

THE FEMINIST SUPERHEROINE: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF PATTY
JENKINS' *WONDER WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

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The study attempts to ascertain to what extent Patty Jenkins' 2017 film *Wonder Woman* can be considered a feminist text and if a female superhero film can be categorized as feminist within the constraints of Hollywood norms.

The first chapter introduces the subgenre of superheroine films, feminism in film, and how Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* fits into this narrative. Chapter two provides historical context on the creation of the Wonder Woman comics, the various adaptations of Wonder Woman, as well as the complex layers in William Moulton Marston's inspiration to create the character of Diana Prince. In chapter three I explain the multifaceted nature and contested terrains of feminism and feminist film theory, then analyze moments of feminism in Jenkins' *Wonder Woman*. In chapter I assess media viewpoints of feminist films and discussions surrounding whether *Wonder Woman* can be considered a feminist film. I consider the importance of women behind the camera in the industry, I analyze the character Wonder Woman in the later 2017 film *Justice League*, and I take a closer look at how superhero films have been seen to reflect concerns of post-9/11 America.

Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* may not be the perfect depiction of feminism, but I argue that it is a progressive step forward for women as lead superheroines and for women leading behind the scenes.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Feminist film theory, Women in film, Patty Jenkins, *Wonder Woman*

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The last film productions with lead superheroines happened over a decade ago, *Catwoman* (2004) and *Elektra* (2005), and they both flopped immensely. After these back-to-back disappointments, it seemed Hollywood was a bit nervous to tackle a female superhero film, leaving this subgenre untouched by popular superhero male film directors. Perhaps a female film director was what the superheroine film genre was waiting for. Twelve long years later, film director Patty Jenkins debuted the highly anticipated *Wonder Woman* on June 2, 2017. Grossing over \$103 million domestically in the first weekend alone and smashing the box office at \$807 million worldwide in total gross sales, *Wonder Woman* sits as the third top grossing film in all the DC Comics franchise behind only *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)¹. It received a Rotten Tomatoes score of a whopping 92%². *Wonder Woman* is altogether in a league of her own when it comes to the lead superheroine realm.

We have recently seen superheroines as accent pieces and second-rate team members in the narratives of hyper masculine male superheroes, such as Black Widow in *The Avengers* or Storm in the *X-Men* series, but with Diana Prince, also known as *Wonder Woman*, we at long last have a superheroine in the spotlight. Reviewers valued the cinematography, the construction of the plot, and how the camera formed its own narrative. At first glance, it seems like a recipe for a feminist frenzy of glorifications, but there's a very evenly drawn line between those who read it as feminist victory and those who read it as a step backward for feminist efforts. The following chapters unpack the

¹ "Box Office Mojo"

² Heinberg, "Rotten Tomatoes"

origin of Wonder Woman, the question of what it takes to qualify a film as feminist, and how Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* situates itself in the conversation of feminist films.

In Chapter II, the historical background and context surrounding the inception of Wonder Woman comics from the hands of William Moulton Marston are explored. The many adaptations of Wonder Woman are highlighted and the success of the comic book series over the years is chronicled. Marston's sexual past is brought to light; the bondage surrounding the costuming of Diana Prince and the lover that inspired her character are discussed. All historical context leading the way up to present day adaptations, specifically with Patty Jenkins' 2017 feature film.

Chapter III focuses on feminist theory and how that is applied to films, building upon Laura Mulvey's works and unpacking feminist film theory. After different waves of feminism have introduced themselves and been built upon over the years, the ideology of feminism has grown to be complex. Criteria for feminist texts in popular culture are contested, complicating judgment. This feminist film theory is then applied to Jenkins' film and the tests are run to see if it passes the Bechdel and the Mako Mori film tests.

In chapter IV, the focus shifts to how the media have reacted to the release of Jenkins' film and how feminism gets muddled in the arguments. In a digital age oversaturated with think pieces and blogs, it doesn't take long to come across a multitude of opposing articles in defense of *Wonder Woman* or attacking it for its representation of women. This popular discussion is chronicled as one part of the critical analysis of Patty Jenkins' film, as well as the reception and criticisms received by her rendition of *Wonder Woman*. A look at post 9/11 American cinema within the superhero realm is also touched

upon to see how *Wonder Woman* fits into this narrative that mostly male superheroes have seen themselves fulfilling in leading the front lines to battle.

Wonder Woman is not a superheroine to be easily recreated. She's complex and strong and an independent action star who believes in peace and justice. Patty Jenkins' accepted the challenge to give this character and her Amazonian world the attention it deserves. In doing so, she created a film that was widely successful and a box office hit. However, does that translate over into a feminist film? Let's start where it all began – at the fingertips of William Moulton Marston.

CHAPTER II

History of Wonder Woman

Can any female superheroine be feminist if it's originated and sculpted from the hands of a man? Before moving forward to analyzing Jenkins' *Wonder Woman*, context is necessary to the complicated and scandalous background to the creation of the character that is Diana Prince.

The first known female superhero is Fletcher Hanks's minor character Fantomah, an ageless, ancient Egyptian woman who could transform into a skull-faced creature with superpowers to fight evil. The character debuted in Fiction House's *Jungle Comics* #2 (Feb. 1940) signed by Fletcher under the pseudonym Barclay Flagg.³ On the brink of World War II, Superman and Batman were the mainstream pop symbols of strength and morality. However, DC Comics needed an antidote to “bloodcurdling masculinity” effect of comic books. William Moulton Marston, a psychologist, came up with an antidote in the form of female superhero.⁴ In February 1941, Marston submitted a draft of his first script, explaining the “under-meaning” of Wonder Woman’s Amazonian origins in ancient Greece, where men had kept women in chains, until they broke free and escaped. “The new women thus freed and strengthened by supporting themselves (on Paradise Island) developed enormous physical and mental power.” His comic, he said, was meant to chronicle “a great movement now underway—the growth in the power of women.”⁵

Wonder Woman was created during the Golden Age of comics, during the second World War when women were accustomed to staying at home and doing household

³ Markenstein, “Fantomah”

⁴ Cavana, “A Look Back”

⁵ Lepore, “Secret History”

chores.⁶ Wonder Woman first appeared in All-Star Comics at the latter part of 1941 and then on *Sensation Comics*, on January 1942. Drawn by Harry G. Peter, she wore a golden tiara, red bustier, blue underpants and knee-high, red leather boots. Peter's unique style was different from the young artists at DC Comics. His old-fashioned cartoonist technique was influenced heavily by his experience or drawing cartoons for humor magazines and working on comic strips. The young cartoonists at DC sexualized female characters. By contrast, Peter's style did not emphasize skimpy costumes or exaggerated bodily figures; his faces were pleasing and provocative.⁷

Wonder Woman was the superhero from Paradise Island who landed in America to fight fascism with feminism to escape the man's world of ego and prejudice.^{8 9} She was portrayed as the hope for greater freedom and champion of equality of women in all fields of human activity.¹⁰

Wonder Woman's origin began in December 1941 when she debuted in All Star Comics #8. American fighter pilot, Steve Rogers crash-landed in Paradise Island which is the home of Wonder Woman and the Amazons. Paradise Island is the hidden place where Aphrodite led the Amazons after they were imprisoned by Hercules to escape the violent world dominated by men. Wonder Woman herself was sculpted by Aphrodite from clay and was given life by gods. She was named Diana. Steve Rogers was rescued by Diana who took him to the hospital of the Amazons. Since the island was off limits to men, the goddesses declared that Steve must be returned to America to be accompanied by an

⁶ Hanley, "Wonder Woman Unbound"

⁷ Hanley, "Wonder Woman Unbound"

⁸ Lepore, "Secret History"

⁹ Cavana, "A Look Back"

¹⁰ "The Strange Story of Wonder Woman's Creator"

Amazon warrior because America is the last citadel for equal rights for women and must be saved. A tournament was held to find the Amazon warrior to accompany Steve. Diana, who was prohibited from entering, disguised herself to win the said tournament. She later on became Wonder Woman who donned a star-spangled outfit to be recognized as a friend of America. Steve and Diana flew on an invisible plane to America. She established her secret identity as Steve's secretary and nurse named Diana Prince. She transforms into Wonder Woman against villain she encounters who are devising an evil plan.¹¹

Originally sculpted from clay by her mother, Wonder Woman's origin was redrafted for All Star Comics so that she became a descendant of a male and female Olympian gods, because critics did not want to see a fatherless child.¹² This revision is an example of the way that Wonder Woman's feminist origin sparked controversy and led the creators, and her character, to eventually succumb to misogyny and censorship. This has become evident when she became part of the Justice Society which is now known as the Justice League. Her superpowers were put into good use when she became their secretary, while often captured and losing her powers to be saved by the male members of the group. Rather than an equal member of the team, she must change roles between superheroine and damsel or secretary. She was portrayed obsessing over Steve Major as her love interest.¹³

Wonder Woman outsold *Superman* and *Batman* during the Golden Age. However, during the 1960's sales data showed that Wonder Woman was only selling just over

¹¹ Hanley, "Wonder Woman Unbound"

¹² Placido, "The Complicated History"

¹³ Placido, "The Complicated History"

200,000 copies per issue which is barely a quarter of the number for the top book sold. In response, DC wanted to make her a more modern character. Wonder Woman's character has always been kind-hearted and peaceful but this was changed by the publishers. Wonder Woman lost her powers and identity and Diana constantly had to have the attention of a man. However, the said change did not go well as Diana lagged behind her fellow female comic book characters like Lois Lane and Batgirl. Stripping her of her superpowers was contrary to the female empowerment movement she was originally conceptualized for.¹⁴

Later on in the 1970s, Wonder Woman's character was re-conceptualized and restored into a hero for liberal feminists. By the late 1970s she again raised to popularity with a TV show that ran for three years and as a co-star in Super Friends. Soon after, America slipped into recession cutting DC's profits.¹⁵

Wonder Woman's character suffered for years, until the seventies where her original character as a feminist and icon for woman empowerment was reprised by Gloria Steinem on the cover of the first issue of "Ms.", a popular feminist publication.¹⁶

Today Wonder Woman is still the most popular female comic-book superhero of all time among the ranks of Superman and Batman. She was included in the list of comic-book characters that has lasted longer than any other fictional character created during the World War.¹⁷

In the last quarter of In October 2016, the United Nations appointed Wonder Woman as the global organization's new Ambassador for Women's Empowerment. This

¹⁴ Hanley, "Wonder Woman Unbound"

¹⁵ Hanley, "Wonder Woman Unbound"

¹⁶ Placido, "The Complicated History"

¹⁷ Lepore, "Secret History"

appointment coincides with the launch of a new campaign to fuel Sustainable Development Goal number five, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030.¹⁸ The announcement, which coincided with Wonder Woman's 75th birthday and a new Hollywood super-production about the comic book character, was met with a great deal of criticism.¹⁹

Dr. Marston, His Feminist Agenda, and the Bondage Undertones

The identity of Wonder Woman's creator had been at first kept secret. It was only until later when political historian Jill Lepore revealed his identity in 2014 through her book, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*. The author surprisingly is Dr. William Moulton Marston who is an internationally famous psychologist, inventor, and lawyer.²⁰ Marston studied psychology at Harvard during the 1910s which was the height of America's Progressive movement. He was heavily influenced by the spirit of reform. He was a student of Hugo Munsterberg who believes that psychology and social sciences should not only seek academic understanding but should also be socially useful. Espousing this belief, Marston dedicated his career in solving personal and interpersonal problems by sharing his psychosocial theories on human progress through his scholarly journals, publications, manuals, magazines and the comic books.

The creator of Wonder Woman is a walking contradiction but as fascinating as the heroine herself. Aside from Wonder Woman, Dr. William Marston invented the systolic blood pressure test and the early prototype of the lie detector.^{21 22} Marston was also a

¹⁸“Wonder Woman: feminist icon or symbol of oppression?”

¹⁹“Wonder Woman: feminist icon or symbol of oppression?”

²⁰ Lepore, “Secret History”

²¹ Placido, “The Complicated History”

²² William Marston”

lawyer and into progressive politics who championed the movement of women. As a feminist, he wrote a thesis which explained how women are mentally stronger than man but argued that they are also submissive.²³ In his 1937 New York Times interview, he prophesied that women will take over the country, politically and economically within the next hundred years.²⁴

According to Hanley, Marston's high opinion of women may have been influenced by women whom he was closest to.²⁵ He had a mistress whom he claimed to be his relative, Olive Byrne, who lived with Marston and her wife, Sadie Holloway, under one roof.²⁶ Holloway earned a BA in psychology, a law degree from Boston University, and a master's in psychology from Radcliffe College (formerly the women's college connected to Harvard). She was self-supporting, paying her own tuition while taking up law when her father failed to support her. She also worked with Marston on his systolic blood pressure research. Byrne on the other hand, was well educated and had connections with the birth control movement which is unconventional during that era.²⁷

Marston had a stark contrast with other comic book creators. The majority of comic book writers during the Golden Age were young men in their twenties. When Wonder Woman first appeared in the #8 issue of All Star Comics, Marston was already forty-eight years old. While his comic book peers were aspiring to have real jobs other than comic book writing, Marston already had several jobs. Marston graduated thrice from Harvard University with a BA in 1915, a law degree in 1918, and a PhD in

²³ "The Bizarre (and Kinky) Life"

²⁴ Hanley, "Wonder Woman Unbound"

²⁵ Hanley, "Wonder Woman Unbound"

²⁶ "The Bizarre (and Kinky) Life"

²⁷ Hanley, "Wonder Woman Unbound"

psychology in 1921. He was a teacher at several universities, a book publisher, an advisor for a Hollywood film studio, and a contributor to the Ladies Home Journal and Rotarian magazines. Marston wrote Wonder Woman under his pen name Charles Moulton.²⁸

Marston used iconography from the suffrage movement as symbolism in his comics. He insisted to his publisher that Wonder Woman be chained in every issue. The defining element of Wonder Woman is that when she is bound in chains, she loses all of her Amazonian strength. Marston felt that the broken chains were also a powerful feminist symbol of emancipation from men. The chains were considered as important part of the feminist and suffrage struggles of the 1910s.²⁹ He also outfitted Wonder Woman with the empowering golden Lasso of Truth, whose coils command truth from its captive.³⁰ The Lasso of Truth was said to relate to female bondage and his invention of the lie detector.³¹ The bracelets which Wonder Woman and the Amazons have to wear reminds them of the consequences when they let a man conquer them. They once fell to the charm of handsome Greeks but the latter put them in chains to beat them, and made them work like horses in the fields. It was Aphrodite, the goddess of love, who freed the Amazons and reminded them to never surrender to a man for any reason.³²

For Marston, a male hero lacks the qualities of maternal love and tenderness which are as essential to a normal child as the breath of life. He sees the most important ingredient in the human happiness as love. Although it is ideal to be strong and generous, toxic masculine conventions to be tender, loving affectionate, and alluring can erode

²⁸ Hanley, "Wonder Woman Unbound"

²⁹ "The Bizarre (and Kinky) Life"

³⁰ Cavana, "A Look Back"

³¹ Placido, "The Complicated History"

³² Marston, interview

these stronger ideals. Comics readers do not want to be girls, nor do girls want to be girls, if the feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. His remedy was to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman and allure of a good and beautiful woman.³³ Marston gave Wonder Woman this dominant force but kept her loving, tender, maternal and feminine in every other way.³⁴

Marston's theories, however, are not without flaws. Sheldon Mayer, his editor, criticized his work for being a feminist book for men. In his response, Marston said that the comic book stories are meant to satisfy longings and fantasy that ordinary life denies. Wonder Woman satisfies the subconscious of the hidden desire of males to be dominated by a woman who loves them. Wonder Woman contained the psychological theories of Marston disguised as superhero adventures. For Marston, a matriarchy will not corrupt women as a patriarchal society did to men. His ideas sexualized the power of women and idealized them, telling women that they can rule based on their ability to subjugate men. A sort of fetishism was inherent to Marston's theories. But since comic books were not textbooks, these criticisms were soon forgotten.³⁵

Wonder Woman has always been associated with sexual deviance. Images of her fighting wild animals and animalistic people while dressed in her skimpy costume has also been viewed by critics like Josette Frank from the Child Study Association as a bondage theme that is sexually suggestive, fetishistic, and sadistic. Marston in his defense

³³ Lepore, "Secret History"

³⁴ Oxoby, "The Ages of Wonder Woman"

³⁵ Hanley, "Wonder Woman Unbound"

claims that the costume was athletic and functional and that the bondage theme is necessary to distinguish between worthy and unworthy readers.³⁶

The Women of Wonder Woman and Comics

Unknown to many, Marston and Peter were supported by several women who played an important role in the development of Wonder Woman. During the Golden Age of Comics, women were very rare in the industry. Marston's belief in women empowerment led him to employ women to help him in his work on Wonder Woman. It was his wife Elizabeth who insisted that the hero should be a woman, while it was Olive who was fond of large metallic bracelets who became the inspiration for Wonder Woman's appearance.³⁷ In the second comics series of Wonder Woman, Alice Marble was hired as an associate editor for the comics. Marble was an eighteen-time Grand Slam tennis champion and named Athlete of the year in 1939 and 1940 by the Associated Press.³⁸ Marble wrote the Wonder Women of History feature which put a spotlight on a famous woman in each issue of the comics. Another female editor who worked for the comics was Dorothy Roubicek. Roubicek was the first female assistant editor in the main offices of All-American Comics and was tasked to handle the advisory board's objections in the content of Wonder Woman. A woman who was credited to have written a few stories for Wonder Woman was Joye Murchison. She worked as Marston's assistant from 1944 until the latter's death in 1947. Murchison's name can be seen in the reprints of the

³⁶ Oxoby, "The Ages of Wonder Woman"

³⁷ Hanley, "Wonder Woman Unbound"

³⁸ Hanley, "Wonder Woman Unbound"

original stories of the comics. On the art side, several women helped Peter, among them was Helen Schepens who helped him within inking and penciling.³⁹

Women's participation in the production of comic books started during the golden age of comics but were not visible and went unnoticed in an all-male environment. At present, women's participation can be found more in self-publishing and independent comics. Most of these women's love for comics began at childhood, influenced by the combination of words and pictures. Inspired by comic books, they created their own characters and wrote their own stories. However, according to the research – *Working the Margins: Women in the Comic Book Industry* by Wesley Chenault, women are discriminated in the industry in terms of pay and they are also underrepresented. Based on the interviews of Chenault, women who worked in the industry since the 1980s found it difficult to make a living doing comics. This prompted them to move into other areas such as television, movies, and books. Overall, the study concluded that based on the interviews of the participants, the reason for the small number of women in creative roles in the industry have been caused by a lack of support.⁴⁰

Now comic books are seen as a nostalgic past prior to the television takeover. With major film companies grabbing to adapt these superheroes and heroines, success has been found within the superhero realm with superheroines still on the fringe. Patty Jenkins' has taken what Marston created, revamped it, and given it the female director's touch viewers have been waiting for. It was wildly successful but does that make it feminist?

³⁹ Hanley, "Wonder Woman Unbound"

⁴⁰ Chenault, "Working the Margins"

CHAPTER III

Feminist Film Theory

Feminism is defined as the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of social, political, and economic equality to men. Feminism plays a major role in hundreds of cultures, as it raises attention to civil liberties of women across the globe.⁴¹ Other definitions provide that feminism is the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes; the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes; the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities; the doctrine advocating social, political, and all other rights of women equal to those of men. Feminism is about equality of men and women, and not "sameness." It is important to understand that same does not mean equal.⁴²

In Ancient Greece, it is said that women had no social, political, or economic importance. Socially, women were secondary to men, who were respected and honored. According to ancient Greek culture, women could not be independent, and relied entirely on the men in their lives. A woman's role in ancient Greek society was to bear children, prepare meals, and watch after the household.⁴³ However, some claim that feminism can be traced back to ancient Greece. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the daughter of Oedipus breaks the social norm by going against the government. It was against the norm during ancient times for a woman to rebel against male authority. Hence, the fact that Antigone

⁴¹ Renda, "Antigone"

⁴² Caprino, "What Is Feminism"

⁴³ Renda, "Antigone"

followed her beliefs and ignored threats of a higher power to go against the orders of Creon shows definite female power and early signs of feminism.⁴⁴

From a historical perspective, feminists and scholars have divided the movement into three "waves". The first wave was during the 1800's to the early 1900's when women fought for equal contract, voting, and property rights. The second wave was during the 1960's up to the 1980's when the discussions on feminism focused on workplace, sexuality, family, and reproductive rights. The third wave started in the 1990's up to present time wherein feminist are still fighting for acceptance and understanding the true meaning of feminism.^{45 46}

Most critics see feminism only as the promotion of women's rights and interests. On the other hand, feminist theory encompasses work in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, economics, women's studies, literary criticism, art history, psychoanalysis, philosophy and politics. The theory seeks to understand gender inequality through gender politics, power relations and sexuality and explore the issues on discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, oppression and patriarchy.⁴⁷

Several feminist sub-movements have been developed over the years. Example of these movements for purposes of discussion are Anarcha and the Socialist Marxist.⁴⁸ Anarcha, which is also called anarchist feminism or anarcho-feminism, is combination of anarchism and feminism. It views patriarchy as a manifestation of an involuntary hierarchy. The Socialist and Marxist view on the other hand connects the oppression of

⁴⁴ Renda, "Antigone"

⁴⁵ Dorey-Stein, "A Brief History"

⁴⁶ "History And Theory Of Feminism"

⁴⁷ "History And Theory Of Feminism"

⁴⁸ "History And Theory Of Feminism"

women to Marxist ideas about exploitation, oppression and labor. Socialist feminists think that inequality in the workplace and the domestic household is the cause of women's continued oppression, while Marxist feminist believes that when class oppression ceases, gender oppression would also disappear. Other sub-movements are black feminism, radical feminism, liberal feminism, postcolonial and third-worlds feminism and many more.⁴⁹ Black feminism argues that sexism, class oppression, and racism are inseparable. It serves as an answer to forms of feminism that strive to overcome sexism and class oppression but ignore race can discriminate against many people, including women, through racial bias.⁵⁰ Radical feminism is a perspective within feminism that calls for a radical restructuring of society where white, male supremacy is eliminated in all social and economic contexts. They view society as patriarchal and dominated by men. Radical feminists seek to abolish patriarchy to liberate everyone from injustice caused by men.⁵¹ Liberal feminism is an individualistic form feminism and focuses on the woman's ability to maintain equality through their own choices. The emphasis is on making the legal and political rights of women equal to men. They argue that society holds the false belief that women are lesser forms of men. They also believe that subordination of women is based on a set of customary and legal constraints formulated by men which hinders women's success. These feminists strive for sexual equality through political and legal reform.⁵² Postcolonial feminism also known as third world feminism emerged in response to Western mainstream feminism. It is a relatively novel wing of postcolonial feminine scholarship. Postcolonial feminism as a new feather

⁴⁹ "History And Theory Of Feminism"

⁵⁰ Collins, "Defining Black Feminist Thought"

⁵¹ Willis, "Radical Feminism"

⁵² Tong, "Feminist Thought"

wishes to bring into light the typicality of problems of women of the Third world nations.⁵³

One modern third wave sub-movement worth mentioning is the Riot grrrl movement which is a 90's underground feminist punk movement. It is based on punk culture called Girl power who takes an anti-corporate stance of self-sufficiency and self-reliance.⁵⁴ Misinterpretation of the movement however have caused some followers to subscribe into commodity feminism. Author Rebecca Hains in her essay, "The Significance of Chronology in Commodity Feminism: Audience Interpretations of Girl Power Music" conducted a study on the on the perspectives of young feminist-identified women who have listened to the music of the riot grrrls or the Spice Girls. According to studies, the Spice Girls' commercialization of the riot grrrls' feminist message has become a problematic instance of commodity feminism. Girl power became part of the mainstream revised commercial form led by the Spice Girls, who were a popular pop group in 1997. The commercial success of these pop stars made their famous catchphrase, "girl power," a household term. In contrast, the riot grrrls rejected normative femininity, while the Spice Girls promoted it. The riot grrrls encouraged women to create, but the Spice Girls led women to consumerism by promoting to fans Spice Girls merchandise as a means to participate in women empowerment.⁵⁵

Feminism and Film

Feminist film theory emerged with second wave feminism during the 1960s and 1970s. Feminist film theory is generally based on sociological theory and focuses on the

⁵³ Mishra, "Postcolonial feminism"

⁵⁴ "History And Theory Of Feminism"

⁵⁵ Hains, "Commodity Feminism"

function of female characters in film narratives or genres. The goal was to understand film as a cultural practice that represents and reproduces myths and stereotypes about women and femininity. The feminist wave in film was prompted by the emergence of women's film festivals. Feminist film studies in general has a wide sociological approach to studying female audiences and the position of women in the film industry, ranging from actresses, producers, and technicians to directors.⁵⁶

Works on feminist film theory, such as Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies, and the American Dream* (1973) and Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in Movies* (1974) analyze the ways in which women are portrayed in film, and how this relates to a broader historical context. Additionally, feminist critiques also examine common stereotypes depicted in film, the extent to which the women were shown as active or passive, and the amount of screen time given to women.⁵⁷

In England, feminist film theory is concerned with critical theory, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and Marxism. These ideas entered feminist film theory in America during the 1980's. Analysis focuses on the meaning within a film's text and the way in which the film constructs a viewing subject. This critical method presents and scrutinizes the process of cinematic production and how it represents women and reinforces gender inequality and stereotypes.⁵⁸

Prior to Mulvey's contribution on film theory, psychoanalysis and feminism, film theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz used psychoanalytic ideas in

⁵⁶ Smelik, "Feminist film theory"

⁵⁷ Smelik, "And The Mirror Cracked"

⁵⁸ Erens, "Introduction"

their theoretical accounts of cinema.⁵⁹ It was Freud who first studied psychoanalysis in collaboration with Dr. Josef Breuer when they studied on Anna O. Working together on the Anna O. case, Freud and Breuer had to balance two different ideas as to her diagnosis and treatment. At present, Breuer is considered as the grandfather of psychoanalysis. The peculiar case of Anna O. was that she was subject to both physical and psychological disturbances, and was not able to drink out of fear. The two found that hypnosis was helpful in discovering more about Anna O. and her treatment. The study on Anna O. were highly referenced in Freud's lectures on the origin and development of psychoanalysis.⁶⁰

Psychoanalysis was the dominant model in feminist film theory, producing scholarly readings of many film genres like melodrama, film noir, horror, science fiction, and the action movie.⁶¹ Feminist film theory was dominated by the discourse of both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Feminist critics of the psychoanalysis model have not always agreed about its usefulness, but they generally agree that its limitations are on its exclusive focus on sexual difference, a heterosexual bias, and the failure to discuss other differences such as class, race, age, and sexual preference.⁶²

For Laura Mulvey, films have depicted women in passive roles for visual pleasure through scopophilia. It was also Mulvey who discussed the “three looks” that occur in film which serve to objectify women. The first is from the camera as it records the pro-filmic event. The second look is from the audience as it watches the final product or the female character. The third look is from the characters at each other within the screen. The third "look" joins the first two looks together and is the male audience member's

⁵⁹ Erens, "Introduction"

⁶⁰ Freud, "Psychoanalysis"

⁶¹ Smelik, "Feminist Film Theory"

⁶² Smelik, "Feminist Film Theory"

perspective of the male character in the film. This third perspective allows the male audience to take the female character as his own personal sex object because he can relate to it by looking at the male character in the film.⁶³

Mulvey's provocative claims produced rival theories. Christian Metz argues that viewing film is only possible through pleasure from looking, so for him there is no ideological connection of looking to gender.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, Bell Hooks theorizes the "oppositional gaze" to encourage black women not to accept the female stereotype in films but actively critique them. The "oppositional gaze" further provides that just as women do not identify with female characters that are fictitious, women of color should also respond the same way with regard to the stereotypes of black women.⁶⁵ Elsewhere, Janet Bergstrom uses Sigmund Freud's bisexual response in her article "Enunciation and Sexual Difference" to argue that women are capable of identifying with male characters and vice versa, either successively or simultaneously.⁶⁶ Thus there are several competing theories about gender, looking, and pleasure in cinema that have grown around Mulvey's essay.

In the action and superhero genre, films would typically feature a strong and intelligent man fighting a villain with the goal to save humanity, the need to rescue a damsel in distress who is often portrayed as a delicate, naïve, and defenseless woman but at the same time sexy and beautiful. Sometimes the woman would be powerful heroine but is still hypersexualized. This influence of female characters particularly as superheroes is not always positive according to the research of Hillary Pennel and

⁶³Erens, "Introduction"

⁶⁴ Braudy, Cohen, "Film Theory and Criticism"

⁶⁵ Hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze"

⁶⁶ Erens, "Introduction"

Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz at the University of Missouri. Exposure to the perfect, voluptuous figures and their sexy, revealing attire can promote oppressive beliefs about gender roles, body esteem, and self-objectification.⁶⁷

Mainstream films have tried to incorporate progressive female characters. Superhero films like the X-Men have featured empowering female characters like Storm, Jean Gray, and Dazzler, who all wield a unique special ability of impressive cognitive and physical competence. Most are hopeful that the current generation's exposure to these heroines will result in equality in gender, higher body esteem, and the prioritization of physical and mental competence over appearance. While these portrayals might elevate egalitarian beliefs about gender roles, critics caution that their sexualized nature may also have negative effects on body image and self-objectification.⁶⁸

Most assume that portrayals of women in film have been generally biased since most were created and directed by male directors and producers. The film industry is still largely dominated by men although women participation has been increasing through the years. The growing representation of women in film was part of a feminist movement to show women realistically.⁶⁹ Film as a medium has attracted feminists. The increasing number of women in the film industry was seen as a positive step, drawing attention to feminist issues, putting forth an alternative and realistic view of women.⁷⁰ For instance, Ruby Rich joined the film industry as a writer because of its social character which for her serves as an antidote to her academic background in literature and archeology. She believes that film is a social process and not an individual private experience which can

⁶⁷ May, "The Problem"

⁶⁸ May, "The Problem"

⁶⁹ Erens, "Introduction"

⁷⁰ Erens, "Introduction"

cross boundaries bigger than culture or entertainment. In her essay, "In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism," she claims that films by women often receive praise for certain elements but the feminist undertones are ignored. Rich argues that feminist film theory should shift to look at films in a broader sense and focus on how films by women are being received.⁷¹ Judith Mayne, also a known feminist, was fascinated by Godard's Masculine-Feminine which led her to enroll in a film course. Film for her has an impact on defining what it means to be female in our culture.⁷²

Claire Johnston suggests that films made by women can function as "counter cinema." Through consciousness of the means of production and opposition of sexist ideologies, films made by women can show "real" women. Eileen McGarry disagrees and claims that "real" women shown on film are just contrived depictions. In response, women filmmakers integrated alternative forms and experimental techniques in their films to encourage audiences to critique and to question the techniques of filming and editing.⁷³ Marjorie Rosen and Molly Haskell argue that the realistic images of women in film are still mediated by the same factors such as the camera, composition, editing, lighting, and sound employed in traditional film. The positive representations of women in film are admired but critics assert that the real change is how women will transform their role in society through film. This was the semiotics insight that Hollywood cinema cloaks its ideological construction by hiding its means of production.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Rich, "In the Name"

⁷² Ciltron, et. al, "Women and Film"

⁷³ Erens, "Introduction"

⁷⁴ Smelik, "Feminist Film Theory"

Evaluating Feminism on Screen

What makes a movie feminist? Some simple tests have appeared to answer this deceptively simple question. In 2013, Swedish movie theaters created a rating based on the Bechdel test for the films they screen. The test was created in 1985 by Alison Bechdel, a comic artist, which asks whether a film has at least two female characters and at least one scene in which they talk to one another about something other than a man. If the said criteria are satisfied, Swedish theaters give it an A. The goal is to draw attention to how few films pass the test and encourage filmmakers to make more movies with three-dimensional women characters in them.

In the opening scene of Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman*, we have a group of Amazonian female warriors practicing how to fight with each other. They continue to have multiple conversations with each other that never once mention men and a man hasn't even been introduced to the storyline yet. Therefore the film passes the Bechdel test.

From the movie *Pacific Rim*, Japanese actress Rinko Kikuchi invented the Mako Mori test named after her character. Mori is the only female character in the film but she has her own goal of avenging her parent's death that separates her from the male lead. The test asks whether a film has "at least one female character who gets her own narrative arc that is not about supporting a man's story." The test is said to be one way to determine whether a character is feminist, not because she espouses feminist philosophy but rather she is a subject in the film rather than an object. A subject has her own

thoughts and desires upon which she acts, whereas a woman who has been objectified is acted upon by others.⁷⁵

Diana Prince is in a story arc all her own. She has a drive to save the world, to create peace, to prove to her mother that she is strong and able. In a classic reversal, Wonder Woman's male counterpart, Steve Trevor, supports her storyline in many ways. He makes sacrifices so that she can do what she needs to be done to save the world. Diana Prince was the subject, not merely an object in a male's story arc. Clearly, Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* passes the Mako Mori test.

But these simple tests are not a comprehensive way to judge whether a film is feminist because in the first place it was not designed to be such. To determine on whether a film is feminist requires more than a number of female characters and conversations between them. A film may have some feminist elements, sexist elements, and elements that are neither. According to Holly Derr from *The Atlantic*, the only reliable way to determine whether a film is feminist is to see it.⁷⁶

Whether a film is feminist is subjective to one's definition of feminism. Liberal feminists who believe women and men are created equal and should be treated as such may consider the *X-Men* films to be feminist because they feature female superheroes. Cultural feminists, who believe women's biology and instincts make them different from men might consider *Steel Magnolias* as a feminist film even though the characters only talk about men and family.⁷⁷

⁷⁵Derr, "Makes a Film Feminist?"

⁷⁶Derr, "Makes a Film Feminist?"

⁷⁷Derr, "Makes a Film Feminist?"

Feminist film theory is a large flourishing field and its diversity has been an advantage rather than a weakness. The multitude of feminist film theories has caused a variety of cinematic style and genre created by women signifying their struggle for representation in film.⁷⁸ However, as per Judith Mayne there is still a need to expand a field of inquiry, to go beyond dualistic categories, understand the power to attract, and to take more risk in rethinking oppositions from which the assumptions of feminist film theories are based.⁷⁹

The Male Gaze and Sexual Objectification

The “male gaze” is a term used by feminists with regard the sexual objectification of a female by a male spectator. The term was coined the essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” by Laura Mulvey. Mulvey defines the term relating to the woman being the spectacle in film.⁸⁰ Mulvey’s essay articulated how the male gaze functions in film based on the three different looks associated with cinema.⁸¹ She was beckoning a call to arms for female directors to take an active role behind the scenes and to create more Mulvey did not expect the phrase would catch on. The term has been widely used by feminists in describing women in print, film and multimedia as a product of the “male gaze”.⁸²

Male gaze is commonly interchanged with sexual objectification. By definition, sexual objectification is looking at the person as a mere object for sexual pleasure.⁸³ Sexual objectification is said to be an actual complex since not all males look upon

⁷⁸Smelik, “Feminist Film Theory”

⁷⁹ Mayne, "Feminist film theory and criticism"

⁸⁰ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure”

⁸¹ Cohen, “Not Safe for Work”

⁸² Miller, “Male Gaze”

⁸³ Miller, “Male Gaze”

women as objects. Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts in their essay, Objectification Theory, agree that when objectification occurs women are defined by her body parts rather than her personality.^{84 85}

The male gaze however is not only limited to women objects. According to Miriam Hansen, in her work "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship", women are also able to view male characters as erotic objects of desire.⁸⁶ Carol Clover, in her book, "Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film", argues that young male viewers of the Horror Genre identify themselves with the female-in-jeopardy character in an unexpectedly profound level. She further argues that the "Final Girl" in the psychosexual subgenre of exploitation horror invariably triumphs through her own resourcefulness, and is not by any means a passive, or inevitable, victim. In response, Mulvey revised her stance and argued that women can take two possible roles in relation to film; as a masochistic identification with the female object of desire that is ultimately self-defeating or as a transsexual identification with men as the active viewers of the text.⁸⁷

Studies have shown that women have started viewing themselves as objects because of the portrayal of advertisement and media on the standard of beauty. This impossible standard of beauty portrayed by the media has caused women to be ashamed of their own appearance causing them to be depressed and anxious. Feminist claims that

⁸⁴ Fredrickson, and Roberts, "Objectification Theory"

⁸⁵ Miller, "Male Gaze"

⁸⁶ Erens, "Introduction"

⁸⁷ Erens, "Introduction"

by finding ways in preventing sexual objectification, the patriarchal order shall subside and give the women the respect they deserve.⁸⁸

Carolyn Cocca an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Politics, Economics, and Law at the State University of New York, created the Brokeback Test. The analysis explored scantily-clad women in mainstream superhero comics to determine whether the images were indeed pervasive and study if the numbers have changed since the 1990s. She found out that almost every issue contains sexually objectifying portrayals of women, that women represented fewer characters even in female-headed titles, that women were objectified on covers than in panels and more often in ensemble titles than in female-headed titles, and that both ensemble and female-headed titles have less objectification in the 2010s than they did in the 1990s.⁸⁹

A new version of the gaze was offered in the early 1990s by Bracha Ettinger, who proposed the notion of the "matrixial gaze". *The Matrixial Gaze* is a 1995 book by clinical psychologist Bracha L. Ettinger.⁹⁰ The matrixial gaze uses the matrix to counter the Lacan's phallic gaze which is a metaphorical reference to anatomy to discuss symbolic masculine power, the matrixial gaze is a metaphorical reference to the uterus in order to discuss relationality. This approach was used not to exchange the penis and its image for the womb, but to provide an alternative to the phallus in terms of structure, mechanism, functions, logic.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Miller, "Male Gaze"

⁸⁹ Cocca, "Broke Back Test"

⁹⁰ Ettinger "The Matrixial Gaze"

⁹¹ Ettinger, "Reply to Commentary"

The Female Gaze

The female gaze is the response to the Mulvey's term the male gaze. The female gaze is often referred to works of women in films, photographs, visual arts, and literature. It is said that when women create these works they are harnessing the "female gaze." Emily Nussbaum, a television critic, was quick to dismiss the criticized term, describing it as "the notion that the camera lens, which has been trained to ogle and dominate, can change, in female hands, launching a radical new aesthetic." Advocates of the new and ubiquitous term defend it stating that it shouldn't be reckoned with the male gaze as the former has more expansive use.⁹²

Cheim & Read, an art gallery in New York, hosted an exhibition called "The Female Gaze". The exhibition featured sculptures, paintings, and collages. Critics felt this exhibition had a negative impact on the term as it simplified it to describe works by women that focused on human subjects. It segregated art made by women from the works made by men creating a double standard.⁹³ Jill Soloway, creator of the show *I Love Dick* defined it as what it means to make or watch a film with the female gaze. She suggested that the female gaze reclaims the body to evoke feeling. It uses the camera to show how it feels to be the object of the gaze, and returns the gaze onto cis males. To expound, the female gaze is characterized by three elements which are: a way of feeling seeing by using the frame to make the audience truly feel the emotions and not just watch the feelings. Here, feelings and emotions are prioritized over actions and bodies are used as tools to portray emotions; by showing how it feels to be the object of the gaze, where the camera speaks out as the receiver of the gaze and actually depicts the gaze itself; and

⁹² Cohen, "Speaking of"

⁹³ Cohen, "Speaking of"

finally returning the gaze or acknowledging the influence of the male gaze culture on people and attempting to shift the protagonist from being the object to being the subject. It's not gender-reversal placing the women in power rather removing women as the object and allowing the viewer to see this shift.⁹⁴

On the other hand, Lucy Engelman calls the female gaze the “feminine impulse in cinema and narrative art.” For Engelman, the female gaze does not pertain to the female body alone, but it is enacted and created by anyone on the spectrum of sex and gender identity whether female, male, cis, trans, intersex, or non-binary gender fluid.⁹⁵ According to April Mullen, women have the vulnerability and connection to a depth of emotions that they can see and feel in certain moments of truth in the films women create. For her, the female gaze is about transparency where the veil between audience and filmmaker is kept thin to allow people in.⁹⁶ Unfortunately, despite such attempts, the term is still used in its general sense as art made by women.⁹⁷ The female gaze is still being defined by the current generation. Contrary to the belief, it is not asserting female dominance on film, but puts an emphasis on presence. Presence in the emotion, in the story and in the characters.⁹⁸ The idea is not to take the place of the male gaze but rather to break down the barriers caused by this male dominant culture. The goal is to destroy all gazes and to harness equality from the film industry and to remove and change the

⁹⁴ Ridgard, “For dummies”

⁹⁵ Engelman, “On The Female Gaze”

⁹⁶ Costa, “Below Her Mouth”

⁹⁷ Cohen, “Not Safe for Work”

⁹⁸ Ridgard, “For dummies”

way in which the world views women as minorities.⁹⁹ With this in mind, another look at Jenkins' direction of *Wonder Woman* is necessary.

In one of her most widely discussed scenes, Jenkins' has an extreme close-up on Diana Prince's leg as she lands from high in the sky with one leg bent, kneeling. The close-up shot is on Wonder Woman's thigh and as she touches down, you see her thigh jiggle. This is a prime example of Jenkins' female gaze. It's real. It's raw. It shows the female body in its natural state without trying to edit out what might be perceived as a "flaw." Instead of sexualizing her exposed skin, it embraces what the male gaze might otherwise overlook or edit out. Diana Prince thus becomes an even more relatable icon and Patty Jenkins' female gaze breaks through the objectification of the male gaze.

⁹⁹ Ridgard, "For dummies"

CHAPTER IV

The Media, Feminism, and Wonder Woman

Are people of the world ready for what Jenkins issued in her version of Diana Prince, as an equal to her dominant male superhero counterparts? Evaluating the latest data from around the world on gender equality, the media, and the internet has made it obvious and clear that there is tremendous dissent and vehement disagreement today among people around the world about the status and importance of equality. Millions of people, both inwardly and outwardly do not support the idea of equal rights and equal opportunities for men and women. Some are too naïve and feels that equality for men and women have been achieved. While others do not believe we're not at all there yet, and support continuing efforts to pave the way for equal rights for men and women. There are those who believes in equal rights but find the term "feminism" and the movement as not aligned with their personal beliefs or principles. It's very clear that our specific views on these issues are rooted deeply in the individual's personal and direct experiences, rather than on any data, research or science surrounding the issues.¹⁰⁰ This perception however cannot be credited solely on personal experiences.

Media has influenced society's acceptance and rejection of the feminist movement and its goals.¹⁰¹ In the initial stage, media was dominated exclusively by men. The images of men and women portrayed in media were made according to the preferences of men. These were the images created by media that men and women would wish to see in

¹⁰⁰ Caprino, "What Is Feminism"

¹⁰¹ Beck, "The "F" Word"

reality. At present media has increasingly associating feminism with independent and powerful women, while women's sexuality continues to play a dominant role.¹⁰²

Feminists have used media to communicate their message. Feminist movements would not have been possible without this tool. In this modern age, social media has become the tool for widespread discussion on women issues regarding domestic abuse, harassment, reproductive health, and social equality.¹⁰³ Social media democratized feminist activism, allowing participation to anyone with an internet access to swiftly, and widely spread feminism ideologies not covered by mainstream media.¹⁰⁴ ¹⁰⁵ And long before the internet different mediums were also utilized. Comic books during the postwar era was utilized by Marston to communicate women empowerment through Wonder Woman.

Feminism's struggle can be traced to its diversity and different viewpoints.¹⁰⁶ However, it cannot be denied that feminism was portrayed in a negative light and inaccurate ways, as angry single women and man haters, without considering the fact that there is also a wide variety of feminist perspectives which aren't as radical. Bell Hooks has observed that during her discussions, the tone of the conversation changes when feminism is mentioned.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, through her work, *The Undeclared War Against America*, Susan Faludi explored the patterns in the messages from media which are largely anti-feminist. Faludi documents how many forms of media engage in a two-part process that both "blames" feminism for women's sense of distress in a time of great

¹⁰² Davtyan-Gevorgyan, "Women and Mass Media"

¹⁰³ Eslen-Ziya, "Social Media"

¹⁰⁴ Chittal, "The feminist movement"

¹⁰⁵ Gutierrez, "The role"

¹⁰⁶ Beck, "The 'F' Word"

¹⁰⁷ "Demythifying"

social change and systematically undermines women's progress in their own eyes.¹⁰⁸ According to Debra Beck, the mass media further enforces the trivialization and mockery of academic feminism, combined with outright hostilities and anger by framing women's studies as having dangerous intentions.¹⁰⁹ The media has a distaste for active, assertive women and they are often portrayed as different from "regular" women and not as victims of inequality and oppression.^{110 111} This misunderstanding about feminism has become a barrier in understanding the work of feminist scholars.

Carolyn Cocca in her book *Superwomen*, explained how media portrayal of gender have been negotiated through female superheroes. Over the last 75 years, superheroes have always been portrayed as male, heterosexual, white, and able bodies. At present, there are an increasing number of female, queer, colored, and disabled superheroes but still not as much as their traditional counterparts. These representations of superheroes matter, because they serve as beacons to the underrepresented and stereotyped groups.¹¹² *Wonder Woman* is no stranger to these changes. Joseph Darowski, author of *The Ages of Wonder Woman* compiled nineteen essays on how *Wonder Woman* has changed over the years. The essays narrate why the comic didn't sell as massively as its male counterparts, despite staying on the shelves throughout the 50s. It also discussed the Wertham witch hunt which declared Diana as a lesbian and not adhering to the ideal character of a woman who should be staying at home, doing chores, and getting

¹⁰⁸ "Demythifying"

¹⁰⁹ Beck, "The "F" Word"

¹¹⁰ Creedon, "Framing feminism"

¹¹¹ Beck, "The "F" Word"

¹¹² Cocca, "Superwomen"

married.¹¹³ Her implicit bisexuality was based on her origins from a land populated solely by women.¹¹⁴ In the 1960s, Wonder Woman's costume was changed, her superpowers were taken, and her boyfriend, Steve Trevor was killed. The comic initially was selling well but the reactions of fans were mixed and it came under criticism from feminist readers. It was in 1972 that DC returned her to her original character while incorporating Second Wave feminist themes.¹¹⁵

Girls who came of age in the World War II era were raised by women of the Suffrage movement, where women were granted the right to vote. It was also an era of women's rights and opportunities, and men were concerned about women invading their territory. This anxiety increased when the government heavily recruited women into almost every male occupation such as the military and production labor.¹¹⁶ During this era, Marston intended *Wonder Woman* to be the standard among children of a strong, free, courageous womanhood and eliminate the idea that women are inferior to men. To inspire girls to self-confidence and achievement in sports, and male dominated occupations and professions. Millions of young people have read or seen *Wonder Woman*, which is quite possible that their acceptance of the ideal woman may alter our traditional standards. Those who *Wonder Woman* will transform themselves to become an independent, honest and fearless woman.¹¹⁷ After the World War ended, Fredric Wertham strived to preserve that image of the strong, independent, career-minded woman. His attempts forced the character during the 1950's to struggle with the pressure

¹¹³ Oxoby, "The Ages"

¹¹⁴ Bellot, "The Queer Literary"

¹¹⁵ McClelland-Nugent, & Nugent, "Second Wave Feminist"

¹¹⁶ Oxoby, "The Ages"

¹¹⁷ Marston, "Noted Psychologist"

to choose between family and career. Wertham may have contained the symbol of strength and independence in the 1940s Wonder Woman, but it was the 1950s Wonder Woman who inspired another generation.¹¹⁸

While Wonder Woman is the ideal for women, it was a frightening image for some men. The independent Wonder Woman is anti-masculine and the character has her own female following, and they are all continuously being threatened and almost put to death just like the icon herself.¹¹⁹

Feminist Blockbusters

There has been a rise of Hollywood blockbusters depicting women in lead roles over the last decade. *The Last Jedi*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Wonder Woman* have recently topped North America's box office. The last time that three blockbuster films were fronted by women was in 1958, when *South Pacific*, *Auntie Mame*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* were the most popular American movies.¹²⁰

But how did Hollywood ensure a high grossing film despite the negative connotation our culture has on feminism? Although the movie's success can be very much attributed to director Jennifer Lee and Chris Buck, it can be presumed that in America there is little appeal on women-driven stories. This was the reason why *Frozen* was marketed to American audiences by downplaying its female characters. In the U.S. poster, it was Olaf the Snowman, the fourth most prominent character in the film who became the dead center of promotional materials.¹²¹ The Atlantic writer also theorizes

¹¹⁸ Oxoby, "The Ages"

¹¹⁹ Wertham, "Seduction"

¹²⁰ Owen, "Women-fronted"

¹²¹ Kang, "Feminist Blockbuster"

that forces other than feminism may have contributed to the movie's success, such as the popularity of the soundtrack.

On the other hand, *The Last Jedi*, which took in \$533.1m, featured an ensemble cast, and has been praised for its strong and varied roles for women. As per documentary film-maker Annalise Ophelian, female heroes are traditionally presented in cinematic isolation. But *The Last Jedi* gave women the role to work side by side, work in technical positions, and learn the ways of the Jedi.¹²² Its success however was not fully attributed due to feminism but to a successful franchise of the past few decades. Nonetheless, the feminist theme infused in the film did not hinder its success.

Others believe that female-driven films connect with audiences because half the world's population is female and that the gender gap is a bad business. Films compete with other mediums of entertainment like television, video games and other forms of entertainment, and the industry can't afford to be biased.¹²³

Female Directors

The number of women directors in Hollywood is increasing but between 1940 and the 1980 only 14 films were made by women. However, in 1990, 23 films were made by women out of 406 features. Today the number continues to grow but the body of work of women directors from the US is small compared to that of women in Europe where filmmaking is subsidized by the government.¹²⁴

The number of behind-the-scenes jobs held by women in the top 250 films has seen virtually no progress in the past two decades, according to a study published by San

¹²² Owen, "Women-fronted"

¹²³ Adams, "Female-Driven"

¹²⁴ Acker, "Feminists or Filmmakers"

Diego State's Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film.¹²⁵ Researcher Dr. Martha Lauzen analyzed the number of jobs held behind the camera by women, including positions like director, producer, writer, and cinematographer, from 1998 to 2017 for her report titled the Celluloid Ceiling. Lauzen found that films directed by women has also increased employment opportunities for other women. These films with female directors, employed writers composed of 68% female, compared with the 8% for films directed by men.¹²⁶ Lauzen found that when a film has at least one female director, the percentage of female protagonists increases. And with the recent Hollywood controversy on sexual harassment involving Weinstein, Lauzen claimed that hiring more women is sure to reduce the number of sexual harassment incidents, as well as lead to more inclusive storytelling.¹²⁷

In 2017, women made up 18% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers working on the top 250 domestic grossing films, which is higher by 1 percentage point compared to 2016. Of the top 250 grossing domestic films, 30% of titles featured zero or only one woman in behind-the-scenes jobs. In comparison, none of the films had fewer than 1 man working in the roles. Just 1% of films employed 10 or more women, while 70% of films employed 10 or more men. Women fared based as producers, accounting for 25% of those jobs; women represented 19% of executive producers; 16% of writers; 11% of directors and 4% of

¹²⁵ Lopez, "Women Held 18%"

¹²⁶ Lopez, "Women Held 18%"

¹²⁷ Lopez, "Women Held 18%"

cinematographers. The report is based on the 3,011 jobs analyzed among the top 250 films.¹²⁸

Wonder Woman and the Justice League

In the original *Justice League*, Wonder Woman served as the group's secretary and even portrayed as Superman's or Batman's girlfriend. In Zack Snyder's movie the inspiring moral center is Superman while the guy who brings the team together, and teaches Wonder Woman how to be a leader, is Batman. Warner Brothers chose to follow the usual script of the original comics and Wonder Woman ends up as a token female here to highlight the greater awesomeness of the guys around her.

Zack Snyder also came under fire regarding some modifications to the outfits worn by Diana's fellow Amazonian warriors. The costumes were mostly leather and a bit skimpier, and it received flak from feminists and critics claiming that the director is hypersexualizing women. However, supporters of the director said that the actresses themselves didn't view the costumes as sexualizing.¹²⁹

Apart from the costumes, Diana's story line was also altered by the director. Wonder Woman in the *Justice League* narrative has been indeed lying low and her heroics limited to private acts following the death of her lover Steve Trevor. Wonder Woman kept her head down and Bruce Wayne argues that Wonder Woman has shunned her duty as well. This is as opposed to the concept of her character as a beacon of hope and icon of empowerment as originally conceived by William Marston.¹³⁰ As part of the

¹²⁸Lopez, "Women Held 18%"

¹²⁹Mitimore, "Feminists Are Furious"

¹³⁰Mitimore, "Feminists Are Furious"

Justice League, Diana became a secondary character making it painful for some feminists to watch.

Patty Jenkins' World of Wonder Woman

Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* has stirred discussions about feminism. There are many of articles written online that are confident *Wonder Woman* isn't a feminist film and is being wrongly categorized as one while many that hold firm that is a positive direction for feminism.

In the film, although Gal Gadot was almost always scantily clad, critics claim that it was not female objectification but a cultural reset.¹³¹ As mentioned previously, female viewers can't help but notice that the actress was shown with her thighs jiggling which were not digitally enhanced nor edited. This was treated as a feminist act through the acceptance of the female imperfection and an example of how the female gaze differentiates from the male gaze. The film also showed women safeguarding the world from male violence not with nurture but violence, the portrayal of *Wonder Woman's* aunt as an axe battler, and a female German chemist trying to destroy humans, which were all considered as feminist acts by critics.¹³²

However, some critics like James Cameron, believe that the film is not feminist. The director of *Titanic* and *Avatar* criticized the film for objectifying women. Cameron compared *Wonder Woman* to Sarah Connor from the *Terminator* series, which he also directed, as what the strong woman that should be portrayed as.¹³³ He double downed on

¹³¹ Williams, "Subversive feminism"

¹³² Williams, "Subversive feminism"

¹³³ Freeman, "James Cameron"

his criticism of the film saying that Gal Gadot was over sexualized ¹³⁴ Patty Jenkins responded to the said criticisms of the director about her film, saying that the Cameron has an “inability to understand what Wonder Woman is or stands for”. Further she said that, “women can and should be everything, just like male lead characters should be. There is no right and wrong kind of powerful woman.”¹³⁵

Many amateur bloggers and digital journalists jumped on Cameron’s coat-tails and reaffirmed his convictions with what tidbits they personally, found to be disconcerting. On the other hand, those who had already been praising the film for its feminist undertones and for the positive impact it would have on young girls everywhere were quick to retaliate with the flaws they found in the opposing arguments. Patty Jenkins’ quick reply to Cameron’s comments sparked further debate between both sides. Jenkins was justified in her response and that while Sarah Connor was also a great lead female role, so is Diana Prince. She also notes that the criticism came from a man, someone who cannot understand a woman’s struggle within the industry or on-screen. It’s only placing further restrictions on how a woman is supposed to be portrayed within the action genre and pigeon-holing women into an appropriate demeanor when men are not held to those same standards.

Wonder Woman made \$412.6m and is the highest-grossing live-action movie ever directed by a woman.¹³⁶ So what made the film a blockbuster? Critics have claimed that the success of the film can be attributed not on its feminist undertones but rather its CGI

¹³⁴ Nevins, “Wonder Woman criticism”

¹³⁵ Mumford, “Patty Jenkins”

¹³⁶ Owen, “Women-fronted”

and musical score.¹³⁷ This however does not discredit the fact that Jenkins did her job well by not adapting the comic book storyline per letter which is a common mistake in superhero films. For studios, female led flicks can get audiences to pay attention, but a compelling, female-friendly script will keep the audience hooked. Warner Bros did not intend to champion feminism but rather to create a profitable blockbuster movie. Nonetheless, all praise goes to Jenkins who could sell a superhero in a sexy costume that is simultaneously a symbol of empowerment for women. There's a direct call to attention to the wardrobe having more functional purposes within the film when Diana Prince's character is wearing traditional Victorian garb that a woman was supposed to wear and she asks how she or other women in general were expected to fight wearing something of that nature. Jenkins' hears the complaints about female superhero costuming and gives the classic outfit of Wonder Woman a functional purpose and a more realistic appearance than those Amazonian costumes in *Justice League*. *Wonder Woman* may not be the perfect answer to feminism but it was able to portray a powerful female icon who is not only a hero and a human being, but also a feminist.

Women and Film Post 9/11

In the ten years since the September 11 terrorist attacks, film directors have responded in different ways. Hollywood struggled to respond to the war on terror and documentaries went through a golden age. Hollywood's response has been the subject of media and academic attention for much of the intervening decade since 2001. In one of the earliest published books on the subject, Wheeler Winston Dixon offered an explanation wherein Hollywood momentarily abandoned the hyper violent spectacles that

¹³⁷ Yoshida, "Truly Feminist"

dominated mainstream late 1990s cinema.¹³⁸ The horror of 9/11 made the movies look tame, however "cinematic" it may have been in conception. Films were temporarily shelved, sequences featuring the World Trade Center were edited, and family oriented films were released or rushed into production.

There was an influence of incorporating women in film post 9/11, and not in the US context but from which the terror came. The movie by Samira Makhmalbaf, *At Five in the Afternoon*, set in Afghanistan, illustrated how women were affected after the attacks. In the movie, women's rights are being asserted once again in Afghanistan, and Noghreh, the young Afghani woman, dreams of becoming president of the nation. Her dreams would later on be abandoned as she and her father will have to search for her brother. In the film, the attack from America and its allies is the greater evil, and whatever advantage it appears to have in terms of feminist liberation only has little impact. The film is a painful skepticism that women in the Muslim world may challenge the status quo, but if this liberation is to be imposed from American feminism, then Muslim women of Afghanistan will have to compromise and continue to suffer humiliation.¹³⁹ While in America, films which use 9/11 as a dramatic device in fictional narratives gave the happy ending real life can't always provide.¹⁴⁰

While this version of Wonder Woman was set on the brink of World War II, it can still be directly related to the attacks of 9/11 by offering a different tactic than retaliating with more violence. Wonder Woman provided an alternative to the narrative of superhero flicks by practicing her "lasso of truth" and encouraging the route of peace

¹³⁸ Dixon, "After 9/11"

¹³⁹ Bradshaw, "9/11 films"

¹⁴⁰ Smith, "Hollywood finally"

before war. This could be seen as contradictory to some feminist beliefs characterizing her as too sensitive or nurturing but that would overlook the countless times she fought and defeated men utilizing her bodily strength, speed, and her iconic weapons. This superheroine offers up intellect, emotions, and physical strength to beat her opponents with her priorities being set on fighting battles to gain peace and love for people across the world.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

It is important to understand that the word “same” does not mean “equal” when considering gender equality as a political issue. Feminism, especially in the liberal tradition, concerns equal rights and equal access to opportunities. Men and women are not the “same” in physicality but they have the right to equality.

Feminists are more aware of the inequalities and hardships faced by women through sexism. However, some writers believe that there is an error in the way feminist media often portrays women as victims, which they feel hinders society from moving towards equality.¹⁴¹ While it is true that spreading the awareness through media on gender issues is the key to spark discussion on equality, progress can only be made if feminists would speak in a manner that praises women for their achievements and work, so that others will adopt that attitude as well.

Although feminist scholars may not be unanimous in considering Patty Jenkins’ *Wonder Woman* as a feminist film, it is nonetheless progressive in its effort to advocate for the movement and for women’s empowerment in general. The box office record also is an indication on how our culture is slowly accepting the role of women as protagonists in film, despite the fact that most critics would still say that Diana was hypersexualized and therefore not a pure beacon of empowerment.

The definition of feminism varies more between feminists than between feminists, non-feminists, and sexists. Equality is not measured by the way women’s treatment is the same as men. In my view, a liberal one, equality is the recognition that everyone is a

¹⁴¹ Lapuerta, “Liberal Feminist Media”

unique human individual. Hence a creator interested in telling stories primarily about men can still make a feminist film or at least a non-sexist one.¹⁴²

Wonder Woman is more than just a superhero movie. It is the call for involvement of more women in film, for equal salaries and opportunities, a symbol of hope from harassment prevalent in the film industry, a fresh new start for a reboot of female led action films, the spark to rekindle an intelligent debate on feminism, and so much more.

Jenkins insists that she didn't approach the film as a feminist nor does she attribute the success of *Wonder Woman* to its feminism alone. She believed in *Wonder Woman* as the greatest superhero of all time and it was accepted as such by a wide audience.

In sum, director Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* demands to be considered within ongoing critical discussions of *Wonder Woman*, of women directors in Hollywood, of feminist superheroines, and of the superhero genre in post-9/11 America. Superheroines in cinema are topics mostly discussed assessing the absence of feminism in such characters and films, as opposed to the presence of it. I assert that *Wonder Woman* is progressively feminist in its content and in Jenkins' creative role.

¹⁴² Derr, "Makes a Film Feminist"

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Sam Houston State University – Huntsville, TX

Jan 2017 – July 2017

Instructor of Record

- Teach an introductory level course for non-fine arts majors
- Content covers basic film production, film theory, and film analysis
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Sam Houston State University – Huntsville, TX

Jan 2016 – Dec 2016

Graduate Teaching Assistant

- Assist professor in the Mass Communication department with their introductory course to Film and Television Production (Spring 2016) and Film History & Theory (Fall 2016)
- Grade student's reading assignments, quizzes, and some tests
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- Help students learn Adobe Premiere video editing software (Spring 2016)
- Researched sports films centered around boxing and football to aid professor in developing an article in their field of study, film theory (Fall 2016)

Advanced EMC Technologies – The Woodlands, TX

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Digital Media Marketing Consultant

- Manage both the LinkedIn company page and the company profile making sure they both have maximum exposure
- Utilize LinkedIn Sales Navigator to find new leads from the company's current connections as well as potential leads that aren't directly connected and condense them onto a spreadsheet
- InMail qualified LinkedIn leads to drive traffic to the website and gain more customers
- Run a LinkedIn sponsored content campaign to attract more leads to the company page
- Use HubSpot marketing software to see the impact of the overall marketing campaign and gain further insight into the target audience

Austin Film Festival – Austin, TX

Aug 2017 –

Nov 2017

Aug

2016 – Nov 2016

Sep

2015 – Nov 2015

Pitch Competition Coordinator – Contract

- Organized and followed through with all logistical needs regarding 160 pitch competitors and their designated time slots during the competition
- Maintained and managed an ongoing wait list of potential pitch competitors for the time prior to the festival as well as the duration of the pitch competition
- Organized, managed, and emceed the Pitch Finale Party with over 150 people in attendance under a very strict time schedule

Business Chicks – Sydney, AUS

Mar 2014 – Jul 2014

Events Intern

- Member of their marketing Think Tank where we brainstormed ideas to attract and retain more members

- Maintained contact with volunteer crew members and coordinated their schedules for event dates
- Organized the events cupboard/closet and prepared events baggage for travel

Clusterfest Music Festival – Georgetown, TX

Aug 2013 – Mar 2014

Chair Intern

- Researched and planned Southwestern's Annual Music Festival
- Worked well under a strict budget with a high turnout of concert attendees
- Managed and trained a team of four coordinators (Volunteer Coordinator, Stage Coordinator, On-Campus Ticket Sales Coordinator, Off-Campus Ticket Sales Coordinator)
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EDUCATION

Sam Houston State University – Huntsville, TX

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AFFILIATIONS

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SKILLS

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- Microsoft Office – Word, Powerpoint, Excel, Outlook
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- Performance IQ