

# **Cinematic Women, From Objecthood to Heroism**

Essays on Female Gender Representation  
on Western Screens and in TV Productions

Edited by

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**Series in Cinema and Culture**



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# Introduction

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Measuring the impact of women in film, even when limiting one's horizon to a few specific national traditions, or to one medium, either cinema or television, can be daunting. To start with, since the 1885 Lumière Brothers' first projections, filming has become a much more democratic process, as the brilliant 2015 movie *Tangerine* by Sean Baker has shown: filming can now be simplified down to three iPhone 5s, a dedicated production team, and gyroscopic mounts to stabilize the image. Gone are the days when a shot required weeks of preparation, pounds of heavy equipment, and painstakingly put together lighting. In practical terms, film has never been more accessible, in Western production, to independent filmmakers, generating a new production led by women, people of color, or queer directors.

In a sense, this more inclusive film industry—or at least bearing that offers the possibility of inclusivity—harks back to the founding days of Western film, when Alice Guy-Blaché, Lois Weber, or Germaine Dulac were amongst the pioneers and more prolific directors of Western cinema. Alice Guy-Blaché's work pioneered narrative cinema, and one can only be in awe of the modernity of her work. Guy-Blaché's contributions to cinema are not limited to her studies of movement and shorts on dance, like *Danse Serpentine* (1900) or *Le Boléro* (1905). In the early 1900s, Guy-Blaché also directed one of the earliest examples of big budgets French films, *La Vie du Christ* (1906), a twenty-five-episode serial that nearly did her career in. The same year, she also directed a film, *Le résultats du féminisme*, which critiqued and parodied gender norms in French society. This women-centric production inspired gender representations that were far from what a wider audience can imagine today, when thinking about early cinema in the West—witness, for example, the clueless Harry, Pauline's sidekick in *Perils of Pauline* (1913), whose attempts to contain, or save, the adventurous and brave Pauline are

frequently thwarted by his inability to stay awake and a comical tendency to meet the rotund end of a 2x4. Like these men, the female characters of these serials and silent movies are not necessarily all black or white—Pauline, for instance, frequently ends episodes suspended from a cliff, hanging on for dear life, but her character is much less fragile than the comically unprepared Joan Wilder of *Romancing the Stone* (1984). In a class on the subject, just a few years ago, our students were stunned to discover the guilelessness and sense of adventure that Pauline possesses—in their mind, early cinema was synonymous with Wilder’s passive role in *Romancing the Stone*.

The truth is that our vision of gender roles in film has long been influenced by an academic perspective and a male-dominated industry that ignored the work of pioneer women—whether their movies were no longer accessible for lack of preservation work (think of the 1937 Fox fire, for example, that destroyed miles of early film), or because academia glossed over these pioneers. As Guy-Blaché, Weber, or Dulac’s work progressively fell into oblivion, so did their take on gender roles that were as modern as they were interesting. Laura Mulvey points out in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, as Susan Sontag did before her for the parent medium of photography, that the film we are most familiar with, in the West, has long been shot through a male gaze, and for male audiences. A few examples linking this transformation from early cinema to our current film industry illustrate the transformation of cinema: with the same subject-matter as *Girls in Uniform* (1931), which ended up with the lesbian protagonist saved from suicide, *Rebecca* (1940) veers between soft-core lesbian sexualization and suicidal despair, a trajectory that leads directly to the “Bury Your Gay” TV trope describe by the Wiki community [tvtropes.org](http://tvtropes.org). And who could forget Rhett Butler’s “No, I don’t think I will kiss you, although you need kissing badly,” in *Gone With the Wind* (1939), the forefather of Han Solo’s forced kissing of Princess Leia in *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). For a long while, this male-dominated perspective meant that women were often represented as hapless and oversexualized—but it also meant that our academic perspective was prone to ignore the perspective of women, acting or directing.

Today, a new generation of filmmakers is very aware of this reductive perspective: for example, as queer director Angela Robinson (D.E.B.S, Professor Marston and the Wonder Women) recently pointed out to us in an unpublished interview with one of our classes (Cornell University, Spring 2019), if the viewer was following a man in a movie who was discussing the romantic and/or sexual pursuit of a woman, one would traditionally expect that the scene cut to a seduction play where the man would pursue the woman. Instead, Robinson’s Professor Marston and the Wonder Women continually disrupts this expectation by cutting to scenes of female friendship and/or romantic love.

We would argue, however, that there is a direct link between the work of pioneering women in early Western cinema and movies or shows today seeking—sometimes unsuccessfully, sometimes successfully—to subvert gender expectations and represent women in ways that are different from a perspective lacking agency. In *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947), the question of sexual consent, for example, is discussed with a female point of view, almost as a response to Rhett Butler's remarks a dozen years before. In an unusual scene, the ghostly captain says to Mrs. Muir:

Ghost: "No woman has ever been taken entirely unaware."

Mrs Muir: "And what exactly do you mean by that?"

Ghost: "If a woman is kissed, it is because deep down, she wants to be kissed."

Mrs Muir: "This is nothing but masculine conceit!"

There might not be, seemingly, any links between this exchange and Hollywood blockbusters, but who can imagine Leia's emotional exchange with Vice Admiral Holdo without the pioneering work of female directors like Guy-Blaché who empowered other women, and portrayed gender as nothing more than a social shackle unfairly placed on women? And because cinema builds on itself, who could imagine Marvel's *Captain Marvel* (2019), or DC's *Wonder Woman* (2017), without Leia's triumphant takedown of Jabba the Hutt? Science-fiction blockbusters and TV shows of the recent decades have certainly benefited from a rich history of strong female leads and female directors, all the way from Guy-Blaché's work. And even though women still only represent 7% of directors in Hollywood, it is hard to imagine the work of Ava Duvernay (*13th*, *When They See Us*), or Leslie Linke Glatter (*ER*, *West Wing*), without the constant push of their predecessors for new forms and new representations.

This collection of essays envisions itself as a series of case studies showing the nuances and ambiguity of gender representation in cinema, and how they answer each other, and function in articulation. Collected by Lisa Mazey, these essays came out of a conference communication in 2018, centered on the idea of thinking through how films are changing what can be seen as a good female role model and a female-positive movie. In such an endeavor, the Bechdel test inevitably comes to mind—named after Allison Bechdel, the lesbian visual storyteller who came up with it. The test is based upon three main characteristics of assessment: the number of female characters, the amount of time they spend speaking to each other, and whether the majority of the

discussion is about male characters or not. Despite its limitations, the Bechdel test has had the merits of provoking a debate on the participation of women in the industry—but it has its limitations. A comparison between Marvel's *Captain Marvel* and DC's *Wonder Woman* show the possibilities of the test, along with its limitations. *Wonder Woman* (2017), which barely passes the test, failed to truly break a traditional representation. In the movie, Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman is a traditionally-drawn female character: her governance and strength are based on romantic love for the male hero, and his sacrifice motivates her to do better. And if the central character is a woman, there is only one other female character in this movie, the mousy secretary whose conversation with Wonder Woman is limited to sartorial choices.

In this, *Wonder Woman* is not truly groundbreaking, despite the history of the character—which Angela Robinson highlights in *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (2017). The original comic showed no hint of the romantically-driven blockbuster character. Further, in the comic, the Amazons derived their powers from Aphrodite—but in the movie, their powers come from Zeus, negating the goddess's side of their strength. On the other side of the aisle, *Captain Marvel*, for example, also passes the Bechdel test, but the movie's model of female empowerment is much different than Wonder Woman's. Two scenes in particular come to mind: the bus fight, in which, after an emotional salute to Stan Lee that is even more self-aware and breaking the Fourth Wall than many previous Lee cameos, Captain Marvel suspiciously surveys the bus to find the morphing alien she is pursuing. In a plot twist, the alien turns out to be not the black man in the bus, but the sweet old white lady.

Similarly, at the end of the movie, *Captain Marvel* overturns traditional expectation of the superhero genre—in Captain America's *Winter Soldier* (2014), villain Bartoc goads Captain America in a fistfight, knowing all is lost. Captain America takes off his mask, puts away his shield, and fights him like a man, mano a mano. When Jude Law's Yon Rogg tries to repeat this scene, Captain Marvel seemingly listens patiently—only to blow the villain away to smithereens. “I don't have anything to prove to you,” says Carol Danvers. In addition to the Bechdel test, then, it is useful to contemplate not only distribution of dialogue and type of dialogue, but also history and meaning of gender (and race, and sexuality) representations. *Black Panther's* main character is a man, and yet, by many aspects, the movie is more groundbreakingly feminist, at least for the Wakandians, than many superhero or science-fiction movies or TV shows centering on women. Consider, for example, the casino scene, in which Okoye transforms her offending wig into a weapon—this scene speaks to both female power and black women's complicated history with fake hair, echoing what Viola Davis called the

groundbreaking moment of Annalise Keating's bedroom scene in *How to Get Away with Murder* (2013-present), in which Keating takes off her wig, and the character fights with her husband Sam (see the many articles on the subject, like Phoebe Davidson in *The Cut*, October, 3, 2016; or Davis' *The Wrap* red carpet interview on June 22, 2015; or Caroline Frost's *The Huffington Post UK* October, 29, 2014 cover of Davis' comments on the subject). In taking that wig off, in a fit of anger, and weaponizing it, Okoye builds on the realness of Annalise Keating, and like Davis' character, redefines what femininity can look like for women of the African Diaspora in film.

This is precisely the type of nuances that this collection of essays sets out to capture. Lisa Mazey decided to initiate this book project while completing the coursework phase of her PhD studies at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. After taking a course taught by Dr. Thomas Slater that investigated gender in American-produced films from the 1940s through the 1960s, she became passionate about how films treated gender roles, and specifically women. She therefore submitted a proposal for a session at the Northeast Modern Language Association's 2019 conference, which took place in Washington D. C., hosted by Georgetown University, to further this subject in the medium of television and cinema between the 1950s through present day.

In completing this task, this collection covers a wide variety of subjects, centering around several themes: the challenges of the male-centered gaze, the relationship between queerness/sexual margins and nature, the relationship between women and spirituality, and the genre of science-fiction and its particular place in redefining gender binaries. The book examines these issues through a three-part structure: traditional ways of seeing and the question of male gaze comes first, examining objecthood in gender. Editor of the collection Liza Mazey opens this book by discussing an old trope, dear to Hollywood: that of madness in cinema, and in particular female madness and its gendered representation—not necessarily like *Rebecca's* Mrs. Danvers' obsessional lunacy of the dangerous woman, but the obsession for women that can lead men to instability, like in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). In chapter 2, Yeojin Kim challenges the black-and-white idea of the male gaze, opposing the imperialistic panopticon gaze of the perverted uncle to Hideko's deconstruction of it, in the *Fingersmith* South Korean adaptation, *The Handmaiden* (2016).

A second part examines contemporary movies, and characters living in our now, but aspiring to exist in a way that transcends barriers—in some ways, heroism is the central way of seeing women on screen in those essays. In the third chapter, Mary Jane Androne muses on the similarity between Marchen and Mädchen—marches and maids—and analyzes alternative stories of girlhood set in the woods, in Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone* (2010) and *Leave No*

*Trace* (2018), opposing the traditional domestic scene linked to femininity to dramatic landscapes, and questioning the meaning of open-endings for the tomboy characters. In chapter 4, Forrest Johnson remarks on the bodily experience of the viewer, a question Deleuze already discussed: in showing women's bodies as the place of transcendence and redemption after a cataclysmic event disrupts normal life, Johnson contends that his body of sources (*The Fountain*, 2006; *Silent Light*, 2007; and *The Tree of Life*, 2011) create a dissymmetric experience for women and men, who do not experience the belief, or response to the movie, in the same way.

The last part looks beyond the now to superordinary women. In the fifth essay of this book, E. Leigh McKagen discusses the ways in which the 1990s show *Star Trek: Voyager's* female leader, the first-ever female captain in the Trek 'verse, is groundbreaking, and the ways in which she fails to go beyond traditional binaries, especially in her relationship to Seven of Nine. Then, in chapter 6, Karen J. Tuthill-Jones examines the Third Wave feminism idea of the link between women and nature/spirituality as a herald of change in masculinity: tackling Fox's *Sleepy Hollow* (2013-2017), Tuthill-Jones points out the evolving masculinity of Ichabod Crane and the two female love interests whose contributions shed light on that masculinity, and the traditional centrality of the male character on which female characters are dependent. In chapter 7, through an examination of the gendered history of computing, and its correlated effects on terms like "nerdy" and geek," Hyunyoung Moon identifies a new way to gender the word warrior—traditionally a male occupation, but whose feminization in *Eye in the Sky* (2016) and *Good Kill* (2015) is made possible through the advent of computerized warfare, in the form of drones, manned by women. Finally, the last essay of this collection, "What a Lovely Day!": Using *Mad Max: Fury Road* to Explore Female Representation in Post-Apocalyptic Pop Culture, Evangeline Kroon traces female characters in post-apocalyptic fiction, showing how traditional female roles are meant to protect their male dependents (Sarah Connor in *Terminator*, or Ellen Ripley in *Aliens*), and how *Mad Max: Fury Road* differs from this, while at the same time still presenting some challenges to the critic in depicting the wives as sexualized, albeit decentered from a male gaze.

As these essays make clear, the road is still long for inclusive representation in many national productions, including in the US, for women, and especially women of color. This collection of essays considers cinema and television both—not the same as a singular medium, but, at least in the United States, linked by the same trend of evolving gender representation pushed on by a crop of diverse filmmakers, writers, producers. In fact, in many ways, amongst others, Shonda Rhimes' production firm, Shondaland, has certainly redefined the game in television, and influenced cinema in turn in the past decade—it is

at Shondaland that Angela Robinson worked for many years before she plunged full time in the production and filming of independent movies, and who can imagine the Wakandians without Miranda Bailey's no-nonsense character (*Grey's Anatomy*), and Annalise Keating's (*How To Get Away With Murder*)? The film and television industry coexist as they continue to perpetuate gender binaries alongside new representations, and offer avenues of change, with the democratization of the visual medium; the growth of other, non-Western centric cinemas like Bollywood or the rise of West African directors; the rise of online streaming platforms as studios (Netflix, Hulu, Amazon); and the changing tastes of audiences. The emergence of late-stage capitalism's hyper flexibility and rhizomic, decentered, and flexible models has favored the upsurge of a significant young generation of female movie makers, production moguls, writers, and actresses who are engaging with ways to make the industry less marginalizing and more progressive. What is more, a whole new generation of scholars has followed this growth, and now presents us with questions that overlap gender and sexuality theory, and call on us to decolonize and de-binarize our minds. This volume draws tentative conclusions that call on us to complexify our tropes and critical analysis, and all of its authors hope it will challenge the reader to rethink gender representations on screen.



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