead undergo a transformation that "erases their personality…" (Schubart *Super Bitches* 253). Her male experience that transforms her from an ordinary into a superpowered person also erases her memories of her life as Carol Danvers, thus her personality can be said to be literally erased as a result of said experience.

Cutting off or shaving off their hair is another female experience in war films. This act, most often done voluntarily "liberates them from the restrictions of female biology" (Schubart *Super Bitches* 254). In other words, they are getting rid of a part of their female identity in order to be a part of a world that is traditionally considered masculine. It has also been pointed out that the act of women taking up masculine traits signifies moving up the social hierarchy (Schubart *Super Bitches* 255), "As the female soldier moves up the body scale, she gains masculine ground but, in the process, loses feminine status" (Schubart *Super Bitches* 261). Carol does not cut off her hair, neither on Earth, nor as a Kree soldier. In this way she diverges from the likes of Joan of Arc or Mulan. One reason for not cutting off or shaving her hair could be because Carol's identity as a woman is a central key point in the film and her character. Her gender identification is considered a hindrance by her male peers, and thus it is important to keep many aspects of femininity in her character in order to show that a woman does not need to reject her femininity in order to succeed in a setting traditionally privileged for men.

Besides her journey, Carol's physical representation conveys the feminist traits of the film by avoiding tropes and elements previously discussed in the case of *Catwoman* and *Elektra*, thus achieving what *Catwoman* claimed to achieve through its protagonist in terms of detachment from patriarchal structures regarding ownership of one's body. After arriving on Earth, the clothes Danvers choose to wear fall into the trends of the temporal setting of the film, the 1990's, and exemplifies a typical and rather mundane outfit considering the genre of the film. Her clothes consist of a pair of fairly loose mum-jeans, a cap, a Nine Inch Nails t-shirt, Dr. Martens combat boots, a flannel tied around her hips, and an ill-fitting leather jacket that is too large. In the scene where Carol steals the clothes, the audience is shown that she stole the clothes from one out of four mannequins. The three mannequins that remain clothed are wearing outfits that more closely subscribe to traditionally feminine trends, such as a short skirt, a dress with a deep V-neck, and a flowery shirt. None of the remaining items would correspond to the

established traits of the character of Carol Danvers, thus, if she had chosen any other items, it could appear as though the character is basing her choice on gender specific norms or expectations, or that an appeal to a specific gaze is present in the scene. Instead, she chose clothing that would allow her to move when fighting, and also clothes that are not unnecessarily revealing. The flannel tied around her hips almost functions as a shield for the upper thighs and posterior, hiding a part of the female body considered sexual from the camera. In an extended scene, it is revealed that she acquired the leather jacket from the same man whose motorcycle she also took. In contrast to Catwoman who also uses a motorcycle as a means of transportation, Carol does not appeal to the male gaze when she sits upon the motorcycle, first and foremost because of her clothes, which are fairly loose and also cover most of her body. This prevents her body from being sexualised and objectified by the audience while she is straddling a phallic symbol. If we consider the motorcycle an extension of the penis and in connection hereto, the man's power, then psychoanalytically speaking, what Carol is doing by stealing the motorcycle from him is castrating him and rendering him powerless. She, as a woman on screen, is representing the subconscious fear of male castration, evoking unpleasant feelings in men, but instead of being fetishized as a means of alleviating said fear, she instead removes his power, playing into his deeper fears of castration.

On Hala, Carol is part of Starforce, a branch of the Hala military, consisting of the best and most powerful Kree warriors. Considering Carol is part of an elite military force, her Kree uniform depicts this through not only the colours and the Hala Star placed on her chest, but also its capabilities and practicalities. Her uniform has been militarised accordingly. The uniform has a colour shifting mode and a preset stealth-mode, an integrated communications system, a specimen analyser, and a Kree threat detector. The uniform covers her from head to toe - almost - and it is tight and form-fitting, but the thickness of the material prevents it from becoming skin tight and sleek the same way Black Widow's suit in *Iron Man 2* (2010) and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Catwoman's costume in *Catwoman* or *Batman: The Dark Knight Rises*, or Storm's costume in the *X-Men* films of the early 2000's are sleek and form-fitting. What is also interesting to mention regarding her Kree uniform, is the fact that it includes a helmet from which her hair sticks out like a mohawk. This is a practical design considering such a helmet would keep her hair out of her face during fighting sequences, though it seems as if Captain Marvel is one of the few female superheroes whose hair is rarely shown loose. Black Widow,

Gamora, Scarlet Witch, Wonder Woman, Elektra, Mantis, and Storm are few examples of female superheroes, whose long hair are not tied up during fighting sequences. Female heroes with long and flowing hair have been a constant in comic books since the beginning, and long hair that is never tied up has become a stereotype for female characters within the superhero genre. Long hair on women has often been associated with beauty and considered a sign of good health (Bereczkei and Mesko), and over time, long and flowy hair has become a signifier of femininity, also in film, as evident by the numerous female heroes who have long hair that never seem to be tied up. Another interesting point regarding the capability of her uniform is the lack of heels in her footwear. Carol not wearing high heels as part of her uniform is not only practical in the setting of the filmic world, but it also removes the association between sexiness and high heels, which is mentioned in Guéguen and Stefan's study (418) . In relation to the gaze, it becomes difficult for men, both the characters and the spectators, to perceive her body in a sexual manner, or basing her level of attractiveness on her footwear and clothing. Removing high heels from 's uniform removes a change in gait (Guéguen and Stefan 419), preventing the camera from focusing on her legs, pelvis, and hips.

The Superheroine Subgenre

Despite some of them being separated by more than a decade, at least three of the four films chosen share some common characteristics of the superhero and superheroine genres. According to Peter Coogan, the superheroine subgenre was introduced with Wonder Woman's character in the first issues of the comic, which changed the presence of the Hero's Journey in the tales of superheroines. In terms of theme, the "superheroine subgenre is not about power and responsibility, it is about love" (Coogan 570-571), and while romantic love is perhaps the most common, several kinds of love would arguably be meaningful to consider. Diana's journey in Wonder Woman is to some capacity decided by the character's sense of duty, as expressed in her conversation with Queen Hippolyta (28:56), but to a larger extent by compassion and love. This is expressed in the climax of the film during the battle between Diana and Ares, after the conclusion of Diana's arc, where she states: "It's not about deserve. It's about what you believe. And I believe in love" (2:05:08). On several occasions, love towards other people in the form of

compassion is shown through Diana's reactions to the horrors of warfare affecting them. The relationship with Steve Trevor, which evolves to become romantic, contributes to Diana's new perspective of the world and her ability to defeat Ares. In addition, the story of the Amazons and their creation is based on the purpose of bringing peace and love to humankind (07:10). The Amazons are extremely skilled and powerful warriors, and do hold power in that regard, but it is power that they do not use unless someone threatens them or their home. Themes of power are not absent from the film, they are, however, presented as an opposing force to love. Power is also significant to the story in terms of Diana discovering that she is a goddess, but the significant moments of this are reserved for the reveal at the climax of the film. In this regard, Ares becomes a symbol of power corrupting, whereas Diana becomes a symbol of the power of love, so to speak.

Carol Danvers experiences a different kind of love, one based in friendship, and does not act from the sense of duty but rather from personal reasons. Aspects of power are tied not to Carol's superpowers, but to whom holds the power over her character. Evidently, the reason to control Carol is tied to her superpowers, but the narrative remains focused on the relationships in Carol's life. Most prominent here are the relationships between Carol and Yon-Rogg who controls her through manipulation, and her relationship to Maria and Monica Rambeau, which offers love and the freedom to take control of her own. Jennifer K. Stuller writes about female superheroism, that it tends to concentrate on themes of "collaboration, love, and mentorship. It's the idea of controlling yourself, controlling others. It is a control, but it's a sense of control bound by love and wisdom" (*What Is a Female Superhero?* 20). Yon-Rogg insists that Carol control her emotions, unknowingly to her to keep her from realising that her emotions are tied to her powers and thus keeping her from taking full control, both of her life and powers.

Elektra incorporates love in regard to Elektra's maternal role with Abby as well as the romantic relationship with Mark. Much of this protagonist's journey surrounds the concept of a "pure heart" and the very capability of caring about others. An additional point is likewise present in the form of "mentorship" between Abby and Elektra, where Elektra acts as Abby's mentor in various capacities. Arguably, Abby indirectly becomes Elektra's mentor in love and family relations. These themes are, in some way, subverted when Elektra decides to leave. Quite differently is the theme of love in *Catwoman*, as this is ultimately presented as one of the things

keeping Patience from living freely. The relationship between Tom Lone and Patience is presented as a conflict of character and interests, despite both characters attempting to maintain it, as Patience states in her letter and epilogue of the film. Both Catwoman and Elektra actively and voluntarily choose to abandon their love interests, which subverts the "standard romance stories" in which "the heroine helps reproduce society, but she does so by joining with the male" (Coogan 571).

As noted by Stuller in *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology* (2010) the subject of love is stressed again and again with women *Ink-stained Amazons* 87). Catwoman subverts the trope of the innate love present with superheroines, but Catwoman herself can likewise be viewed as an antiheroine in several regards, so in this particular case there is perhaps a reason why this character in specific is the one who exists outside the norm the others to some extent follow. The *Catwoman* film does not adopt the same features of the superheroine subgenre as the other three of our analysis. Already touched upon is the subject of love. bell hooks writes that the values a love ethic offers, will have one "make choices based on a belief that honesty, openness, and personal integrity need to be expressed in public and private decisions" (bell hooks 88). In *Wonder Woman*, Diana lives by a love ethic expressed in the numerous instances of speaking out against issues of injustice and harm towards other people. When the character expresses anger in presence of the Supreme War Council, for instance, when she learns of their willingness to sacrifice innocent lives to reach their goal, and feelings of betrayal when she learns Steve Trevor has been lying, not even to her, both examples of personal integrity and honesty being relinquished in their pursuit. Another aspect fulfilled by the *Wonder Woman* film is collaboration, although in this case the collaboration can be read as an expression of gender parity, expressed by Diana herself when Steve attempts to credit her from saving the village of Veld, Steve: "You did this" Diana: "We did" (1:24:48). Here, the "feminist triumph is upheld by mixed-gender partnership" (Cummings 33), the feminist triumph, so to speak, existing as the perplexity expressed by Diana in regard to "mankind's sexism, a quality the film uses to articulate its feminist opinions" (Cummings 30). However, the nature of the collaboration found in this film "also work to subvert singular acts of feminist achievement" (Cummings 33). Gender parity assumes a notion of relative gender equality in terms of representation, as the European Agency of Gender Equality defines on their website ("gender parity"). Presuming a state of equality between genders is a characteristic of postfeminism and

disregards the lack of diversity and representation addressed by the intersectional values of fourth wave feminism. In and of itself, postfeminism disregards the influence of gender, and is “distinctly anti-feminist for its apolitical approach” (Cummings 34). In regard to the discourse and celebration surrounding *Wonder Woman* being the first superhero film with a female lead in this new era of the genre contradicts, then, how the presentation of a woman in early 20th century Europe is portrayed. Diana might be both goddess and Amazon, but to the knowledge of the men around her she is but a strange, albeit abnormally physically strong, woman. She must prove her worth to those same men more than once to fully earn their respect and a place in their group.

Elektra does not collaborate as Diana does, instead she rather resents the presence of Mark and Abby, and rejects social interaction for the majority of the film. In place of collaboration is the theme of redemption, specifically the redemption of Elektra with the purpose of allowing her the maternal role she achieves at the end of the film. The *Madonna/whore* dynamic dictates that a character cannot be both, therefore Elektra must be redeemed of her past actions and through that deemed worthy of the place as the contrast. At the same time, the subplot of exploring the character’s childhood trauma evolves into a revenge plot once Elektra learns that the same villain who is chasing Abby, was the villain who killed her own mother when she was a child herself. Maura Grady writes in her analysis of the film *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* about how the protagonist of that film, the Bride, is allowed to “play at the role of a male hero for the bulk of the movie” (Jones et. al. 66), a point that coincides with Elektra’s transition from aloof and cold demeanour, but that the Bride is ultimately denied “the agency that a male hero would have because her biology determines her fate more than her actions” (Jones et. al. 66). Grady details the manner in which the Bride’s female body is utilised as a frequent reminder of the character’s gender, but also notes the masculinity that is present. While the two characters’ stories bear some resemblance, their journeys are quite different from one another. Still, it is evident in *Elektra* how the protagonist’s body is emphasised as a weapon, while clearly maintaining the male gaze that is to exaggerate her physical presence in an appealing way. In a similar vein is Elektra presented closer to an archetypical hero with characteristics alike those of Batman or the antihero the Punisher, often displayed as distant, focused on their target or objective, and highly skilled in combat and death. That is, until Abby Miller is introduced and Elektra’s journey towards redemption and a maternal role is begun. While there is no indication

that motherhood is negative or looked down upon, it is the factor that diverts Elektra from the masculine space she has existed in. Since masculinity and things considered or associated with masculinity are idealised or sought after in patriarchal societies, this change, in the case of this film, indicates a shift towards something that is not held in as high a regard. Coinciding with the notion that “female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing” (Halberstam 1), Elektra possess the physical strength and skills of an expert martial artist and assassin, and has the freedom to act from that as she will, but ultimately she is only capable of living a fulfilling life once she puts her own mother’s murder behind her through protecting a younger version of herself, and then taking the place of her own mother in caring and protecting Abby.

Redemption does play a role in *Captain Marvel*, but not nearly to the same significance as *Elektra*. The redemption Carol must achieve is redemption in her own eyes, and still, it is not expressed in the film that she experiences guilt for the things she has done under the influence of the Kree. Alternately, Carol acts first out of duty, then out of compassion and love, and lastly from responsibility and justice. Peter Coogan explains the very core of the superhero genre is found in power and responsibility (Coogan 567), and which correlates with the monomyth of Campbell’s Hero’s Journey which, according to Coogan, has been a method of teaching young boys about their power and how to use it “in service of their community, in defence of their society” (Coogan 569). As such, the origin story of Captain Marvel in the MCU more closely resembles that of a classic superhero origin.

Discussion

Objectification, Sexualisation, and ‘What-aboutism’

When it comes to the topic of objectification and sexualisation, one argument that has been made before is that male superheroes get equally as objectified as female superheroes and characters (Harris), using shirtless male superheroes as examples of such objectification. Several points and counter arguments can be made regarding such arguments. One counter argument concerns the variety of male characters in popular media, whether it be film, television series,

video games, or literary works, where more types of male characters than female characters exist, and the male characters come in greater diversity. The male characters do not always have to be conventionally attractive and are not always described based on their physical appearance, thus removing significance in this area and making it possible to put significance on other elements of the character. Consider for example a male superhero such as the Hulk. Inspired by Frankenstein's monster, this hero can with confidence be described as a monster, whose whole costume is made up of ripped pants, whereas his female counterpart, She-Hulk is more conventionally beautiful, still retaining her curvaceous physique with a tight bikini-esque bodysuit as her costume. Other male superheroes, who contradict conventional beauty ideals are The Thing, the Swamp Thing, and Hellboy. Female superheroes that can be considered ugly or unattractive are few, so few that it appears quite difficult to think of a female hero, whose physical appearance cannot be considered sexualised to an extent. Think for example of Poison Ivy, Mystique, or She-Hulk as mentioned. Male audiences are thus exposed to a larger diversity in male characters, in cases of objectification and sexualisation which the male audience do not wish to see. The same sort of diversity is not present in regard to female characters, who seemingly fall into a collection of archetypical or stereotypical roles and tropes, often enough defined by their physical appearance, independent of the genre.

Regarding shirtless male superheroes as examples of male objectification, it might appear as a mirroring of the instances of female characters mentioned above. That is, if attractive and/or sexy male characters are offered to women in visual media, then should men not be offered the same? The argument alone, independent of other factors, sounds reasonable. Examining the male characters that could be considered objectified, characters who pose shirtless on television, with big muscles or exaggerated physique, and comparing them to the objectified women of the media, there seems to be a clear difference. Arguably, some female audience members will perceive these men as attractive and sexual, but if we take into account that most representative work is created by men for men, the integration of narcissistic visual pleasures in the story and visuals, and the function of the male protagonist as an ideal ego and an active hero, he becomes precluded from objectification. Both the male characters and female characters play into the male phantasy, but in different ways, for where the image of the women functions as sexual fantasies, the image of men function as an instrument of identification (Mulvey 300).

According to Heflick and Goldenberg, when an individual is subjected to sexualisation and objectification, they lose agency in the eyes of the audience, thus when a female superhero, such as Catwoman or Elektra, becomes sexualised, they lose the ability to undergo their Journey in a convincing fashion. Moreover, in relation to this, it has been noted that audience members find female action protagonists less convincing than their male counterparts, which, as a consequence, pose a risk for studios financially, as they may not be as commercially and financially successful (Heldman et al. 10). Considering the lack of box office success of both *Elektra* and *Catwoman*, no superhero films with female leads were produced until 2017, as their earnings were not as convincing as for example the *Spider-Man* (2002) and *X-Men* (2000), that were released around the same time.

The result of objectification of female characters in media is one, where audience members lose the ability to perceive these characters as fully human beings. A study conducted by Mina Cikara et al. concluded that male subjects did not better recognise the faces of sexualised female targets as compared to the faces of other targets in the study which are clothed women, sexualised men, and clothed men (Cikara et al. 545). Moreover, sexualised women were more closely associated with being objects rather than agents of action as compared to the other targets of the study (Cikara et al. 547). These same findings can be found in a study done by Bernard et al. (2012), which concluded that "at a basic cognitive level, sexualized men were perceived as persons, whereas sexualized women were perceived as objects" (Bernard et al. 23). These findings suggest that sexualisation in women decreases their agency in male perceivers. Thus, the male viewer perceives a human female the same way he perceives an object, that is, as less human. This may lead to sexually objectified female action heroes to be met with less empathy and concern regarding pain and trauma, exactly because they are perceived as (actual) dehumanised objects. Such acts of dehumanisation and objectification may lead to female characters losing their position of power they have in relation to the audience. Sexualising and objectifying female leads renders them passive and subordinate to other characters that might be present alongside them, thus when a female lead is directed to both keep an active position of power yet also be subordinate and passive, a difficult task and something she cannot do, the character becomes unconvincing.

Exposure to sexualised and objectified female characters has an effect on women's perception of their bodies. Self-objectification, the act of perceiving oneself as an object where

men and women tend to internalise objectification of their bodies which results in self-criticism, is another consequence in this regard. Sexual objectification can lead to multiple health issues, such as depression, lower self-esteem, dietary restrictions, eating disorders, and general shame regarding bodily functions (Heldman et al. 10-11; Pennell and Behm-Morawitz 219). Sexual objectification, and additionally the male gaze and scopophilic fetishism with its notable focus of the body itself and its physical appearance, removes the significance and presence of possible feminist messages or depiction both in narrative and cinematography. Considering a film such as Catwoman that bears a feminist message of female body and sexual liberation while also utilising the male gaze and sexually objectifying the female superhero counteracts said message. Thus, the superhero, one that is supposed to be an example of a positive notion for the viewers, becomes non relatable, and an imposter who cannot fulfill the role she is meant to. According to Pennell and Behm-Morawitz's study, where they examined the impact of both female superheroes and female victims in superhero films, it was the image of the sexualised female superhero that subsequently had an impact on women's body image and body esteem (Pennell and Behm-Morawitz 219). This indicates the importance of female superheroes and the manner in which they are presented in popular media.

Backlash Culture

Since its release, the *Captain Marvel* film has become one of the most popular films both among those of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and DC Extended Universe. The worldwide opening for the film was the sixth biggest of all time, not to mention it became the biggest opening for a film with a female lead (Tartaglione). It has become one of the highest grossing superhero films, surpassing the likes of *The Dark Knight Rises*, *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, *Thor: Ragnarok*, *Wonder Woman*, *Man of Steel*, *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2*, and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* ("List of Highest-Grossing Superhero Films"). Despite the evidence of success, the initial announcement of the *Captain Marvel* film was not met with enthusiasm among certain parts of the MCU fanbase, general moviegoers, and comic book enthusiasts. Several reasons have been given to its unpopularity and disapproval among these groups of people, one being Brie Larson's public comment regarding diversity or lack thereof (Marotta).

Another reason can be the overt and clear feminist message that the film bears, though *Wonder Woman* arguably shares some of the same characteristics and themes.

Most of the criticism that *Captain Marvel* faced came before the film was even released, with much of the criticism being based on the teasers and trailers alone (Darcy; Bacon).
After the release of the film, points of criticism were rarely ascribed to the elements of the film as a medium in and of itself but was rather attributed to the lead actress' personality and personal beliefs, the statements of the creators, and what was viewed as a misplaced so-called agenda. As this type of commentary did not cease, its provenance and justification raised basis for suspicion, that perhaps a reason for such backlash could have been the lack of male gaze, sexualisation, objectification, and fetishization in the film.

At the time, *Captain Marvel* was pitted against another film with a woman-led action heroine *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019), perhaps as a defence against claims of sexism or as an argument for evident existence of female representation in action films. Actor James Woods, for instance, tweeted: "When you have a choice, pick a movie where the studio doesn't hate half its audience…" with a meme showing moviegoers choosing *Alita: Battle Angel* over *Captain Marvel* (@RealJamesWoods). Neither *Alita: Battle Angel* nor *Wonder Woman* faced the same backlash as *Captain Marvel*, even though all three films feature a female hero in the lead, *Wonder Woman* contains representation of strong, both physically and emotionally, empowering female characters, and Rosa Salazar, the actress who portrays Alita in *Alita: Battle Angel*, has commented on Latinx representation in connection with the building of the Trump Wall (Nickolai). As such, there was a reactionary atmosphere against Captain Marvel, both the hero and the film, and in the spirit of the fourth wave backlash culture described in the feminist section, the opposition took to the internet to voice their dissatisfactions. For example, a simple search on YouTube reveals results such as "Why Captain Marvel Failed where Wonder Woman Worked | One v One", and "Captain Marvel Goes Full SJW Villain in Deleted Scene". On February 25, 2019 Rotten Tomatoes announced "because of an uptick in non-constructive input, sometimes bordering on trolling," (RT Staff; "The Time of Rotten Tomatoes Captain Marvel Shilling Ends, The Age of Fans Begins") films could no longer be rated or reviewed before its release, an act that has been deemed as censorship and silencing of fans ("Rotten Tomatoes REMOVES Captain Marvel Low Rating & OPENLY Lying! DISGUSTING"; "The Time of Rotten Tomatoes Captain Marvel Shilling Ends, The Age of Fans Begins"). Many had taken to

the review-aggregation website, reviewing the film negatively and leaving comments of hateful and disapproving nature before it had even premiered, an act commonly known as ‘review bombing’. Most of these comments regarded Brie Larson, how she does not smile enough (@BrettRSmith76; McCluskey; Abad-Santos), her vocal feminism, and how the film pushes a certain ‘feminist agenda’ that will ruin the Marvel franchise (Dumaraog).

Looking at this topic from a feminist perspective, the question then arises whether or not we are looking into a future, where female superheroes and superhero films with diverse casts and characters are more common, or if this is a case of what we can call performative feminism, where celebrities, corporations, and companies openly encourage the feminist movement and female representation without actually promoting it or doing anything of true significance. Examining prior situations, consumers could be vary of empty messages of solidarity instead of contributing positively to the causes they claim to support.

Marvel has upon numerous occasions been criticised for excluding its female characters. *The Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) is an intergalactic team, where Gamora is the only female among them. After its release, the film quickly gained popularity, becoming a favourite among moviegoers and comic book enthusiasts, and, like other popular films, a line of merchandise was released. Gamora is 1/5 of the team, yet she was not featured on as much of the merchandise as her male and male presenting alien counterparts. Too often, Gamora was not to be found on merchandise depicting the whole team (Pahle). Similarly, Black Widow, who has been an integral part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe since *Iron Man 2* and has since been in eight films, has also been omitted from the merchandise. At one point, her character was replaced with the character Captain America, leading to actors Mark Ruffalo and Clark Gregg, both who act alongside Scarlett Johansson in the Marvel films, tweeting in support (@clarkgregg; @MarkRuffalo). Regarding the Black Widow character, it was announced in 2019 that a Black Widow film was to be produced and released in 2020, with pre-production beginning in early 2019. The news of Black Widow getting a solo film seems like a progressive response to the critique of the previous lack of a female lead solo film within the MCU, but considering her death in *Avengers: Endgame*, one can question the reason for producing the film now. No matter the plot of the film, whether it be about the origin of the female superhero or the character’s time as a member of the Avengers, the film would have no true impact on the overall narrative of the Marvel Cinematic Universe films, because the character herself is taken out of the narrative. The

character having died in the *Avengers: Endgame* film will likely mean that there will be no sequel to the *Black Widow* film, making it a standalone film, much unlike the *Captain America* and *Iron Man* trilogies and the planned sequels of *Black Panther*, *Captain Marvel*, and *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

In the same film Natasha Romanoff is killed, the audience is presented with a scene within the climactic battle of all the remaining established female hero characters in the MCU. The battlefield appears to stretch for miles with thousands of individuals from multiple places in the universe fighting one another, massive aliens and ships are flying overhead, the ground is cracked, visibility is obscured by dust, and hero after hero is shown as they progressively become more exhausted and injured. In the midst of the battle, Carol Danvers finds Spider-Man to aid him with the Infinity Gauntlet. Once he looks to the chaos ahead and questions how Carol is going to make it through, Wanda Maximoff and Okoye first appear to tell him not to worry, that "she has help," whereafter the remaining female characters appear and advance collectively. A series of shots show some of the characters fighting alone or together and then Carol simply lifts off and flies through the army on her own without any need of aid. The scene itself, from the moment Carol finds Spider-Man to the moment she has made it through, lasts about one minute, wherein it presents the assumption that every female character is able to appear in the same place at the same moment, without any male characters doing the same, and then in the heat of the battle. The scene and the message which are supposedly meant to be conveyed contradict each other in the short time. Alongside the fact that the first female hero of the MCU, Black Widow, is not present in this scene causes it to appear flat all the more. 'Girlboss' has been used to describe the moment, which, in this context, indicates a sort of so-called 'woke' feminism that is often ridiculed or dismissed by anti-feminists and feminists alike. Even more contradiction is evident with the inclusion of the funeral of Tony Stark/Iron Man and not Natasha's. Both heroes made a world-saving sacrifice, both heroes have appeared in most of the same films, and both heroes die in pursuit of the same goal within the same film, yet one of them is presented as more important. Co-director of *Avengers: Endgame*, Joe Russo, explains that this is because Natasha's character continues to exist in the upcoming *Black Widow* film, which is set before the events of *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), whereas Tony Stark has no more screen time ("Comic-Con 2019: The Russo Brothers Spill Avengers: Endgame Secrets (Full Interview)"). While the argument that the films in the MCU franchise do not all appear in chronological order, the character was

still killed, which, on one side appears as a logical argument for not including a farewell to the character in *Avengers: Endgame*. On the other is the dissonance of basing a character's significance on screen time rather than narrative. To the audience, Natasha Romanoff is dead and will continue to be as the solo film will be set in the past, which implies no intention of reviving the character in the present. That is not to say the character might never return in the present of the film franchise. It is, however, noteworthy that the film incorporates eulogies for two of its male heroes, one who is still alive at the end of the film but relinquishes the opportunity to include one for a female hero who has had a similar, if not greater, impact on the franchise. Since the directors of *Avengers: Endgame* did not direct *Black Widow*, could this be an indication of rejecting the same call for representation and diversity that is presented to be answered through the girlboss-scene? The case of Black Widow's death alongside the all-female-heroes scene are examples of media that can be interpreted as a performative form of feminism, where one minute of the film's 181-minute runtime is given to a scene about 'girlpower' and superfluous solidarity in the form of assistance, but a farewell to one of the most significant characters in the franchise's, at the time of *Avengers: Endgame*'s release, 11 year existence.

That being said, other instances of both past and future productions indicate a shift in the company with a much wider range of directors, writers, and characters present. *Captain Marvel* saw the first film production in the MCU with a female co-director, the upcoming *Black Widow* film is directed by Cate Shortland, *The Eternals* is directed by Chinese Chloé Zhao, and *The Marvels* is directed by Nia DaCosta, a woman of colour who is also the youngest person to direct a film from Marvel Studios. Aside from these films, several more are described as featuring people of colour and LGBTQ+ representation in the cast, story, and production crew. Patty Jenkins is so far the only female director of upcoming DC films, with Cathy Yan directing *Birds of Prey* in the past. An interesting approach to note in the case of the DCEU franchise's upcoming films is an untitled Superman reboot where the only information released at the time of writing is that the role of the iconic superhero will be filled by a Black actor, that it will be directed by J. J Abrams, and written by *Black Panther*'s Ta-Nehisi Coates. Similarly, Sascha Calle, a Latinx actress, has been cast in the role of Supergirl whose character is reported to be introduced in *The Flash* set to release in 2022. Superman and Supergirl are traditionally represented as white, and while Supergirl has yet to be introduced in the DCEU, Superman, portrayed by Henry Cavill, made his debut in 2013 with *Man of Steel* and has since appeared in

Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice and *Justice League* (2017). To state that Superman cannot or should not be portrayed as anything but white would seem problematic on the surface, and several actors have already filled the same role within separate DC films, for example Joaquin Phoenix and Jared Leto both playing the Joker, and Ben Affleck and Robert Pattinson both playing Batman. Several new characters, such as Zatanna and Blue Beetle, are likewise set to be introduced alongside the sequels to the *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020), *Aquaman* (2018) and *Shazam!* (2019) films, to which one might wonder why the character of Victor Stone/Cyborg, is the only member of the DCEU Justice League who does not have a solo film, nor one planned in the near future. Allegedly, a Cyborg film was planned to release in 2020, but no writer nor director was ever hired to work on the project. Black Superman is identified and recognised as the Black version of a character, and will not, as such, be recognised for being a character who is also Black. Cyborg is a superhero who is also Black, and who is featured as one of the integral main characters in *Justice League*. Although most of Cyborg's skin is covered in metal, and therefore obscuring the inclusivity and progressive nature of including a Black superhero, would it not subvert the meaning of featuring more characters of colour even further, if they do not exist on their own terms instead of the fame of another?

Turning to the medium of TV-series, both DC and Marvel feature much more diverse casts and representation, both on-screen and behind the screen, in terms of gender, sexuality, and people of colour than in their films. An early example is *Marvel's Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) series, which not only featured a female lead character, but also centred around issues of substance abuse, physical abuse, and themes related to experiences like manipulation and rape, somewhat alike *Captain Marvel* although with other themes. *Luke Cage* (2016-2018) centres around a Black hero with the majority of the cast being represented by people of colour, similar is DC's *Back Lightning* (2018). Upcoming TV-series from Marvel are set to be directed by, among others, Kate Heron (*Loki*); Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, and Meera Menon (*Ms. Marvel*); and Jessica Gao (*She-Hulk*). And the title characters of the upcoming series appear more diverse than previous works by the studio. Within the TV-series based on DC, characters of colour, of various sexualities, gender identities, noted social backgrounds, and themes connected hereto, have been especially present in series such as *Supergirl* (2015-), *Legends of Tomorrow* (2016-), and *Batwoman* (2019-). Something worth noting is the lower risk of including such diversity in TV-series as the risk of what might be

considered a box-office failure does not exist, far fewer people will watch the series upon its release than a major film, the budget is usually far lower, changes can be made according to audience reactions, and, until the recent surges of so-called prestige television, most TV-shows have not been regarded in the same way as film in terms of acknowledgement and prestige. Another point worth noting is the lack of sexualisation, male gaze, and stereotyped characters in works with more women working behind the screen and directing, not only evident in the films analysed in this paper, but from other examples as well, notably the change in Harley Quinn's character from *Suicide Squad* (2016) and *Birds of Prey*.

Conclusion

The narrative content of the films chosen bear themes that would indicate a predisposition of feminine genre traits, as explored by Peter Coogan. Whether each individual film ascribes more closely to Campbell's model of the Hero's Journey or Murdock's model of the Heroine's Journey have no immediate effect on the content itself, as the themes are interchangeable, and the representation and diversity is determined by other factors in the production and direction. Either of the models were originally intended to convey modern storytelling as one might experience in contemporary film and TV-series, but both continue to hold some form of merit, both in case of narrative and how narrative might be viewed. Campbell's model reflects myths and stories of the past whose elements are still present today, although Campbell originally did not believe this should or would be a model that applies to men as well as women. Murdock takes into consideration the experiences of women and merges that with the original model of Campbell, suggesting that women do indeed have a journey, but that it might be different from that of men. From our analysis, it is evident that female superhero characters embark on Hero's Journeys regardless of gender, why the significance of the journey does not lie in the stages but rather what occupies the stages. Subjects and themes associated with women and the woman's experience in society are prevalent in all four films. What then becomes interesting is the way in which these themes and narratives are presented and represented, who will stand and has stood behind the decisions concerning that, and what the consequences of those decisions ultimately will be. Detrimental or contradicting representation of characters and their stories evidently has the potential to undermine the very message or scope

which the film is supposedly designed to, or claimed to, convey, including its themes and potential political standpoint outside the fictional setting.

If impressions of characters depend upon the manner in which they are conveyed and by the individuals of the audience's personal convictions and experiences, then backlash would originate from experiencing opposition to one's expectations and opinions, and from changes in the conventions one is accustomed to. Male audiences are used to, for instance, seeing women appealing *to them* through the male gaze on screen, whereas women are accustomed to portrayals of their gender that do not resonate with them in an authentic way. Conservative standpoints found during research for this project indicate the experience of 'losing' rights at the rate of minorities gaining them, and attribute elements of equality and equity between male, female, people of colour, LGBTQ+, and disabled and abled bodied people's representation on screen to feminist and radical leftist 'agendas' or 'propaganda'. Examples of such especially regarded the instance of *Captain Marvel* and actress Brie Larson, as discussed. Changing the content and manner of representation and narrative regarding diversity in characters provide opportunity to communicate other experiences of existence, on one hand to individuals who can relate and thus feel seen and empowered, on the other to individuals who cannot relate, but instead experience another perspective to maybe inspire positive change. To authentically portray experiences outside of stereotypical popular culture tropes and conventions of patriarchal society, more members of minorities who are under- or misrepresented on screen must collaborate with creators or be given the opportunity themselves to write, direct, design, and produce popular media. This project only contained a few examples of films and is by no means a comprehensive overview or analysis of the superhero genre as a whole. What has been found in the few examples, of those analysed and reviewed for discussion points and examples, is that female directors in modern cinema tend to incorporate feminist notions as a way of encouraging progressive notions and conveying the experience of women. In addition hereto, the newest of the analysed films is speaking to the female viewers in a way that the male viewers do not seem to experience, serving as an example of both backlash culture against progressive notions as well as the concept of lived experiences, that are rarely seen, being portrayed on screen in a genre where it has previously been largely absent.

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Abstract

This Master's thesis explores the representation of female superheroes in solo films released after 2000 with the aim of analysing how and if narrative structure plays a significant role in differentiating between male and female hero characters. To this end, Joseph Campbell's monomyth of the Hero's Journey, Maureen Murdock's model of the Heroine's Journey, and feminist film theory will be utilised. Four films within the superhero genre have been selected and will be analysed both individually and comparatively. The films have been chosen on the basis of time period and cultural significance, as the genre experienced an increase in popularity around the turn of the century. In addition, earlier examples of films within this genre tend to be widely different from more recent ones. In this regard will the representation of female characters be relevant, as a starker contrast is evident between the female superheroes of the two earliest films and the two most recent. Genre characteristics between male and female superhero media will be included as part of the analysis, in part to determine how and if such might be applied to the concept of the gendered hero or heroine.

Several other examples of media within the genre have been included in both the analysis and discussion for comparison's sake, as well as to provide a broader overview of the genre, its themes, representation among its cast and creators, and what changes have been occurring within the past two decades. The analysis will include the application, when possible, of each narrative model as well as relative feminist film theory. The discussion includes points regarding representation and how its presence or absence affects the audience, relevant concerns of backlash culture online, and an exploration of the potential of the future of the genre. More women and people of colour are set to direct television series and films within the genre, signalling a progressive change in diversity and representation. Other examples of intended inclusivity suggest a different situation, where seemingly progressive elements and/or characters either appear contradictory or partial in their execution.

While gendered concepts of the hero and heroine are included and utilised, it is not the purpose of the analysis to determine the role of men and women as heroes, but rather some of the differences in the models proposed in relation to the portrayal of female superhero characters.