

Wonder Woman: A Look at the Characterization of Women in Hollywood Film

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Author Note

This is a research proposal for an in-depth research study on women in film that will be completed by the end of May 18th, 2018.

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The history of women in media has certainly been a challenging one in terms of gender representation, but most especially in mainstream Hollywood film. Both on screen and off, it has been rather difficult for women working in the film industry due to the ongoing sexism they continue to face. To begin with, the narratives of classic Hollywood film have crafted specific stereotypes and expectations of both genders, constructing a 'generic' female character that has continued to be portrayed throughout mainstream films. To put it simply, women continue to be underrepresented on screen as they are often identified as the lesser of the two sexes. The representation of women in Hollywood has certainly been addressed as a problem, but there is a lack of progression due to the industry continuing to be dominated primarily by men.

However, this is not to say there is a *complete* lack of progress in terms of gender representation within the film industry because there are certainly notable projects that have taken place. Just this past year, a recent mainstream Hollywood film took an Amazonian-sized sword to the norms of women on screen. *Wonder Woman* (2017) was brought to life by a woman named Patty Jenkins, and this film offered a new perspective on what makes a powerful female character. Jenkins was the director of *Wonder Woman* (2017), which certainly provides an explanation as to why the film depicted a more progressive representation of women on screen. The script was written by a man, but Jenkin's interpretation and guided direction of the narrative allowed for a more realistic, yet insightful representation of women on screen. *Wonder Woman* (2017) features a strong female protagonist that is independent and capable of saving the world, which is something that is not typically seen in major Hollywood films. It is important to note that *Wonder Woman* (2017) was highly successful upon its release because this speaks volumes to what the mainstream film audience is willing to consume.

With that being said, the purpose of this research study is to better understand the treatment of women in the film industry, while also discussing the sexism that continues to take place. However, we want to look at how some of the mainstream films are currently challenging, but also attempting to change these stereotypical views of gender previously constructed by classic Hollywood films. These films that are progressive in terms of gender representation, such as *Wonder Woman* (2017), are important to study because they offer a new perspective that needs to be understood and accepted by the film industry. The world of cinema is beginning to offer some positive changes, and while this is certainly a good thing, we need to review the history of women in film and look at some of the causes to explain why this breakthrough is such a large success for women in the film industry.

The growing fight for equality needs to be discussed in terms of solutions, and there are certainly scholars out there attempting to find those solutions by offering their own insights. Within our literature review, we present notable studies that have previously been conducted and use these studies to guide and support our own thoughts about women in film. These studies help to benefit the movement towards a better representation of women in film, but there is certainly more that can be done, which is why we are conducting a study of our own. Due to the fact that we are both females interested in the world of Hollywood film, we are inspired to help provoke change in the way this industry treats women in all areas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional Film Narrative and "The Male Gaze"

Anneke Smelik (2016), the author of *Feminist Film Theory*, discusses the manner in which women have previously been represented in Hollywood film through a stereotypical lens. Smelik (2016) explains female characters within the traditional narrative structure of film have

been consistently objectified, specifically for the male character(s) that appear on screen, ultimately reflecting this notion that female characters are quite submissive and otherwise, vulnerable. On the other hand, male characters are represented on screen in an entirely separate way. The action within the narrative typically revolves around the man, meaning the male character(s) are the primary focus of the film, and of most importance to the story. Smelik (2016) explains these traditional male characters on screen are seen as rather powerful and lively, which is completely opposite to the way a female character is represented within cinema. To this day, females on screen continue to be represented in the manner that Smelik (2016) presented in her article, which clearly deems women as the lesser of the two genders. This particular representation of women is a part of the common narrative to cinema, and it has been for quite some time now. Smelik (2016), and many other scholars have identified this portrayal of women as an ongoing problem within Hollywood, and this representation is the outcome of a concept prevalent in all kinds of media known as “the male gaze”.

The “male gaze” was first presented back in 1989 by Laura Mulvey, and to put it simply, “the male gaze” explains how women are presented on screen. That is, how they are shot in a particular way that is based on the idea that a heterosexual man is the audience, causing the viewer to identify with this specific gaze. Smelik (2016), using Mulvey’s concept, explains that “within the narrative of the film, male characters direct their gaze towards female characters. The spectator in the theatre is made to identify with the male look, because the camera films from the optical, as well as libidinal, point of view of the male character. There are thus three levels of the cinematic gaze (camera, character and spectator) that objectify the female character and make her into a spectacle” (p. 491). To further explain, the objectification of a female character goes beyond the male character on screen. Not only are these female characters objectified by the

male characters on screen, but they are also set up to be objectified by the audience as well, and that is because the camera is primarily connected to what the male character sees as he is the overall focus of the film. Smelik (2016) uses Mulvey's concept to help the reader understand how Hollywood tends to this male gaze, leading to a troubling representation of women in film. However, she mentions this is something that can be changed with experimentation of different techniques, calling for a "feminist counter-cinema" to create change within film and challenge the traditional narrative in cinema (p. 492).

An Example of Challenging "The Male Gaze"

Alyse Keller & Katie L. Gibson (2014) offer a content analysis of a relevant, yet popular film that is worthy of discussion in relation to challenging the male gaze within traditional Hollywood cinema. *The Hunger Games*, which was released back in 2012, "challenges the male gaze by lending narrative agency and control to the female protagonist" (p. 24). A strong female protagonist is quite rare to film in Hollywood, as protagonists are often male, so could this be the spark to a change in cinema? With that being said, *The Hunger Games* allows its viewers to follow a leading female character who is resistant to the patriarchy at hand, and certainly not afraid to fight against it (Keller & Gibson, 2014). Katniss is a strong character, but most importantly she is willing. Throughout the film, she does not depend on anyone else which reflects her independence, along with offering a trait that is unique to the typical female representation on screen.

The narrative of the film primarily follows her actions, causing the viewer to identify with her character and see things from Katniss's perspective as a powerful woman. In conclusion, Keller & Gibson (2014) imply "the rhetoric of *The Hunger Games* constitutes a transformative female action hero that invites the audience to rethink gendered logics of

vulnerability, agency and protection—logics that anchor most of our cultural stories of heroism” (p. 28), meaning the characteristics that are typically associated with particular genders are used much differently in this film, and challenge the norms. For example, associating protection with a female character is already something that goes against the traditional film narrative, but creating a female hero brings this unique narrative one step further while encouraging the viewers to question the traditional representations that often appear on screen. Keller & Gibson (2014) explain that with action films, giving the audience a female heroine and telling the story from her perspective can alter the stereotypical beliefs of what makes a hero. Action films too often portray the concept that women are weak and need to be saved, highlighting this need for masculinity. However, *The Hunger Games* strayed far from this typical narrative for action films and rather presents a strong female character that shows a woman is capable of being a powerful figure that can fight for herself. (Keller & Gibson, 2014).

Fully-Real Violent Women in Disney Movies

In the 2017 article, *Disney’s Violent Women in Quest of a “Fully Real” Violent Woman In American Cinema*, researcher Zsófia Anna Tóth analyzes multiple Disney films, carefully examining both the protagonists and antagonists present in their narratives. Tóth (2017) compares these characters to the article’s definition of the violent woman and refers to the history of violent women in film, incorporating the idea of the ‘*femme fatale*’ within this discussion. Tóth (2017) studies Disney films from all eras of the company’s history; from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, which was released back 1937, to more recent Disney films like *Moana* (2016). In this particular article, Tóth (2017) provides an in-depth description, definition, and history of the cinematic concept *femme fatale*, while including the terms ‘ingénue’, ‘vamp’, ‘fallen woman’, and ‘true woman’.

Tóth (2017) also touches upon the ‘Madonna-whore dichotomy’, which was first introduced by Clarice Feinman, and discusses how in a patriarchal society, men are made out to be the “protectors of the Madonna and punishers of the whore” (p. 187), reflecting this that idea that their own two different types of women, the good and the bad. Tóth (2017) discusses the film industry today (even post-Production Code era) resists to resolve the dichotomy of the two types of women, making more of a gap between them and creating two distinctive types of female characters. While in the same section of the article, Tóth (2017) quotes herself on the definition and tropes of the *femme fatale* by stating, “...*femme fatale* is that iconic female image which is connected to the figure of the female transgressor and criminal...primarily linked to tragedy and tragic desire and ‘her’ fall is inevitable traditionally...(Tóth 2011)” (Tóth, 2017, p.186).

Tóth (2017) then goes on to begin her explanation of the violent women in Disney/Pixar films, and explains that in stories like *Maleficent* (2014) and *Frozen* (2013,) the roles of well know ‘evil and violent women’ were taken out of their original stories and “actually asked what their problem was. The creators of these stories looked behind the supposed wickedness, vileness and violence of these women and gave them the chance to tell ‘their own’ story...” (Tóth, 2017, p. 188). With that being said, the first film that Tóth (2017) speaks to is *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) by focusing on the female character of the Evil Queen. This character is Snow White’s stepmother and she rules with the help of her magic mirror (Tóth, 2017). Tóth (2017) explains that the Evil Queen was favored by animators, and they were eager to work on the beginning of the film for she was created to be a ‘fully real’ woman with complexity, sexuality, and a purpose “driven to desperate acts by the mirror” (Tóth, p. 189). On the other hand, Snow White often slept or sung for a large portion of the film, barely speaking a word in

comparison to her stepmother, the Evil Queen. Tóth (2017) also explains how the Evil Queen fits into the 'violent woman' and '*femme fatale*' category of cinema, while also briefly mentioning Walt Disney's own feminist history and his call for women's sexual liberation and rights. Many say that this is a direct link to how the women in his movies are portrayed since their creator was such an activist.

Film Industry Sexism: It's International

Since the birth of film, there have been many problems in terms of sexism towards women. Jones & Pringle (2015) discuss this in their article where they examine the history of sexism within the film industry, but also focus on the sexism that is prevalent today as well. Jones & Pringle (2015) explain that sexism is "an agile, dynamic changing and diverse set of malleable representations and practices of power" (p. 38) and continue to discuss how the world of sexism in the film industry is unspeakable. Jones & Pringle (2015) explain how some people say they hold the realities of feminism and equality up high, but they do not put those moral and values into practice, meaning there is only talk from individuals and no action performed. Men say they are equal and the equality is there, but they still receive advantages from it and continue to be privileged by the film industry over their female counterparts.

On the other hand, Jones & Pringle (2015) also point out that in films where women are the decision makers, or in a position to make choices about a film, there tend to be more female roles found overall. More specifically, however, these female characters are in the form of protagonists and other major characters on the screen. In their article, Jones & Pringle (2015) further their claims by talking about the legitimacy of statistics in the research of activism in the film industry, discussing how women should be mindful of their sacrifices. Jones & Pringle

(2015) claim the ‘privilege of denial’ within the film industry and overt sexism is still running around under the guise of anti-sexism.

At the end of the article, Jones & Pringle (2015) discuss the possible ways to manage or combat sexism in the film industry world, which is certainly important to take note of. They explain what it means to call the film industry “inherently sexist”, and reveal how the film industry has been looking at gender when making decisions, rather than other divisions. Jones & Pringle (2015) conclude their article by stating that even though there is much talk about how inequalities will not be accepted, the world of sexism is still alive and this needs to be acknowledged. They call for action and state that “widespread and consistent statistical claims are combatted by lists of token women, by deep-seated belief in talent as a decipher, and by a conservative approach to gender difference” (Jones & Pringle, 2015, p. 46).

Recent Percentage of Strong Female Protagonists in Hollywood

Films like *The Hunger Games* clearly help to break the conventional gender stereotypes Hollywood has come to know through traditional film narratives, but recent studies show there has not been enough of these films created in recent years. That is, those with a strong female protagonist. Brent Lang (2018), in an article published by *Variety* claims that “in 2017, just 24% of protagonists in the 100 highest grossing films were women. That was a drop of five percentage points from 29% in 2016” (paragraph 2), showing the number of female protagonists actually fell as another year passed in Hollywood. With that being said, 24% of female protagonists in Hollywood’s most popular films is already a fairly low number, so to have that fall even lower would not be an ideal outcome in terms of allowing for change within the traditional film narrative. Lang (2018) continues to explain how male dominance in the film industry has not changed, however. When looking at characters with speaking lines in

Hollywood's most popular films of 2017, 79% percent of the time 10 or more male characters spoke on screen, but with women, it was only 32% of the time (Lang, 2018).

One of the most popular films of this past year was *Wonder Woman* (2017), a film that fell into these percentiles and featured a strong female protagonist as its lead character. Its release was highly anticipated by many, and critics were highly impressed with the film after its release. *Wonder Woman* (2017) was a big success in Hollywood and became quite the sensation among its viewers. This film featured a strong protagonist that was not only female, but a superhero as well. Film Critic Neil Soans (2017) explained *Wonder Woman* (2017) was "a blend of an uplifting & humorous outlook with strong female characters, that does justice to the iconic female superhero" (paragraph 3). The success of this film is a moment to take note as it has been said to break away from the traditional Hollywood narrative we are often exposed to.

RQ1: How does *Wonder Woman* characterize and reflect gender roles, specifically in relation to female characters, in Hollywood film?

METHOD

For this particular research study, we will conduct a qualitative textual analysis of the film *Wonder Woman* (2017) by thoroughly and repeatedly observing the film and its content. The purpose of a textual analysis is to evaluate the language presented through a text or a cultural artifact. With a textual analysis, language is not necessarily restricted solely to words, and that is because the term 'text' in this context can relate to visuals and sounds as well, not just the printed word. As a society, there are several types of texts an individual is exposed to every day, and these texts hold a certain type of value that should not go without study. For example, a television show, a song, or even a commercial is considered to be a cultural artifact. Anything

that an individual can find meaning in about the society that surrounds them can be deemed as a text, and these texts can be analyzed through the interpretive method of textual analysis.

We chose to perform a textual analysis for this research study due to its evaluative nature. With a textual analysis, we have chosen to closely examine *Wonder Woman* (2017), which gives us the ability to acquire the information we are specifically looking for in relation to our research question. This choice to comprehensively and thoroughly study the content of this film will allow us to obtain the answer(s) to our proposed research question and come to a supported conclusion that uses sufficient evidence from the film. *Wonder Woman* (2017) acts as our singular sample to this study and choosing to look primarily at the film makes this a rather purposive sample. In other words, when making the decision to use the film as our sample, we were mainly influenced by our overarching research question and nothing else. We chose to analyze the film primarily based on the question we were asking, clearly identifying this as a purposive sample. To conduct our textual analysis of this film, or in other words, our sample, we will access *Wonder Woman* (2017) through a purchased DVD and view the film several times, individually. With that being said, we will know when to stop reviewing the film once we reach the point of theoretical saturation. That is, once we begin to notice the same themes and values within the film and begin to come to the same conclusion(s) as researchers. This moment will be our indication as researchers that we have studied the sample enough to move forward with our analysis.

In order to create a detailed, yet credible textual analysis of the film *Wonder Woman* (2017), we will examine the overall framework and content of the film, using this material to find a connection to our research question. On the other hand, we will also connect our chosen conceptual definitions that were influenced by our sources from the literature review. These

conceptual definitions include the *male gaze* and *sexism*. When connecting these ideas to our analysis, this will help us to further our own claims about the film and the representation of gender within it. We plan to look at how these concepts play a role in *Wonder Woman* (2017), using their application to the film as a guide to answer our overarching research question and make our claims. With that being said, incorporating these sources and their concepts also speaks to the validity of our research as we are bringing in credible knowledge and using this information to help inspire and support our own conclusions. However, we also have triangulation within our research, and this can also speak to the validity of our research due to the multiple perspectives we have performing the same study. Rather than just having one individual study *Wonder Woman* (2017) and its representation of women, we have two researchers working on this analysis, comparing their thoughts and ideas to come to a more reliable conclusion.

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