PRETTY/VIOLENT: CINEMATIC ACTION HEROINES FROM 2015 TO 2020

Ryan Michael Monk

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2021

Committee:

Becca Cragin, Advisor

Esther Clinton

ABSTRACT

Becca Cragin, Advisor

Hollywood filmmakers have recently, and dramatically, changed their depictions of women in Action Movies in the Two-Thousand-Teens. There has been a dramatic disparity between images of violent men and violent women. However, filmmakers are now giving action heroines the same attention they gave to action heroes. This thesis examines *Mad Max: Fury Road, Atomic Blonde*, *Wonder Woman*, *Wonder Woman 1984*, and *Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn* to make clear much of the progress, and one or two pitfalls, these films have presented audiences with, including the use of tropes that were previously, in terms of Hollywood major motion pictures, mostly only seen in male-led Action Movies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Dr. Becca Cragin (chair) and Dr. Esther Clinton, and Bowling Green State University, for allowing me opportunity to develop my thoughts under their tutelage, Dr. Jeffery A. Brown for letting me T.A. his class, Women in Action Movies, and my colleagues Tricia Ennis and Blue Profitt, whom I met at BGSU, for their attention to detail and for going out to the movies with me so much the theatre felt like a dorm room. I would also like to thank Dr. Dan Stuart for his guidance, my colleague and hetero-life-mate Tyler Barnum, for the countless hours of watching and discussing film. And finally, my parents, for showing me so many great movies.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I first began seriously considering the depiction of women in film shortly after I got to college around 2002. My roommate convinced me to join his Kung Fu class, and, of course, we'd talk about which Martial Arts and Action Movies we liked. One day as we were in my roommate's parents' kitchen talking about the *Lara Croft* adaptation, his aunt heard us kvetching that the choreography is ridiculous and that Jolie is a bit twiggy to be a convincing threat. She rightly called us out on it, saying something to the effect of, "Well I still think that movie is a good thing for girls to have! Because at least, it's something!" My initial thought was, "What? That masturbation fodder? That's not exactly helping them." I had grown up watching *Aliens* (1979) and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), and Sigourney Weaver and Michelle Yeoh had shown me what good, convincing female fighters looked like. I had also seen those actresses in less-than-stellar pretenses, and knew that not all things were equal. I was a teenager in the 1990s, and remembered all the prevalent lust for a pixelated Lara. I knew what a thirst trap was, even though that term didn't exist yet. I didn't keep up with the Kung Fu, but I kept looking at these Action Movie heroines.

In 2001, Paramount Pictures and Mutual Film Company released the Angelina Jolie vehicle *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, directed by Simon West. The film features a waifish Jolie jumping around in laughably bad action sequences, which serve to objectify her physique more than convey danger. Jolie reprised the role in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider - The Cradle of Life* (2003), which was directed by Jan de Bont. Fifteen years later, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and GK Films produced *Tomb Raider* (2018), starring Alicia Vikander and directed by Roar Uthaug. The new film's trailer presents audiences with a tellingly different version of the character than

previous iterations. Instead of focusing on a model performing impossible acrobatics, wearing those iconic short shorts, or flicking her hair back while she bathes, the new trailer presents Vikander covered in dirt, running through the jungle, realistically punching bad guys, and jumping through obstacles. In short, Vikander's Croft has more in common with John McClane from *Die Hard* (1988) than Jolie's character. Interestingly, the cinematographer for *Die Hard* was Jan de Bont.

Even their respective movie posters tell a different story. For the 2001 poster, Jolie stands in a cowboy shot, light reveals her face and cascades down her bosom, and an improbably long ponytail whips out behind her. The rest of her body is in silhouette, which is impossible except in Photoshop. Her legs are wide, and the logo rests tantalizingly over her groin. In the posters for the sequel, Jolie wears a skin-tight diving bodysuit, light hugs her curves, and she wears a gun belt that has straps running from the hip to the crotch, so that they create a triangle over her pelvis. The effect implies a bikini without her having to wear one. She looks more like a Bond girl than the lead in an Action Movie.

By contrast, for the 2018 posters, instead of seeing smooth and pristine skin, filmmakers show Vikander dirty and muscular. In one poster, she's in the notorious "butt-first" pose, in which an actor twists her body so both her bosom and backside are visible. Instead of highlighting her sexual characteristics, however, the emphasis is on Vikander's defined triceps and deltoids. Her ponytail is reasonable and unkempt, befitting a woman who pulls her hair back, so it will not get in the way while she aims. The new film's advertising material turns away from the hyper-sexualized version of Croft. This new representation is noteworthy because of how different it is from its predecessor.

Though studying representation in movies is noteworthy, so, too, is examining the environment that produces them. A larger study would include an examination of those who worked on this franchise, whether they were male or female, whether they considered how to avoid objectifying her. That is not to say that analyzing what is in front of the camera is less important than what's behind it. From watching television and movies, audiences can cultivate meaning that they can believe to be reality. As Yvonne Tasker suggests in *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*, "Cultural production involves the work of characterization and performance" (204). When audiences see female protagonists valued for their physical appearance and male protagonists for their physical actions, this divide reinforces hegemonic notions of patriarchy: that men are doers and women are to be done. Conversely, when audiences see women as heroines, they must confront stereotypical notions they may have cultivated from decades of film.

The short answer scholars tend to give when asked, "What even is Popular Culture Studies?" is "It's the folklore surrounding popular, mass-produced texts." That's a good line, but that's only a third of it. The other two thirds are production analysis (because these things don't come from nowhere, and they're not necessarily organic to a culture, rather built to market to one) and, of course, textual analysis, because these texts contain narratives to enthrall their markets. How the audience understands them is a different element altogether.

When it comes to the medium of film, or what we should probably now call cinema to distinguish it from the endless slough of content on streaming services, I think there are really only three valid audiences a filmmaker should consider. First, there is yourself, as that's the purest form of imagination. The thought goes--I want to see this idea, this story, this

representation in a film, therefore, I'm making it. Second, there's whomever you're trying to seduce, be it an audience of peers or film buffs or an ethnic group or a nationality. With this group, the filmmaker is trying to not just get their dollar, but their approval too. As such, these filmmakers are quick to list their names on their work. The third and heaviest group, and therefore most consequential, is everybody. The creatives who make these films are also quick to credit themselves, but that's also because their names have become selling points. The concept of everybody has gotten wider relatively recently. Two decades ago, the largest cinema market was America, and filmmakers attuned to their sensibilities to that market. After James Cameron made *Avatar* (2009), which quickly earned a billion dollars worldwide and has to date earned over 2.8 billion dollars (boxofficemojo), Hollywood took notice, and that film became a model. Warner Brothers' *The Dark Knight* and Marvel's *Iron Man* both came out in 2008, and which added to legitimizing such big ventures.

In order to see that kind of return, studios would need to prop up a big tent picture, where initial production costs needed to be over 200 million (Avatar's was 237 [Mendelson]), and the movie had to play well with foreign audiences, which often means elements that don't translate, like wordplay and culturally specific humor, get axed. Instead, filmmakers pushed for more action scenes, slapstick, and more easy-to-understand plots. As the audience got wider, the most common denominator shrank lower. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has hastened the inevitable, and China is now the world's largest movie market (Brzeski). The effects of that shift are not yet clear but will be profound. I mention these economic realities to make clear the importance of them.

Societies the world over are now willing to see women as warriors, including in their own armed forces, as over 30 women have now graduated U.S. Army Ranger training (Lacdan), and Japan's Self-Defense Force now has a female fighter pilot (*The Japan Times*). Hollywood has responded to these market and societal pressures with films that are somewhat like Spaghetti Westerns: they often star women as Americans but aren't necessarily for American women. They'll feature women as the lead action star, but only the ones they feel are attractive to their audiences.

I suspect these filmmakers think that not only do we want to see women be violent and suffer violence, but we still insist they're pretty. The larger the audience, the more conventionally attractive Hollywood will cast. It's as though there's a new kind of triple threat emerging, one that requires a would-be heroine to be good at acting, fighting, and being pretty. The acting is actually the easiest part, considering the nature of filmmaking with the option of multiple takes, but the fighting requires months of martial and strength training just to be able to perform complex choreography, let alone actually hit hard. And by today's standards, being pretty requires just as much work as being good at singing or dancing.

But these existent factors do not mean filmmakers cannot progress in terms of who is in front of or behind the camera. Although their efforts have already been lauded, it behooves us to understand what a big leap Ripley in *Alien* and *Aliens* was. Ridley Scott took a vehicle that was written for a man and cast a beyond competent Sigourney Weaver. James Cameron and Gale Anne Hurd continued and furthered the representation for *Aliens*, and they grew the character of Sarah Connor for their sequel, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). These filmmakers "cracked the code," as Kevin Smith likes to say. They saw a missing piece of the puzzle and put it in what

are the most technologically advanced films of their time. Which brings me to George Miller and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), a film that made Steven Soderbergh remark, "...I couldn't direct 30 seconds of that" (Blair).

In Chapter One, I analyze George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road*, which stars Charlize Theron, leading me to consider her in *Atomic Blonde* (2017). In Chapter Two, I examine Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020) and bring in Laura Mulvey to consider Gal Gadot's depiction. In Chapter Three, I look at *Birds of Prey*: *And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn* (2020) and how Margot Robbie's depiction changed there from *Suicide Squad* (2016).

CHAPTER ONE

Hollywood filmmakers have recently, and dramatically, changed their depictions of women in Action Movies in the Two-Thousand-Teens. As Sherrie Inness, writing in the previous decade, notices in *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*: "The increase in female action figures suggests that women are gaining a new access to heroic roles, which formerly have predominantly been the providence of men." Most notably in the aughts were Uma Thurman in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2004) films, Summer Glau in Joss Whedon's *Serenity* (2005), and Chloe Grace Moretz in *Kick-Ass* (2010). These three films, all directed by men by the way, position their heroines within familial relationships as mother, sister, and daughter, respectively, and inherently define them by their relationships to the male members of their immediate family.

Tellingly, this current decade has given way to more progressive heroines taking on greater screen time and performing more violent action scenes, such as Charlize Theron in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) and *Atomic Blonde* (2017). This chapter shall focus on those two films in particular. With the former film, I explore how director George Miller produces a fully realized feminist heroine using a little-known yet widely used trope in Westerns and Action Movies, and how Miller preserves his legacy character, Mad Max. With the latter film, I shall explore how director David Leitch further plays with that trope and how the depiction of Theron's body in various states of violence and undress complicates the overall narrative.

From mere sex symbols that exist to support or tempt men, to displaying the pain women suffer at the hands of patriarchy, to becoming the heroine of her own storylines, Theron's filmography is long and prominent enough that it serves as a microcosm for how women have

been depicted in popular media. Before breaking into film, Theron was a model, a mere object to be gazed at. Her early film work is an extension of that voyeuristic state. She was initially known for romantic comedies such as *Sweet November* (2001) or for playing eye candy in *The Curse of The Jade Scorpion* (2001) and *The Devil's Advocate* (1997). She then established herself as a serious dramatic actress and won an Academy Award for 2003's *Monster,* before starring in two films that tried to present her as a suitable heroine: *Aeon Flux* (2005) and *Hancock* (2008). Both films were box office duds, and Theron's acting talents were hamstrung by the films' emphases on her looking good in ridiculous outfits and matching choreography.

It was a surprise, then, to see her fit the role of heroine so well when she took the reins in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. In 2015, that film garnered overwhelmingly positive reviews (98 percent on Rotten Tomatoes) and six Oscars for Miller's imaginative world building and cinematography of car chases. The film served as a palate cleanser for audiences who grew tired of aggressively stupid and aggressively macho car-chase films, such as *Furious 7*, which came out one month earlier.

Yet *Fury Road* did not sit well with many so-called men's rights advocates, usually a decent sign of feminism making ground. They lamented that Max took orders from Furiosa (Clarey). In this film, Max surrenders his rifle, his phallus, to Furiosa, and gets beat down by a one-armed woman. The men's rights advocates felt Miller betrayed them (Clarey). The teaser trailer and previous films had promised the male demographic their cliché silent hero who could murder and drive his way through the savage wasteland.

Co-star Tom Hardy even admitted, "In many ways it's her film, and Max is on for the ride" (Blu-ray extra). Hence the film's subtitle "Fury Road." It's Furiosa who takes the convoy

off the patriarch's road and blazes her own path. She's the impetus for the film's plot and freneticism. The women of the film don't need Max to save them. It's as Tina Turner's character sang for the third installment, "We don't need another hero. We don't need to know the way home. All we want is life beyond the Thunderdome" (Turner). What then does the former protagonist Mad Max have to offer?

Audiences have waited a long time for a heroine like Furiosa. Since the medium's inception, Hollywood has relegated women to be sidekicks and accessories to men. In the '90s, we saw heroines like Lara Croft and G.I. Jane, both of which are problematic for reasons too long to repeat. The last decade gave us *Kill Bill*'s the Bride, *Kick-Ass*'s Hit-Girl, then Gina Carano in *Haywire* (2011). What makes *Fury Road* such a feminist cinematic milestone is how many progressive strides it made in what should have merely been a Western with cars, as the preceding films were. While the film's premise is silly, it's hard to overstate the shifts that George Miller's Wagnerian feminist monster-truck show represents. We were finally seeing women dish out, and more importantly, withstand a beating. Another hurdle was many heroines relied on fantastical powers in order to be dominant. Many expect a supernatural reason as to why a woman would kick a man's ass. The problem is not that there aren't male heroes that aren't realistic, it's that Hollywood wasn't allowing women to be naturally superior. As Oscar-nominated director and world Karate champion Lexi Alexander said, "When there is a child or woman fighting, you have to design the fight choreography in a way that people buy it. And kicking a guy twice your weight--I have done it. They do not move" (Fatman on Batman).

As Deadpool so brilliantly put it during a bout with female henchmen in his film (2016), “Is it sexist if I don’t hit you?” Allow me to answer that. When men are allowed a certain representation and women are not, then, yes.

Miller avoids many pitfalls of the action genre when it comes to representing women: Furiosa doesn’t get into any catfights, she doesn’t have a father figure from whom she learns her badassery. She’s a road warrioress in her own right. In fact, her costume is a mirror of Max’s: he wears a coat that has one big shoulder pad and is missing a sleeve; Furiosa is missing an arm and has a large shoulder pad. Whether the two main characters are fighting each other or bad guys, Miller’s always comparing the two. She’s also disabled, but the film doesn’t treat it as much of a disability. At one point, Furiosa hits Max with her stub.

And speaking as a man who’s spent a lifetime staring at women on screen, while watching this film, I totally forgot to objectify Charlize Theron. That’s because Miller’s camera doesn’t linger lustfully on any of his principals. We know he can show such sexuality, and he does briefly with the shot of the wives washing off with the firehose. Though, that scene is more about showing how thirsty Max is than his sexual desires, which he seems to have no interest in. To have a male protagonist who doesn’t want to bang his female compatriots is actually atypical for the genre.

Miller’s also pretty wise when it comes to showing sexual violence. All of that is Greek and happens off stage, off camera. The wives have obviously suffered through rape and bondage and the film addresses that suffering. Yet *Fury Road* doesn’t exploit such depravity like *Game of Thrones* does. Miller even had Eve Ensler, writer of *The Vagina Monologues*, visit the set to discuss with the actresses what enduring such torture would be like (Dockterman).

Yvonne Tasker notices the disparity between heroes and heroines in *Working Girls* (1998). “There is a tension between the images of strength accruing to the female action hero and the narratives with which they are contained” (69). There is a tension, too, between the images of tough women and the ridiculous ways in which they take care of the bad guys. It follows suit that the literal performance of the heroine, the manner in which she fights, will shape our cultural narratives. Thus these performances shape our ideas of what a woman can and cannot do.

Sherrie A. Inness stresses the studying of toughness in *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (1999). According to Inness, ever since the Action Movies of the ‘80s and ‘90s, “…as real women, influenced by the ideas of feminism, step into even tougher roles, the media also change. No longer is the little lady content to stay at home and knit socks; now, she is apt to carry a submachine gun and be trained in martial arts” (6). Now that feminism has helped us attain warrior women with guns, we need to take it one step further and examine how women use their guns.

In typical Action Movies where the male protagonist is joined by a female sidekick, Inness notes the type of fighting reserved for the heroines, “…it is always obvious that [the female sidekick] is less important than the hero. Her male cohorts are at the center of the action and engage in the heavy fighting. The sidekick also may tote a gun, but her primary mission is to parade around in a skimpy outfit… revealing her shapely form” (2).

How then are we to judge performance? For this I turn to Paul Smith’s essay “Eastwood Bound” (1993). Building upon Steve Neale’s article “Masculinity as Spectacle” (1983), Smith identifies the formula for masculine toughness in the Action and Western genres. “The heroic male is always physically beaten, injured, and brought to a breaking point…[until] the hero is

permitted to emerge triumphant within the movie's narrative line" (81). Smith goes on to say how the objectification of the hero's body is "pleasure yielded to the sadistic gaze, and where the destruction of the male body is to be grasped as a masochistic trope."

Smith finds that when it comes to the destruction and enjoyment of the body in three stages, (95) which I've summed up as Dominant, Masochistic, and Sadistic (D/M/S). First, the male body is shown as powerful and flawless, and the audience is invited to delight in watching this figure exist. Second, as the hero engages tougher enemies, he is hurt. In a sense, he is rendered impotent. While the audience now fears for the hero, they also take pleasure in watching the destruction of his previously flawless body (think *Fight Club*). Third, the hero overcomes the destruction of his body to reestablish his dominance, thereby reaffirming patriarchal ideals of male supremacy. By ascending through these stages, the male action hero escapes the mere objectification of his body to be viewed as something deeper. That, in addition to a physically-capable body, he possesses a mind smart enough to defeat his opponents.

One can best see how these stages make a hero more than just a bodily presence in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). First we see Indiana Jones dispatch henchmen with ease. Then Indiana encounters the big Nazi, who is actually a stock character of Action Movies, which I call the "heavy." He's a sort of mid-level boss the hero must defeat to reach his way to the main villain. He's usually big or more adroit than the hero, a captain to other henchmen, and, as an alpha male, is often a phallic representation of the antagonist's authority. Spielberg reuses such a character in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom.* Interestingly, Hollywood is starting to give us more female heavies, such as Gazelle in *Kingsman* (2014) and Angel Dust in *Deadpool*.

The big Nazi, the heavy who obviously knows how to box, repeatedly knocks Indiana down. Spielberg plays this for thrills, putting Indy squarely in the masochism stage. Because he cannot outfight the Heavy, Indy tricks him into standing in front of a plane propeller. Spielberg includes the briefest shot of Indy wickedly grinning at his rouse, indicating the hero, as well as the audience, will delight in watching a Nazi get sadistically ripped to shreds.

Martial Arts films hardly use this D/M/S trope, probably because one underlying message of the genre is that the superior martial art is what allows the hero to win. In *Bloodsport*, Jean-Claude Van Damme dominates his way through lesser foes. He then encounters the film's heavy, Bolo, who really hurts him. So Van Damme is somewhat in the masochism stage, but instead of tricking Bolo into standing in front of a plane propeller (strictly against Queensbury rules), he remembers something from his training which allows him to win. Having a protagonist go sadistic and cheating would be antithetical to the hero's display of superior martial arts.

Mad Max: Fury Road is the first Hollywood film that clearly puts a woman through the D/M/S trope. Throughout the movie, Furiosa shoots, rams, and detonates her opponents. She has a well-choreographed fight with Max, in which the two seem to not only fight for a gun, but also who gets to be the film's protagonist. When Max tries to drive off with her truck, it stalls. Furiosa informs him she's the only one able to drive it, which is Miller's way of saying she's the one who drives this plot. She again asserts her dominance when Max concedes she's the better shot, and lets her use him as a stand on which to perch a rifle.

But Miller doesn't want to abandon his original character. In order to keep Max relevant while Furiosa takes the reins, Max becomes her spiritual guide and savior. (When you saw only one set of tire tracks, that's when I was driving the war rig). After a number of battles, the two

characters finally trust each other. That they're in the desert when she communes with Max is no accident.

Furiosa says in reference to the brides she rescued from the patriarch Immortan Joe, "They're looking for hope."

"And you?" Asks Max.

"Redemption."

After encountering warrior women who seem content to wander the wastes, Max finally offers her a path. His guidance towards that redemption at first seems very uncatholic: "You know hope is a mistake. If you can't fix what's broken, you'll go mad." Which he knows cause he's *Mad* Max. He's telling her that women can't abandon patriarchal society, because there is no respite in the wastes, there is no "green place," as the brides hope for. It's up to women to go back to the world of men to fix it.

In the final car chase back to Immortan Joe's citadel, Miller operatically displays D/M/S and furthers Max's messiah imagery. Furiosa helms the truck while simultaneously throwing knives into henchmen. Max joins the warrior women to fight the patriarch's warboys. Clearly, Furiosa is in command and dominant, and so are the warrior women who pick off henchmen. Miller shows multiple characters go through the stages to make the trope grander.

As more henchmen make it onto the war rig, one fires a nail gun at Max's head. He throws up a hand and takes the nail in his palm, reminiscent of the crucifixion. (By the way, to all the men's rights activists who are mad about Furiosa using Max's rifle, in this scene Max steals one of the warrior women's guns to kill a bad guy.) A henchman slips a noose around Furiosa's neck, one steals a bride, another chainsaws a woman's neck. Max falls and Furiosa catches him

with her prosthetic arm. Then another bad guy stabs a screwdriver into her ribs, and the audience is thrilled to see if she can hang on. Clearly, Miller puts his characters into masochism.

Then Max makes it to another vehicle, and Miller does an interesting juxtaposition. As Max wrenches the gear shift, the film does a cut on action to Furiosa pulling out the screwdriver, then cuts back to Max popping out the nail. It's as though the two are sharing stigmatas and masochism, the screwdriver being the spear Christ was stabbed with, and, again, the nail being part of the crucifixion.

The film's heavy arrives, and this character's full name is Rictus Erectus. Clearly, he's a phallic symbol, and the embodiment of his father Immortan Joe's authority. Furthermore, that the war boys paint themselves white is not just a reference to the character Screwloose in *Beyond Thunderdome*. Much of the plot deals with these white soldiers trying to penetrate the hull of Furiosa's war rig to steal back the patriarch's pregnant bride. Such visuals serve as an allegory for rape.

True to the trope, Rictus is bigger and stronger and manhandles the good guys. Max taunts Rictus, sacrificing himself so Furiosa can headbutt her way onto Immortan Joe's vehicle. Wounded, Furiosa grits her teeth and smiles and she climbs up to his window. She hooks a harpoon on his facemask, and sadistically says through bloodied teeth, "Remember me?" She catches the harpoon's line in the vehicle's tire, which rips the patriarch's mask and jaw off. In a Wagnerian crescendo, a bereft Rictus tears off part of the war rig's engine and stands erect in flames. The truck flips and the Erectus topples, along with any power the patriarch once held.

Furiosa passes out from her injuries, and here Miller solidifies the Messiah Max concept. Up until now, Max has withheld his name from her. Max rigs a blood transfusion from himself to

her and then tells her his name. That Furiosa doesn't get to know his name till she accepts his blood is reminiscent of the ritual of sacrament—taking his blood to know Him.

The Messiah Max concept explains what at first seems to be a few incongruities in the film. Namely, how old is Max anyway? Entire cultures and subcultures have arisen, such as the women tribe of “Swaddle Dog" that Furiosa hails from. This world has industries such as Gas Town and Bullet Farm. Fury Road is actually post post-apocalyptic, and Max has been around since the before time, in the long long ago. He’s now some sort of lingering spirit, guiding the good back to civilization. He’s a cop, after all.

In addition to Max’s new role as savior, this film has smatterings of Christianity throughout it. Such as when the women discuss what to do when they find the war boy Nux: “No, we've already decided he doesn't know what he's doing.” This line is similar to Jesus' sentiment regarding those crucifying him: “Forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Or that weird scene where Max washes himself in breastmilk: that’s his John the Baptist moment. That’s when Max is joining the tribe of women, and they no longer view him with suspicion. He is washing himself in women’s essence to wash away the sins of the world of men. The film even ends with a baptism, as the milk mothers, now free of their oppressor, drench the scarred land and people in water.

That Max leaves Furiosa at the end of the film is telling. As she goes up the lift to the citadel, the scene features two shots: one from her point of view, looking down at Max; and one from his point of view, watching Furiosa ascend. Max gives her a nod of approval and turns into the crowd to be lost and wandering again, while the last shot is on her, as the lift pushes her up and out of frame, clearing indicating that while the movie began with a shot of Max in the

wastes, the movie ends with a shot of Furiosa, making her the true protagonist, one which Miller has said he will follow up with in the prequel.

Two years later in July 2017, Focus Features released David Leitch's *Atomic Blonde*. Its modest budget of 30 million dollars eventually garnered over a hundred million worldwide (boxofficemojo.com). It was met with mixed reviews. The story drags throughout the third act, but Leitch, who previously worked on the film *John Wick*, packed his film with gruesome and interesting fight scenes. Some brutal enough that it makes one wonder how often we get to see cinematic heroines perform such violence.

When it came to action heroines of the '80s, as Jeffery Brown describes in *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, there was and is a constant struggle to "find an appropriate way to sexualize and empower tough women." (53) When it came to one particular stock character, that of "the Bad Girl," Brown notes, she "is required to be both active and static at the same time" (56). Audiences wanted to see women kick ass, but filmmakers still thought the market was largely men, so selling them graphic images seemed and was profitable. To refer back to Yvonne Tasker's *Working Girls*, she notes the tension in film between "an image built, designed for contemplation in static poses and the situation of such images within the context of action. By extension it is possible to understand the difficulties involved in putting the eroticized female image from pinup into 'action'..."(70).

As Brown notes, "The problem, at its simplest, is that this double bind constructs these emerging roles for women as both a heroic subject and as a sexual object" (8). He later adds that this character in particular and all heroines since were so "thoroughly conceived within the sexual logic that strong female characters must also be beautiful that her strength can easily be

overshadowed by the fantasy of her as a dominatrix, an erotic spectacle, and as a sexual commodity for men" (241).

Leitch's *Atomic Blonde* is one such film that tries to have its action cake and eat its femininity too. It begins with a bruised, battered, naked Charlize Theron tending to her wounds in a bathtub full of ice. Whereas her character in *Mad Max: Fury Road* escapes objectification, here Leitch's narrative centers on looking at Lorraine (Theron) through the male gaze. However, the choice to show her in the masochistic state, Smith's second stage, troubles the male gaze. She's not pleasantly propped up for easy consumption and objectification. Her bruising makes us consider her as a character. By beginning the film with the effects of violence rather than what caused them, the audience is left to wonder what kind of person she is. Is she a warrior and these are the results of battle (as they indeed turn out to be), or is she a battered woman? The scene plays out with her pulling a photograph of her late boyfriend, whom we saw get killed in a pre-credits scene, and igniting the image. For all the audience knows at this point, her injuries could have been caused by him. Throughout the film, Lorraine's relationships with men are inexorably linked to violence, either suffering at their hands or at their request. Her relationship with women, however, is more complicated, even though there's really only one other female character of note: her lover, the French spy Delphine Lasalle.

The film is told through flashbacks. Lorraine is an MI6 agent, and her debriefing in front of British and American spymasters provides the structure for these flashbacks. She reports for her meeting after carefully applying makeup over her bruises and mixing painkillers with booze. She arrives wearing a tight black shirt and white leather coat. She must present herself as a model among suit-wearing spooks. She begins her testimony by describing her initial exposure to

Berlin. Her first fight scene involves Lorraine in a car with two double agents. She uses one of her high-heeled shoes as a weapon to jab one of the henchmen in the throat. Unlike much of *Fury Road, Atomic Blonde* ties gendered images such as high heels as weapons. This is a trope Leitch presents throughout the film, such as at the end where blood spatter from a head shot is used to give "lipstick" to a painting of a woman.

Lorraine's second fight scene involves a bunch of policemen confronting her in an apartment she's investigating. As her opponents are not soldiers but merely peace officers, her motivation isn't to kill them. It is merely to incapacitate them. As such, she doesn't shoot or stab them, preferring instead to use improvised weaponry such as hoses and kitchenware. This fight scene got the attention of critics, and Vince Mancini's thoughts on the scene are particularly relevant: "The notion that a sense of humor was the key ingredient in action choreography should've been settled once and for all post-Jackie Chan." Mancini argues that like a joke, a fight scene should have a premise and a punchline. "Sure, *Atomic Blonde* requires you accept the premise that willowy (though statuesque) Charlize Theron can beat up three or four 200-pound army men at once, that is the premise." And watching this premise play out is the joy of solving the puzzle the filmmakers present the audience with.

Later on in the film, Lorraine tries to escape a group of Russian and East German spies tailing her by ducking into a movie theatre. The theatre is playing the Russian Film *Stalker* (1979), and Lorraine ends up on the opposite side of the screen (in which we see *Stalker* being projected in mirror opposite) where she encounters this film's heavy, whom the credits give no other name than "Soldier." Soldier stands taller than the high-heeled Theron and is equipped with a lean frame of sinewy muscle. Confronted with the sight of him, Lorraine puts her keys in

between her fingers, as often instructed in women's self defense classes. In fact, much of this movie plays on women's fears of being assaulted by (large) men. She jabs Soldier so hard the keys become stuck in his face, and we are left to see the horrific image of them dangling from his cheek as he hoists her against a wall. He kicks her through the screen, and she uses the opportunity to retreat.

This encounter is used to set up their characters and their fighting abilities to culminate in the film's climactic fight scene, an over ten-minute long sequence filmed and edited to look like one long take. After she has stabbed and shot her way through half a dozen henchmen, Lorraine encounters Soldier again. And here Leitch takes us through the totality of the dominant, masochistic, and sadistic trope. Lorraine is holed up in an apartment with an asset she must protect. As the first henchmen bursts through the door, she shoots him right in the eye. Through the scene and this moment, she's clearly in the dominant stage. However, she and Soldier quickly run out of bullets, which leaves her to pistol whip him. Just as he withstood the keys to his face, the heavy here endures the beating Lorraine puts on him, and he's able to throw her against the wall, whereupon she collapses with fatigue and pain. As he tries to put another clip into his gun, it's Lorraine's turn to throw him into the wall, and the two exchange volleys of throwing household appliances at each other. This whole scene (of the bigger 10 minute action number) goes on for two-and-a-half minutes, and it's thrilling to watch her keep going as she is badly bloodied. Thus putting her in the masochistic stage.

Lorraine's sadistic turn comes when she picks up a corkscrew. It plays off of the previous usage of the keys-as-a-weapon moment. Despite being incredibly beaten himself, Soldier puts her in a headlock. He says, "Take this, you bitch," at which point she takes the corkscrew out of

his arm and begins jabbing it wildly into his eye and then his neck. “Who’s the bitch now!” she screams as he drops to the floor.

Such moments allow the audience to see Lorraine as a valid action hero, as Vince Mancini likened her to Jason Bourne and said this was the best action movie of the past 15 years. But *Atomic Blonde’s* quieter moments and sex scenes present the audience with a different kind of protagonist. It’s as though the film vacillates between static and active portrayals, as Brown would say. *Atomic Blonde* has its sex appeal, Theron in states of undress and engaging in lesbian sex, which the producers advertised in the trailer. It’s as though they’re saying her alluring body is half the reason to come to the theatre. It should be noted that in her sex scene with Delphine, Lorraine is always “the top.” Which allows straight men and lesbians of the audience to fantasize about being Lorraine and being with Lorraine. Lietch uses *Re-flex*’s “The Poilitics of Dancing” to score their sex. The song is both supremely ‘80s sounding, with its emphasis on synthesizers, and reinforces the queer nature of this scene. The song might as well be called “The Politics of Sex.” The scene also uses what some now call “bisexual lighting,” that is the blue and pink lighting reminiscent of the bisexual pride flag. Many queer audiences enjoy this color scheme because they then read that the scene is “for them,” as if the two statuesque actresses going down on each other wasn’t enough. Leitch, to my knowledge, has not addressed why he used this color scheme so blatantly. It’s entirely possibly the severe neon was an attempt to convey what the ‘80s Berlin club scene was like.

As Charlize Theron’s career has progressed, so has the political nature of her roles. While a film like *Monster,* with its explicit feminist nature, can be easily accessed and examined, scholars should equally consider the work in more popular genres such as Action Movies. If a

goal of feminism is consciousness raising, and we want to penetrate the misogynists' mindset, then we must insist cinematic heroines perform at the same level as or better than their male counterparts. Not only does reviving old macho properties with feminist themes and characters confront chauvinism, but, as Warner Brothers and Focus Features proved, it's profitable as well.

CHAPTER TWO

On June 2 of 2017, Warner Brothers released Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman*. I highlight Jenkins' authorship because, unlike the other films producer Zack Snyder has directed, Jenkins took effort to avoid what film theorist Laura Mulvey called the male gaze. That is the scopophilic, voyeuristic way filmmakers use cinematography, editing, and mise en scene to create a cinematic code (Mulvey 843). Women become passive objects of desire, while men become the active, and the audience can then join them in objectifying the actresses (Mulvey 843). Since Hollywood has been telling men's stories from men's perspectives since its beginning, the onus was on Jenkins to not let Wonder Woman fall victim to that same voyeuristic cinematic code. Instead, she challenged how an audience conditioned by presumably years of the male gaze understands this film.

Mulvey noted of the films *Only Angels Have Wings* and *To Have and Have Not* that both begin "with the woman as object of the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists" (840). Having male actors introduce Wonder Woman (Diana) would lead the audience to view her as they do, as Snyder did in *Batman v Superman* (2016). Jenkins avoids the problem by simply having Diana introduce herself. The film is jam-packed with painful exposition, but here in the opening, it's totally justifiable: "I used to want to save the world, this beautiful place, but I knew so little then." Jenkins sets up that an established heroine is about to reveal her own backstory. The first character to appear is Diana, marching to work in a civilian dress: a dark red sweater, skirt and a matching shawl, which from behind looks like a cape. The outfit is both eye-catching and modest. The shawl covers Gal Gadot's figure, opposite to the way her superhero costume draws attention to it.

Diana's impetus for telling her story is a package from Bruce Wayne containing a photo of her from World War I. Warner Brothers likely mandated the mention of the other films in the DC Extended Universe, just as Marvel has done with their films. Unlike Marvel's cross referencing, however, where one character meets another, Jenkins' choice of a disembodied letter instead of Ben Affleck prevents the men in the audience to view Gadot from a man's perspective. Mulvey states that “by means of identification with [a male protagonist], through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too." (840). Everyone else in the film up until this point is a faceless extra, which forces the spectator to contend solely with Diana.

The disruption of the male gaze continues as Diana recounts her upbringing on Themyscira, an island populated only by women. Seeing Diana as a child so early in the film de-sexualizes her to the audience, and the women-only space does a fair bit of challenging the old cinematic code. We see characters passing the Bechdel test, which is seeing two women talk about something other than men. We see women as active leads in the story, and we see Amazons train with each other, which doesn't tempt us to consider how one would fare against a man. When men do finally show up in the form of World War I Germans, the suspense behind the action is not one of sex-based difference, but of technological difference: bows against rifles. This women-only space works so well, it makes me wonder how many films would be better if they spent the first ten minutes with just women.

Wonder Woman as a character, however, can't fully escape objectification for a number of reasons. One has to do with the iconic costume she's donned since 1941. In order to tie her to the legacy of the comics, Jenkins had to dress her in something reminiscent of the original. But thankfully, she did not go with the star-spangled bikini bottom. When Mulvey wrote “Visual

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Wonder Woman was played by Lynda Carter wearing little more than a glorified swimming suit. Gadot, on the other hand, wears something more reminiscent of Hoplite armor, which further associates her with ancient Greek mythology. Her skirt is quite short, which the audience indubitably will examine, but such a high cut makes some sense given it's from a society of only women, so why should they care? The costume is not perfect as armor, as it doesn't cover her upper chest and shoulders, but it's an acceptable compromise.

What still confounds is Jenkins decision to have Wonder Woman in wedge heels. Why would an island of Amazons develop those? They're already statuesque! And her greaves cover them anyway. We wouldn't see them except for a shot at the end where Jenkins has a close up of her feet coming down. Perhaps one reason is Jenkins wanted Gadot (5'10") to be as tall as her male co-star, Chris Pine (6'), so they can see each other eye to eye. But because her heels are in a close up, that indicates Jenkins is trying to tell us something. Perhaps they are to help signify her as a woman, as if we needed any reminding.

Another hurdle of objectification is one central to all visual media: our desire to stare at the beautiful. Although society reinforces this desire, it's one that's "hardwired" into the experience of film. So it's no surprise Warner Brothers cast a tall actress who was once a beauty queen (Miss Israel 2004, YouTube.) Thank Hera Gadot can actually act, otherwise she'd have just been eye candy. But that doesn't negate the gaze.

Watching film, no matter how it's constructed, is an act of voyeurism, and it "satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking" (Mulvey 836). You can look at the pretty lady on the screen, and she's not going to look back at you and call you a creep. Even if the film does that, it

doesn't dissuade the audience, because they know it's an illusion. Frankly, men will gaze as long as they have eyes. Mulvey speaks to this: "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. ... she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (837). But just because we know “pervs gonna perv” doesn't mean cinematographers must reinforce it. Or that we can't reverse it, or call it out within the narrative.

Wonder Woman's cinematographer Mathew Jensen and editor Martin Walsh assisted in both turning men into passive objects for women to look at, and to find a balance in which neither sex is inherently weak. The first use of a character intensely looking is young Diana, and her eyeline matches with a cut to watching the Amazons train. Diana's subsequent mimicking of the Amazons' movements is a mirror to what the audience wishes they could do: be like those strong women.

Jenkins and her crew reverse the gaze in another eyeline match cut when Diana first gets a good look at Steve Trevor after saving him. The scene begins with a shot that's clearly an homage to the iconic moment in *From Here to Eternity*, where Deborah Kerr lies atop Burt Lancaster on the beach while a wave rushes atop them. In *Wonder Woman*, Gadot is examining an unconscious Pine (and a wave similarly laps at them), she taps his face, and when he wakes, Jenkins gives us the first shot of a male gazing at Gadot. It's less a look of lust and more one of awe.

“Wow,” he says.

She smiles and says in a way both telling and asking, “You're a man.”

“Yeah,” he says, “Don't I look like one?”

That bit of dialogue reveals Steve's insecurity, which he displays throughout the film, such as his attempt at humor with his “above average” dick joke. The initial dialogue combined with the first use of the male gaze on the beach presents the male audience with the dilemma Steve has: how to examine a woman who's also your salvation.

Later when they are sailing in a boat, Steve tries to see if he can beguile her with his knowledge of sex. She sighs dismissively and tells him, "I've read all twelve volumes of Cleo's treatises of bodily pleasure. They came to the conclusion that men are essential for procreation, but when it comes to pleasure, unnecessary."

The scene challenges Steve and therefore the audience, reminding them with a blatant reference to lesbianism, which Mulvey might construe as a fear of castration. Moreover, this scene places women's sexuality above men's, in what I think is Jenkins’ attempt to address what Mulvey calls the “great gap from important issues for the female unconscious which are scarcely relevant to phallocentric theory...” (834). This chapter isn't the place to get into every theme of the film, but to quickly summarize, Wonder Woman's struggle is to understand the world in order to save it, and Steve's struggle is to understand her. He must learn to trust her, forgive her mistakes, and be honest about the world. If the movie did employ the male gaze in typical fashion, lusting after her would be antithetical to learning those lessons.

But a little bit of lusting can be a good thing, as the movie does with Pine. When Diana walks in on Steve getting out of a bath, we see Pine almost fully naked, shown to us in another eyeline match cut from Diana's perspective. Although Gadot's look is not predatory or cloy, the camera is, and Jenkins invites the audience to gaze at his body, which is lit to highlight his musculature. (And if you look closely enough, you can see the production lightly painted his abs

to make them seem more cut.) His objectification is important because "[s]exual instincts and identification processes have a meaning within the symbolic order which articulates desire" (Mulvey 837), and Jenkins is explicitly playing with the established code of desire. Part of disrupting the male gaze involves inverting the active-male-and-passive-female trope. Inversion alone will not transcend the gaze, but having all sexes perform both active and passive roles can challenge it a lot. Though, it will always be a question of balance in each film.

For this film, it's important that the audience, as much as they may want to, never are presented with an image of Wonder Woman as meat. The closest the film comes to gazing at her lustfully is when she meets Sameer. As he, taken with her beauty, says objectifying lines like, “Now that's a work of art,” and “All I want right now is a picture of your lovely face.” Jenkins never positions the camera from his eyeline. Instead, she relies on the tried-and-true convention of two-shots and over the-shoulder shots commonly found in most modern films. And Gadot does not compose herself with any come-hither looks. Rather, she looks right back, confronting the creepy come-ons. Another reason why the audience never gets to see through Sameer’s eyes, and this is pessimistic, is not just because he's a minor character, but because he's brown. The male gaze in Hollywood is also a white gaze, and for the same reasons. The filmmakers and the presumed audience are overwhelmingly white.

Another moment in which the leads escape being seen as meat is their love scene. Such scenes are rare in superhero films, as they are largely geared towards children, so Jenkins' inclusion of it demands analysis. Diana and Steve never give each other a horny, devilish look. Rather, Gadot shoots Pine a glance of excited curiosity, and he returns one of cautious eagerness. No one speaks, which is probably for the best. Jenkins lights the scene with candles, so we

cannot make out much more than their faces. This moment is for them, not us. I'm not sure the scene was entirely necessary, but perhaps the filmmakers wanted Wonder Woman to know a man before she saved all of them.

Despite *Wonder Woman*'s shortcomings, Jenkins and her team sufficiently challenge the male gaze and limit the amount of opportunities the audience can lust after Diana. But just because you can create a good portrayal in one film doesn't mean the male gaze won't reappropriate the character in another. Jenkins' efforts to escape the gaze become all the more obvious after seeing how Zack Snyder and Joss Whedon brought it to bear in *Justice League*.

Snyder employed his gaze to an absurd degree, "at the extreme, fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and peeping toms" (Mulvey 835). Snyder's camera may as a well have a mirror on his shoe, for all the moments we see up Wonder Woman's skirt, which happens no less than five times. In one sequence, we see Diana greet Bruce Wayne and Barry Allen as they disembark a plane, Gadot is wearing tight leather pants, and Snyder has the camera just below her ass. The shot fragments her groin, and it's lit from both in front of and behind with blue lights, which highlight her contours. Another shot, which is also in the trailer, has Wonder Woman sweeping the legs of her opponent, and Snyder again positions the camera super low and employs slow motion, so we can catch a glance. Jenkins never positions her camera so low (to be fair, though, she does give us a shot where we see another Amazon's crotch as she rolls off horseback in slow motion). Snyder even digitally pads her bra! I have seen both *Wonder Woman* and *Justice League* in 3D, but only once each, so I'd have to revisit the film to be sure, but I recall Wonder Woman's breastplate protruding out more in *Justice League*.

Such shots do nothing to further the narrative. As Mulvey notes, “her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (837). *Justice League* even has a moment where the story stops as Aquaman accidentally sits on the lasso of truth and starts spouting off how fine Wonder Woman is. This feels more like Joss Whedon's doing, who took over the project when Snyder had to deal with a suicide in the family (Holmes).

The disparity in portrayal between the two movies demands further attention, but the eye for detail may be beyond the average movie goer. Although *Wonder Woman* earned 821 million dollars from its 149-million-dollar budget, and *Justice League* has currently garnered 278 million (boxofficemojo) from a rumored 300-million-dollar budget (Google). The two films advertise each other, and Snyder's film will buoy. The monolithic film industry will only care about the profits. However, given that Jenkins will continue to get work, I hope production companies will spend the time to see why this film resonates.

Three years later, in 2020, Warner Brothers released *Wonder Woman 1984* (*WW84*). The production company did indeed give Jenkins more control. Jenkins, with the support of Gadot, successfully lobbied to have Brett Ratner removed as a producer in this franchise, given that all the longstanding allegations of his sexual abuse were finally being taken seriously in the light of the Me Too movement (Bradley). Jenkins also had more creative control. However, the resulting sequel felt careless, aimless, and afraid of its source material, as I will show.

Although some don’t consider Zack Snyder and Robert Rodriguez to be the most artful directors, their best superhero movies (*Sin City*, *300*, and *Watchmen*) are just straight translations of the source material. Fans have been clamoring for decades for someone to use a comic book

as a storyboard. Unfortunately, because of their pulpy origins and demographics, entire swaths of the population never considered there might be great art in these comics. It took far too much time for the subsidiaries of Warner Brothers to respect each others' medium and talents, and the film people often didn't get along with or even talk to the comic book people. To make matters worse, the owners of film rights often don't understand what these stories are, just that they're valuable properties (Kevin Smith). When Rodrigeuz's *Sin City* premiered in 2005, Roger Ebert was blown away that you could sit with the comic and turn the pages with every scene of the movie, whereas comic book fans let out a collective "duh" to this notion.

Had Jenkins just used the comic book source material as a storyboard, this movie could have been glorious. Jenkins, and writers Geoff Johns and David Callaham, based *WW84* on a run that climaxes in *Wonder Woman 219*. In that comic, author Greg Rucka conceived that Max Lord had enslaved Superman's mind, and had him going around the world wreaking havoc and destruction. Lord then gets on the airwaves to decry how dangerous superheroes are. When Wonder Woman gets a hold of him and ties him up in her magic lasso, Rucka, and artists Rags, Randall, and Propst, treat us to the following images of a supremely dominant heroine. She interrogates Max Lord, demanding him to answer, "Tell me how to free him [Superman] from your control." The magic lasso compels him to answer, "Kill me." Then the artists treat us to a close up of Diana's face right behind Lord's head. The next panel has the verb "KRK" and a somewhat repeat as before, except the coldblooded Amazon has twisted his head around, so that both faces are to the audience (Rucka, 23).

What could be more a more poignant image of good defeating evil than a goddess passing judgment on a slavemaster, who has forced Superman into a wanton murder fit, by

snapping his neck? But no, instead Jenkins gives us the same *Fifth Element*-style ending, where an appeal to love trumps hate, just like in the first *Wonder Woman* movie. In *WW84*'s climax, as Lord broadcasts his thoughts to the world, asking everyone to make wishes, he reaps the benefits of the untold cost. Unbeknownst to Lord, Wonder Woman has her lasso of truth around his leg, and she has furtively asked everyone in the world to rescind their wishes, which causes Max Lord to lose all his power. There's BS and then there's BS, and this is supreme bullshit. It's not even visually cool. Standup comedian Emmy Blotnik has a great line about that all these recent superhero movies are like "...watching Happy Meal toys fight a column of light" (Conan). Here, this movie gives us a beauty queen lying down making an appeal to love at a column of light.

Conversely, the world has been watching men shoot down bad guys in film since 1903's *The Great Train Robbery.* The world is more than ready and capable of seeing an Amazon, dressed in an American flag, executing justice. Far more hardcore visuals exist in commonplace texts. Just look at how *Raiders of the Lost Ark* begins with Indiana Jones firing a pistol and hitting a random thug between the eyes, all done in a close up so the blood spurts at the camera, like a POV money shot.

I could spend all day listing bad choices in this film, like Screen Rant's *Pitch Meeting* videos, but I will focus on just three more to illustrate where a fundamental flaw in Hollywood exists. Generally, movie producers only understand what has previously worked in other movies. There are some exceptions--Michael Eisner has a degree in English, and the Disney Renaissance in the 1990s, which he oversaw, consisted of adaptations from literature. Eisner clearly understands narrative. But by and large, what we have here in *WW84* is a collection of misfiring tropes from other movies.

The first trailer for *WW84* featured the song "Blue Monday," and it is devastatingly telling that that song opens *Atomic Blonde* (2017) in a badass fight scene, in which a 5'10" Charlize Theron beats a man to death with a stiletto heel. While the song appears in the trailer for *WW84*, it does not appear in the movie. In fact, the movie has no needle drops whatsoever. Why then is this film set in the '80s? There are no allusions to George Orwell's *1984*. Do they not know what fans want out of '80s action heroine nostalgia? They knew it was necessary to have such dramatic sights and sounds in the trailer, but the film is afraid to be awesome. Another movie that I have yet to delve into in this thesis is *Captain Marvel* (2019). Consider everything that film got right that's missing in *WW84*. Marvel and directors Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck were not afraid to try '90s nostalgia, a fun soundtrack, and showing that spies have infiltrated the U.S. government.

Also consider the two Black women we get to see in *WW84*. A lot has been made about the little Black girl (Rey Rey Terry) looking at Wonder Woman holding a violent man up with one hand. The casting and role is an obvious choice. Because the "algorithm at the moment" tells us we're seeing ourselves, this plays like the movie is telling little Black girls to look up to the superpowered, pretty white lady. But more jarring for me was the director of the art museum (Natasha Rothwell), whom the credits list as "co-worker," even though she hired Wiig's character. It's perfectly fine and good to display Black women in positions of authority. My mantra for underrepresented groups is "more and better." But her scene plays out like she's the Black police chief informing the veteran and the rookie of a case. The Black police chief trope is so old it's hackneyed. This movie only thinks in the most basic of optics, and it doesn't consider an audience wider than itself. Gal Gadot was in the Israeli Defense Force, which means to a good

part of the world, when Wonder Woman fights nameless Middle Eastern men, it looks like a Jewish soldier fighting Arabs. (And, by the way, Gadot being an IDF soldier means she knows how to snap a neck.)

Which leads me to a criticism--Patty Jenkins is a great feminist filmmaker. You have to be in order to make *Monster* (2003), but she's not a great Action Movie filmmaker. This genre needs more women filmmakers who understand its conventions and pugilism. Lexi Alexander exists, and while her *Punisher* movie was a dud beloved by some, you can fix a lot of what's wrong with these movies in the edit, and Warner Brothers had a six months of a pandemic to fix *WW84*.

WW84 had great elements, but the filmmakers didn't capitalize on them. It's like they were afraid to say what they wanted it to mean, so they hedged everything. Lord is an effigy for Trump. The character is an '80s businessman, who admits he's a television personality, who gains the powers of the presidency, and he has that awful wispy blonde pompadour. It would be wrong to have a nazi who's not antisemitic, or a slave master who doesn't enslave, or a serial killer who doesn't kill. Yet this film's villain is abstractly after power. Max Lord is another of these villains that's really only bad in theory. He's bad because they say he's bad, but the only visual we get of that is him being sweaty and shaky. The worst thing we see him do is be awful to his kid, and this movie did not spend a lot of time on that. Cheetah is there to have a woman fighting a woman, and it's great they didn't resort to a sexy cat fight, but they didn't really produce something memorable. Consider how *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* is thematically terrible yet dramatically more impressive and infinitely more memorable, because it likes drama. Spielberg's not afraid to torture his darlings, or show that Indy will risk the lives of

his girlfriend and adopted son by taking a sword to a rope bridge that everyone is on. Not that Wonder Woman needs to be wantonly crazy like that, but Jenkins forgot to toy with the audience's emotions with the action scenes. Emotions that don't react to actions, in this case, strong visuals, are empty. This movie wants to make a point so badly but is afraid to do so succinctly or impressively or in a fun manner. Why is Steve's death just Chris Pine walking around a corner? Why does that fill her with angst? Yes, we understand he's dead, but we didn't see him die. In the first movie, Steve dies in a plane exploding in mid air. A woman behind me in the theatre cried when that happened. Nobody's shedding tears over a guy walking behind a corner. The movie is content to tell instead of show. Why is Wonder Woman still not allowed to draw blood or penetrate someone with a sword? *WW84* is so sheepish about violent women it happens to make Freud right about sexual anxieties.

When it comes to what we should want from Hollywood producing cinematic heroines, or, again, any underrepresented group for that matter, the mantra I return to is "more and better." However, that *WW84* didn't live up to artistic expectations can still be a good thing, because it forces contrast and conversation. When people get together to watch a movie, and they're in the mood to watch a woman kick ass (or anyone kick ass for that matter), they're going to be more likely to watch the first movie and talk down about the sequel. Although film buffs do this all the time, the popcorn-wielding masses generally don't think too critically about what they consume, but the bad taste this movie will leave in their mouth will make some ask why it was so sour. If every movie featuring the underrepresented were good to great, the public would quickly find it cliche, as many do about Best Picture nominees or Marvel movies or Wes Anderson pictures. Consistently good becomes consistently boring. Variability breeds excitement.

Still, the paltry representation here counts for something, especially in terms of sex. Warner Brothers announced Gadot would play the character before the release of *Batman v. Superman* in 2016, and I was lifeguarding a Jewish summer camp of about 15 orthodox Jewish teenage boys. I overheard a couple of them talk about who was hotter, Megan Fox or the blonde from the second *Transformers* movie (Her name is Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, and she plays the pregnant wife in *Mad Max: Fury Road*). When they were winding down and sitting in the spa, I said to the lot of them, "Hey, you guys hear about an Israeli playing Wonder Woman?" They went dead silent, and one from the back said, "She should know better!" To which I said, "Oh, but it's OK to ogle a shiksa?"[1] They didn't have a response. Eventually, one of them said he thought I was cool. This is entirely because I have a beard and didn't put up with their blather. Ugh, teenagers.

This event was somewhat similar to when my roommate's aunt called us out for decrying Jolie's Lara Croft. Neither the early *Lara Croft* nor the recent *Wonder Woman* films are as good as could and should be, although the latter are superior. In either event, they still give little girls something rather than nothing.

---

[1] a gentile woman.

CHAPTER THREE

In February 2020, Warner Brothers released *Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn*, directed by Cathy Yan. Whereas my second chapter examined a character that was first represented by a female director then given to a male director, the presentation of Harley Quinn in cinema affords us an interesting reversal: a character first represented by a male director then reworked by a woman, Yan, and the contrasts couldn't be clearer. Unfortunately, so were the narratives surrounding the box office earnings.

Variety deemed the film's opening weekend of 35 million dollars domestic gross was 20 too short for Warner Brothers' expectations (McNary). What the producers wanted was another hit like 2016's *Suicide Squad,* directed by David Ayre, which cost about 175 million and reaped back 746 million (boxofficemojo), whereas *Birds of Prey* cost about 84 million and eventually pulled in 200 million worldwide (boxofficemojo). Warner Brothers hasn't revealed their advertising budget for each film, but I suspect *Suicide Squad's* received more assistance, as their advertisements flooded the market earlier and longer. Nevertheless, because superhero movies regularly earn a billion dollars worldwide now, Yan's film had been deemed a failure despite doubling Warner Brothers' investment. The film had mostly positive reviews, an 84 percent on Rotten Tomatoes. Yet the venture wasn't without mishaps.

This film wasn't released in summer like *Suicide Squad* and most other big tent superhero movies. It also had an 11-word-long title, in which the protagonist, the main draw, was listed nine words deep. After the first week, Warner Brothers retitled the film *Harley Quinn: Birds of Prey*, in an effort to catch not only eyes but the algorithms for the character's name (Desta). That the film wasn't called that from the beginning is surprising. While the Birds of Prey and girl

gangs are immensely popular in comic book circles, the only character the popcorn-wielding masses were likely familiar with was Harley.

Aside from Will Smith, Margot Robbie's Harley Quinn was the main draw of *Suicide Squad*. And after audiences saw Jared Leto's severe yet flat attempt to play the Joker, which was bound to not endure as well as Heath Ledger's iconic performance, it was pretty clear that most audiences would rather just watch Robbie. Her performance and the character's story, however, wasn't what was highlighted in the trailers, like Will Smith's. It was her figure, hinging at the waist, pointing her butt at the camera. She was bait.

Before *Suicide Squad*, most American movie goers knew Robbie from Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), a part she had to get nude for. How an actress chooses to present her body at various points in her career is noteworthy, and while taking your top off is generally looked down upon, when a director the caliber of Martin Scorsese says he'd like to put you in a major motion picture that will introduce you to the American market, but you have to get naked, nobody looks down on you for taking that very profitable proposition. Even Charlize Theron's career has a similar path. Before she won an Oscar for Patty Jenkins' *Monster*, she took her clothes off for Taylor Hackford's *The Devil's Advocate* and a few other films. But since *The Wolf of Wall Street* and *Suicide Squad*, Margot Robbie took on work to show off her acting chops. She played Elizabeth in *Mary Queen of Scots* (2018) and starred in *I, Tonya* (2017), parts that let her show a woman wielding ultimate authority and a woman losing everything.

It's no surprise then, that when Robbie chose to return to the character of Harley Quinn, she sought out a female director and worked on the script with her and crafted a narrative where she wasn't just eye candy playing second fiddle to a man (Aurthur). As such, this sequel, if we

may call it that, reflects those aspects explicitly. *Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn* is not just about Harley Quinn leaving the Joker, it's also about her breaking up with *Suicide Squad* and films that explore women from men's perspective.

The film begins with an animated foreword that serves as Harley's relationship status update. It explains her upbringing, how she came from an abusive home where her father tried to get rid of her, to how her seeking approval from abusive male figures led her to the Joker, who similarly dismisses her. The cartoon also allows them to have the specter of the Joker there, who doesn't have dialogue in this film, without actually having to recast Leto, which further helps shift the entire focus onto her. When the film cuts to live action and we finally see Robbie, Harley is getting tossed out of the Joker's hideout, but not by him, by some nameless henchman who's not even in focus. It's as though Yan is tossing the character at the audience.

Yan then takes the character through a montage of her rebuilding herself, where she alters tattoos mentioning her ex, and she cuts her hair right on her iconic blue and red patches. *I, Tonya* has a similar scene in which Robbie breaks down to a further degree. They're intentionally referencing Robbie's previous iterations. This movie insists upon a recent film literacy in order for the narrative to work, of her character's abuse and of others'. Her hair in this movie is interesting in contrast to *Suicide Squad,* because here she's allowed to have roots. The previous film would have us believe that Harley Quinn is either naturally a platinum blonde or that she is allowed hair dye in prison, as we never see her roots. Robbie is actually a brunette, but much like her characters, she's often dyed to the Hollywood ideal—the Marilyn Monroe, Grace Kelly type. That we get to see Harley in various states of upkeep lends itself to this being a woman's narrative.

The montage also includes Harley competing in women's roller derby, which not only sets up her acrobatic roller skating prowess that will pay off during the film's climax, but is a sport that has certain connotations for and about lesbians, such as the 2009 film *Whip It*. Queerness is prevalent in this film and amongst these characters. Even in her cartoon introduction, Harley says "I had my heart broken once or twice," while a slot machine featuring her face, a broken heart, and various suitors spin around, one of whom is a woman. Gotham has always been a setting in which the villains are often coded queer, going all the way back to the 1966 *Batman* television series, in which Julie Newmar's Catwoman has her henchwoman Pussycat, played by Lesley Gore, who in fact was a lesbian in real life.

The character of Gotham City policewoman Renee Montoya, played by Rosie Perez, is openly lesbian, which we find out from Harley's narration when she meets her former girlfriend Ellen Yee, an assitant district attorney, played by Ali Wong. Harley had earlier thrown a bag of garbage at Montoya, requiring her to change clothes from the precinct's lost and found, which leaves her meeting her ex in front of her boss while wearing a shirt reading "I shaved my balls for this?" Lesbians sometimes joke around about having hypermasculine traits, and this dumb shirt not only reinforces Montoya's inappropriateness as a policewoman, but signifies her as butch. One could even read the shirt as a metaphor that she's a man without testicles, as she took a razor to them.

Returning to Harley's montage, we see a moment of her partying at Roman Sionis's (Ewan McGregror) The Black Mask club. Yan and costume designer Erin Benach dressed Harley in a spangly pantsuit and a top with red and blue stars covering her breasts, which is a female infiltration of menswear. After downing four shots, Harley swings around a stripper pole, spilling

yet another drink on Sionis's driver. The driver, played by stuntman and frequent heavy Daniel Bernhardt, scolds her, saying, "Sit your skinny ass down, dumb slut." Satisfied with his insult, he looks away and puts his feet up on a table. To which Harley then says "OK" and jumps off the platform and stomps the henchman's knees, breaking them so they bend backwards. This savage act sets up the main theme of this film, which is women being dismissed by men until the women violently push themselves into society or, metaphorically, onto the center stage.

Harley then relaxes on a couch while chastising the driver: "Call me dumb? I have a Ph.D., motherfucker." Sionis walks over to see what's the matter. He lets her assault against his henchman slide, saying, "Consider him fired." To which Harley expounds, "Consider me grateful, especially since I know you don't like me." She turns her head to someone who isn't there to continue, "I agitate his already delicate sense of mental equilibrium. That and his obsessive-compulsive need to be the center of attention." Her projection is ironic because Harley also suffers from an obsessive need to be the center of attention. She is a clown, after all. Although Sionis hates her, he puts up with her antics because he believes the Joker would kill him if he hurt his girlfriend. "Will you paramour be joining us this evening?" Sionis asks. She says he won't. "Well, do give the Joker my best," he agitatedly says. Harley then narrates that she hasn't told anyone about the breakup because her relationship gave her status and immunity.

Harley's narration is a reflection of her broken psyche, as it's occasionally difficult to know where we are in the film and what's a flashback. Sometimes Harley makes a point in one scene to no one, such as her extemporaneous analysis of Sionis, that's not relevant until another scene. Harley's narration exists in the flashbacks of Huntress, even though she wasn't present nor privy to some of that information, such as Huntress's fetish of the toy car.

Yan and cinematographer Matthew Libatique then cut to a long, unbroken shot, with fast motion interspersed with normal speed of Harley stealing drinks, taking pills, giving a mannequin life advice, and vomiting into someone's purse. The song playing both diegetically and non diegetically is Doja Cat's "Boss Bitch." The song repeats the lyrics "I'm a bitch. I'm a boss," which sets up a dichotomy, albeit a very juggalo-esque one, which matches her aesthetic. Although she is the heroine of her own story, as all great villains are, Harley remains a villain, and she revels in the hedonistic freedom that not caring about what's right or legal allows her.

After she publicly updates her relationship status by driving a tanker into the chemical plant where Joker baptised her in the same vat that transformed him, Harley's narration picks up, "I wasn't the only dame in Gotham looking for emancipation. This is our story, and I'm telling it. So I'll start where I fucking want." Women rarely get to be the voice of the omniscient narrator, and that this film has a woman narrating stories of five women, and sometimes those women take up describing the others, gets a little *Inception*-y. Whose thoughts are whose come into question, especially given that the next shot after that last line of dialogue is a title card reading "four minutes ago." Harley then introduces Montoya working a crime scene.

While Montoya investigates four dead bodies seated at table in an Italian restaurant, Harley's voice over describes her as a hard-knuckled Gotham detective, raised on '80s cop shows, who breaks big cases but loses credit to her male counterparts. Harley explains that Montoya's partner was promoted to Captain, because he took credit for her work and is now her boss. Montoya herself then takes over the narrative, describing the scene before her as the shot transitions into an imagined flashback of the moment it went down, Montoya fantasizing about Huntress (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) killing these men. Yan makes an interesting decision to

include Patsy Cline's "Sweet Dreams," which not only reinforces the imagined nature of the moment — implying that Montoya picked the song herself — but speaks to Montoya's conflicted ethos in appreciating the work. Huntress is a killer of killers, a woman killing men. Although the audiences never hear the full lyrics, the song is about a woman mad at her ex: "I should hate you the whole night through, instead of having sweet dreams about you." The scene's layered nature — Harley's narration, Montoya's imagination, and Huntress' yet-to-be-revealed vendetta against the men who murdered her family — creates a moment in the film in which all three women characters involved have been wronged by men in one way or another, four if you count Patsy Cline. Furthermore, because the flashback is conjured from Montoya's perspective, it technically makes it a lesbian fantasy.

Birds of Prey is a film that loves fantasy, as anything set in the world of Batman should, but it especially loves Hollywood fantasy. Harley Quinn is a character who recognizes she based her persona off of many popular tropes, most tellingly is the Marilyn Monroe number she slips into, to escape the reality of being tortured by Roman Sionis, AKA the Black Mask. Sionis's goons kidnap Harley and tie her to a chair on the stage of the Black Mask Club. Aside from a spotlight above her, the club's lights are off and on the stage behind her are two large black hands on either side of her in a black room, which gives the impressions she's being choked by this environment. Sionis asks her, "Do you know why you're here?" And Harley narrates to the audience, "When it comes to me and Roman Sionis, there are a lot of possible answers to this question." Yan then freezes the frame on McGregor's face, and a list of grievances appears, which scrolls through her slights against him. Some of which include: Disabled his driver, have a

vagina, voted for Bernie, and called him “Queef Richards.” Some of these slights are decidedly female, which further establishes a theme of women versus evil men.

Sionis tries to answer his own question, but Harley interrupts his monologuing: “Oh stop. You’re gonna do that thing where you open up a weird-ass case of torture devices while inexplicably detailing your master plan and how I don’t fit into it.” She further analyzes him as having daddy issues and that he’s going to kill her to set an example. Sionis responds that he’s going to kill her because actually “Without the Joker around, I can,” which is the premise of the film. His insult is one that robs her of her agency and places her value in proximity to a man. The thought that this woman might have allies, and allies with strong women, is not a factor he can conceive of because his world is that sexist. It’s one in which all the mob bosses and heroes and villains are men, and women are just their decorative accompaniment he occasionally has to suffer.

There's a link between feminine fantasy and feminine violence, whether that is suffering or enacting. Yan couples the concepts in this film. Fantasy is an escape mechanism and a mechanism for doing. When Harley performs violence, she performs her own fantasy, which Yan invites us into her mind to also enjoy. *The New York Times* on November 6, 2020 published a piece by Manohla Dargis that explored this film and the rough and tumble depictions of women entitled “Why I Love Women Who Wallop.” In it, Dargis writes, “There’s nothing redeeming or relatable about ‘Birds of Prey,’ which is in its favor. The movie is brand-extending entertainment from DC Films and Warner Bros., and its vision of female empowerment is reductive. You go, girl — kablooey!” Ridiculous as this movie can be, it’s not about relatability. It's about catharsis. And that catharsis comes not just from acting out forms of violence that have hitherto only been

allowed in movies starring men, it also comes from repurposing depictions of Hollywood's ideal woman, whether that be Harley's look in this film contrasted to *Suicide Squad* or even Marilyn Monroe.

As Roman Sionis sets up to watch his men torture and kill Harley, she begins looking for an out, and mentions she overhead him talk of a diamond he's looking for. Of course this piques his attention, and Harley begins to prattle about how she's great at finding lost things, including "a rare picture of a nude Eleanor Roosevelt." Sionis backhands her face and screams "You're so tiresome!" Then as he commands her to "shut that hole in the middle of your face. You're gonna get me that diamond," Yan cuts to an extreme close up of Robbie's face as she reels from the blow she just received, which she then match cuts to a close up of Robbie as Harley as Marliyn Monroe in a reworking of the "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend" number from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). Male dancers throw up jazz hands framing Robbie's face, as she lip syncs the lyrics "A kiss on the hand might be quite continental." Harley then chomps down on one of these men's hands. It should be pointed out that she's biting a black hand. This, I figure, Yan does merely for contrast. The black finger stands out against her powdered white face, and in a sequence that has such frenetic cutting, using contrasting skin tones to communicate a sight gag makes sense. That doesn't mean there aren't racial undertones to this moment, but they're probably lost on the popcorn-wielding masses, who don't watch films through a magnifying glass. However, this dancer isn't the only Black presence in this moment, as the voice Robbie is lip syncing to is Megan Thee Stallion, who's accompanied by Nomani. What is immediately noticeable and communicated well is while Robbie is similarly dressed to Monroe in that iconic pink dress, Robbie's outfit has pants. This alteration not only communicates that women's

fashion has progressed since the ‘50s, when dresses were the standard for women, but indicates that Harley is in command, i.e., she wears the pants in her single relationship. It’s a metaphor denoting one can and should play around with masculine and feminine ideals in dress, especially if your identity is built on a hodgepodge of popular tropes, as Harley’s is.

This Monroe number ends when Sionis smacks Harley again, bringing her back to the present world. He threatens, “I’m gonna give you till midnight, then I’m gonna peel off your pretty face and pickle it.” Although this line is meant to be menacing, it falls flat, not only because it’s lame (“pickle” is too funny a word to ever be said threateningly) and McGregor phones it in, but because the character of Black Mask is dull, and he’s similarly boring in the comics. Black Mask’s schtick isn’t fully realized. He wears a smoking jacket and driving gloves, but he never smokes nor drives. He has an obsession for faces and skinning, but we don’t really see much of that in this film. When he’s about to spare a mob boss’s kid, he changes his mind when he notices she has a snot bubble, which grosses him out enough to direct his main henchman, Victor Zsasz (Chris Messina) to slice her face off. But all of that violence is Greek and happens off screen.

These shortcomings are noteworthy not only because aesthetics inform narrative, but because many of these superhero movies are only as good as their villain. In fact, the villain is often played by a better actor than the hero: Gene Hackman was more impressive than Christopher Reeve, and Heath Ledger stole every scene from Christian Bale. But McGregor is not nearly putting in the work that Robbie is. In a movie that toys around with the theme of women versus men, as this film does, the antagonist’s characterization shouldn’t be so lacking or disparate.

Consider the scene before Sionis tortures Harley, where he is getting injections in his face, which I assume are botox. McGregor then perfunctorily gets mad at whoever's doing these injections. Perhaps it's a plastic surgeon. The film never really tells us who they are or why Sionis wants botox. There was also press for this movie touting that Black Mask is gay (Malkin), but he's about as gay as Dumbledore is in the *Harry Potter* franchise: we don't see him display homoerotic feelings, it's not thematically involved, and it just amounts to barebones tokenism. His whole characterization reminds me of a line from *It's Always Sunny in Phildelphia*, in which Dee criticizes her brother Dennis for pretending to be gay to get more tips at the bar: "You're not gay! You're just really, really vain!"

However, there are aspects of Roman Sionis that are more interesting than his Black Mask alter ego, if we can even call it that. He's a child of privilege who hates his family, even though they've enabled his extravagant lifestyle, and he desperately wants to make it big as a crime boss to set himself apart. Perhaps his most interesting scene is when Black Canary (Jurnee Smollett) comes up to his loft above the club. He beckons her in, "Isn't this stunning?" Canar-y then admires some African masks in the hall. "That is a Chokwe mask," he says, "I got it when I was embedded with the Mbangani tribe in Congo-Kinshasa. Have you ever been?" Canary responds, "I've never been. I've heard it's beautiful." "It's dirty," Sionis says, before leading her over to his next artifact, "Genuine Tsantsa, or shrunken head, … Look at those little ears, and his little haircut. He's a thousand-years-old, and now he's just an ornament in my living room. Ew!" That a rich white guy would show off artifacts he collected from Africa and South America, while insulting them, to a Black woman is a way of demonstrating not only his wealth to her, but to convey superiority over her and these brown cultures she's only heard of.

Also in this scene, Zsasz begins to act a little put out that Sionis is giving his attention to Canary. Whereas Sionis' is about as gay as Dumbledore, i.e. inconsequentially, Zsasz is more like Mercutio, and his homoerotic feelings for his boss lead him to hate anyone else Sionis consorts with. When Zsasz realizes the diamond is inside Cassandra Cain, referred to throughout the film mostly as Cass (Ella Jay Basco), he tells Canary to "rip it open," the "it" being Cass. When Canary refuses, he says, "I knew you couldn't be trusted. 'Roman's little bird.' ... "That's why he needs me, to look out for him." Zsasz needs to justify his homoerotic feelings and existence in Sionis's outfit.

The most interesting scene featuring Sionas has little to do with him and more to do with how Yan and Libatique chose to frame it. While he is at his club, venting that Harley has run off with the girl who swallowed the diamond, Sionas takes his frustrations out on a woman who happens to have laughed annoyingly. He walks over to the table, and shouts at her until she gets on the table, dances, then commands her boyfriend to cut her dress off her while she dances. It's meant to be menacing but fails because of McGregor, but more to the point—the scene is framed so that the focus isn't on the woman. We don't really see her body as her clothes are ripped off. Instead, Yan focuses on where the dress is being cut. This way, the woman is not a subject of the male gaze.

In fact, when it comes to Harley Quinn and the male gaze, she's always been the object of it until *Birds of Prey*, and the differences between her portrayal in this movie and in *Suicide Squad* are striking. In his depiction of the character, David Ayre chose for her to wear the skimpiest booty shorts, and featured images of Margot Robbie bending over, while the camera is right behind her. It's an annoying yet predictably profitable choice to show Harley that way. The

character's origin is defined by her sex, and Batman villains have always been sex symbols. However, some of these shots are downright pornographic, such as the scene in which Harley promises herself to the Joker, then hops into a vat of acid. Then the Joker jumps in and pulls her up, with white goo dripping off her face, and Ayre has a closeup of her that looks straight-up like a bukkake money shot, as the Joker baptizes her in a vat of white slime and brings her face up out of the pool so that white slimes slides off it.

If you're familiar with Internet Pornography, you know where you've seen that kind of display before. With shots like these, all that filmmakers are doing is applying sex fantasies to famous characters starring impossibly beautiful actresses in licensed franchises.

Yan, on the other hand, doesn't make such base, objectifying decisions. Although, she does briefly quote that shot in a flashback when Harley is driving the tanker into the chemical plant. All of Harley's outfits are dramatically less skimpy in *Birds of Prey*. Instead of a peewee baseball shirt and booty shorts, Yan puts her in daisy dukes. Yes, it's sad when daisy dukes are an improvement, but the film also has Robbie in a baggy shirt or a wild top that has spangly sleeves, which does a lot to hide Robbie's silhouette. For the final fight scene, Harley's in the least sexy garment there is—overalls. They're gold and have a diamond pattern, but overalls cover 3/4s of the body, and the filmmakers probably needed a way to hide padding for the scene where she's being towed behind a bar, while she's on rollerskates. All of the costume design by Erin Benach could be described as roller derby chic, that is, flashy and fashionable, yet allows for high kicks while not showing off one's groin. Even the overalls have a long, yonic zipper on the front instead of just buttons. Benach even came up with a bulletproof bustier that Harley gives to Montoya.

While this is an adult movie, perhaps its target audience is the one who's just legal enough to see it: 17-year-old girls. As such, Yan doesn't lean into the most graphic depictions that the R rating would allow for. There's no nudity, and the violence is shocking but not gory in the way Tarantino would revel in. Instead, it's eye catching and shocking yet comical.Yan is also aware of the Dominant/Masochistic/Sadistic (D/M/S) trope, due to a clear trajectory in the development of fight choreography in many of these recent (2017-20) action heroine films. That trajectory is the result of a lineage of fight choreography among recent American action films, due in large part to Warner Brothers frequent hiring of 87eleven, a martial arts choreography team founded by David Leitch and Chad Stahelski. 87eleven is the team responsible for the *John Wick* films and *Atomic Blonde*.

So while Yan is clearly aware of the D/M/S trope, she ups the idea by playing for gags, like in a cartoon. In his review of this movie, Vince Mancini said a good fight scene is like a story—it has a beginning, middle, and end, or in the case of *Birds of Prey*, a punchline (*Filmdrunk*). So when Harley has it out in the police station's evidence warehouse, she dispatches with henchmen left and right, clearly showing her as the dominant force in the scene. She eventually encounters a big, tall biker. His size serves as a phallic symbol of masculine strength, much like Rictus Erectus in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, although, *Birds of Prey* is less concerned about leaning on that point. He pulls two guns on Harley, and she easily bats each one out of his hands. She then swings her bat at him, which he catches, then he grabs her by the throat before kicking her through a car door that was left open. Yan has put her in the masochistic stage for a moment then. The big biker proceeds to pick her up and choke her against some shelves. As she struggles to break free, she says to Cass Cain, "A little help?" Cass tosses her a

lighter, and Harley smiles at what she's about to do to the big man, which puts her in the sadistic stage, then she lights his beard on fire.

The fight scenes in *Birds of Prey* go from the graphic and realistic to the comical and fantastical. It would not be out of place for any character in this franchise to have a word bubble reading "POW" appear whenever they hit someone. So there's quite a bit of leeway as to what kinds of violence the filmmakers can engage in, especially given the film's R rating. It's interesting then to see where Yan goes graphic then pulls back on the ultraviolence, because these moments reveal a woman's sensibilities. This movie likes to show a knee bending the wrong way; it makes for a great visual. In one standoff, a henchman kicks at Harley and his leg gets caught on a car door, which allows Harley to come down on his knee with her bat, then she goes after his other knee, bashing it backwards, then back again. While this depiction is extreme and comical, many women's self defense classes do teach women to attack a man's knees and groin, as they are the easiest targets that will bring down an opponent who's bigger than you. Yan is also not shy about nut shots, and she often uses them to punctuate the end of an encounter, as she does in the climatic scene in which all Harley and the Birds of Prey face off against Black Mask's thugs. Even in fantastical fight scenes, this barebones amount of realism, that a male's most vulnerable spot is his testicles, is instructive. For young women to see a heroine ending a thug's harassment in such a way is both exhilarating and reassuring.

Part of why my descriptions of these fight scenes are all over the place is because these fight scenes are all over the place, which Yan does to reflect Harley's broken mind. Harley's entrance to the police station comes about 21 minutes in, but the narrative goes off to follow the other characters for a while, and that fight scene picks back up about 25 minutes later, around

minute 46. Nevertheless, Harley's entrance to this scene, and throughout the movie, and the gore she's allowed to exhibit have definite flairs aimed at young women.

When Harley approaches a cop at the front desk, she's disguised in a black trench coat, big sunglasses, and a magenta scarf. When the cop asks how he can help, Harley slips into some sort of character, saying in a mid-atlantic accent, "Why, yes, yes, you can. I'm here to report a terrible crime." She then opens her coat, a la *The Matrix*, to reveal a cache of weapons and ammo underneath. This change in character is not only part of Harley's ruse, but harkens back to helpless damsels and femme fatales. In fact, the scene begins like a lot of detective stories, with a woman entering an office seeking help from a male authority. Yan plays with the trope to delight and re-center the woman as the authority. Also, whereas similar scenes would have their hero unleash a hail of bullets on the security force, like Neo does, here, Harley's weapons are all non lethal. Her M79, her "fun gun," doesn't fire grenades, but bean bags, canisters of colorful gas, and bags of glitter. It all makes for a playful pageantry as she marches through the station, dispatching with cops who are all slow on the draw.

When Harley makes her way to the jail cells, she bashes on the switchboard overseeing the locks until the cell doors open. This also triggers the sprinkler system, and we are treated to a fight scene in which a drenched Harley fights the men who were previously locked up. As she slides across the wet floor, she performs a leg sweep that is eerily similar to the leg sweep Wonder Woman uses when she fights German soldiers in her own movie. Yan's choice of this maneuver, shot from a similar angle as low as the protagonist, feels like a nod to *Wonder Woman*, as each film includes heroines enacting similar methods of attack, despite them having very different powers. This matters because it further establishes a cohesive pattern of representation

of choreography, even though Patty Jenkins did not hire 87eleven, instead relying upon the talent of fight coordinator Ryan Watson (IMDB).

For all this elaborate violence, the only person Harley kills is Sionis, one could argue, which is only due to Cass putting a live grenade on him before Harley kicks him off the pier. Her triumph over Sionis is also the film's goriest moment, as it's the climax. Yan probably realizes that even though Harley is a villain, having her kill cops wouldn't go over with fans old or new, nor would it work for secondary markets. The ultraviolence and drug use is sparse enough that one can make just a few edits to make this film playable on basic cable or on an airline. The cursing these characters display is also interesting, because while some of it is by definition rude, it's usually hilarious and honestly not that harsh, like when Harley calls her ex a "slimy jizz nozzle." And while a number of the characters say "fuck" or "motherfucker," not once do any of them say "fuck" to mean sex. While the intention seems to have been to always make a R-rated film, especially given the success of *Deadpool*, *Birds of Prey* is not a hard R, like *Deadpool.*

While violence is definitely part of this story, that's not Yan's point. Instead, one can see her point in this film's choice of bad guys: cops, criminals, thugs, mobsters, and Harley's ex—all male. While Harley does have it out with Montoya throughout the movie, they become allies. The film is clearly about abused women uniting against abusive men. When Sionis gathers his goons to assault the funhouse Harley and the Birds of Prey are holed up in, he says, "Friends, brothers, men of Gotham! ... Go show those little bitches you don't fuck with Roman Sionis!" Not only does Sionis address his men by their gender, he has them dressed in a similar fashion to himself, with them all wearing masks. Covering their faces gives them a certain persona, as what

then becomes identifiable about them are their physical statures. This serves to make the men a collective.

As the women escape down a chute, one henchman growls and slides in after them. Huntress nimbly slows her descent and climbs to the top of the tunnel, so she can literally get the drop on the henchman, whom she then rides down on while stabbing him. The other women are stunned by Huntress' prowess, and Harley remarks, "You are so cool." This sets up the theme of this fight scene, as like all the others, of women skillfully dispatching men, who seemingly only know how to attack with brute force. Yan includes "Barracuda" by Heart in this scene, which is not only a song popular among feminists, but was recorded by sisters, which these characters now metaphorically understand themselves as. The women here fight as a team, knocking bad guys from one woman to another, and taking turns protecting Cass. Harley then skates into frame, causing Canary to remark, "The fuck did she have time for a shoe change?"And later as Canary's locks obstruct her vision, Harley skates in and playfully offers a hair tie. These moments are distinctly woman, because, like it or not, commenting on fashion and hair are decidedly coded feminine. The scene ends with Harley swinging her mallet into the balls of a big, bald, bearded, Black man, who gasps, "Please, no more" before he collapses. The sexual connotations couldn't be clearer. Comic book movies are rarely subtle, especially not the rated-R ones.

The other fight scene of note in this film is where Canary rescues Harley. Not so much for the choreography, though, as it follows much of the rest of the film: bigger man lunges, smaller woman evades and strikes. What's interesting are Canary's reasons for saving her. Previously, in the Black Mask Club, Harley confesses to her that she broke up with the Joker and

asks if she knows what a harlequin is, “A janky-ass clown with bad eye makeup?” Canary wisecracks. Throughout this film, Canary gets the best of every verbal encounter, as though she’s the star of her own movie. But what causes her to go silent for a moment is when Harley explains that, “A harlequin’s role is to serve. A harlequin is nothing without a master, and no one gives two fucks who we are.” That she mentions that women are defined by their male masters to a Black woman cannot be overlooked. When Canary then encounters a fall-down drunk Harley being taken advantage of by a guy in the alleyway, she initially ignores her. It’s only when Canary sees another man roll up in a van to help kidnap Harley, in which Yan gives us a close up of Smollett’s eyes looking forward as she expresses her will to do something, that she steps in. But we don’t have a reason as to why Canary is OK seeing Harley being taken advantage of and presumably raped (she’s so drunk that everything that man does with her at this point is not consensual) but not OK with her being kidnapped and presumably raped. While the goal of this chapter is to examine how the sex and gender of these heroines display new and exciting physical performances, another analysis could focus on the racial elements of this film. Perhaps Harley’s mention of a “master” triggers something in Black Canary. Perhaps it’s because she wants to be like her mother, as Montoya has the line “You have the same power she has,” referring to her supersonic scream. Perhaps there is vagueness here because many filmmakers now include vagueness, as it leads to fans speculating on the Internet, and fan speculation is basically free advertising.

I will mention, however, that while Yan is a woman of color, and includes lines from Cass like, “You’re not the only one who makes money off of dumb, rich, white people,” of the main characters in this movie, the only ones who get to have flashbacks are the white women: Harley

and Huntress. All we know of Montoya's background comes from Harley's narration, and all we know of Canary's background comes from Montoya's exposition. It is striking that so many lines regarding Canary, such as that she has superpowers, are said offscreen by Montoya, as she does in the climactic battle: "Canary, you know what you have to do!" There's only one character in this movie that has superpowers, and it feels like that should have been a bigger deal.

There are two more things I find interesting in this movie. First is the moment in Harley's apartment in which Cass looks at Harley's drawing of the Joker, and asks, "What's this? … He your ex or something?"

"You don't know who that is," Harley responds, "The Joker? Clown prince of crime? My former partner in madness, the harlequin of hate, the jester of genocide? You never heard of him?"

To which Cass replies, "Looks like a dick."

Not only does this lead Harley to re-categorize the Joker, her impetus for being, as a mere dick, I feel Cass's classification as such echoes what many female fans of Harley think of the Joker: that he's just a dick, and it's best to focus on someone else for a change, especially since Todd Phillips' *Joker* came out one year before to very mixed reviews.

Second, Yan ends the film with the Birds of Prey congealing into a supergroup, and Harley "adopting" Cass, as she calls it. Harley has gone from a depressed newly single woman to wacky mom, or perhaps crazy aunt is more accurate. After she pawns the diamond, she gets into her Jaguar, and Cass hands her a breakfast sandwich, which prompts a question: was all this commotion for a diamond, or was it all for an Egg McGuffin?

CONCLUSION

You're probably wondering why I'm not talking about other movies, like *Captain Marvel*. It's beyond the scope of the paper. If I got into that film, I'd have to talk about how it's situated in the rest of the Marvel universe, and that's a massive library. I'd also have to talk about its relationship to *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), which is another movie featuring an amnesiac badass woman who goes on a road trip with Samuel L. Jackson. I also don't need it to make this argument about which kinds of violence women now display. I actually saw that film thrice in theatres with a colleague, Tricia Ennis, and I have a lot to say for it. I think *Captain Marvel* has the best use of nostalgic popular culture since *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Brie Larson in her leather coat evokes not only Linda Hamilton, but also Arnold Schwarzenegger. *Captain Marvel*, in a way, is responding to popular culture prevalent in the time of *Terminator 2* (1992).

I also don't address Luc Besson, who made *Valerian: City of a Thousand Planets* in 2017 and *Anna* in 2019. Besson's work with filmic heroines goes all the way back to *La Femme Nikita* (1990). Unfortunately, so do his relationships with his leading ladies, and unpacking his muse complex is a minefield three decades long.

Future analysis would also incorporate discussions of race. It's no accident that Marvel's most racially progressive movies, *Black Panther* (2018) and *Thor:Ragnarok* (2017), were from directors of color, Ryan Coogler and Taika Waititi, respectively, and each of those movies features heroines of color in supporting roles. When I develop this scholarship further, I will include the aforementioned texts.

Interestingly, each of the lead actresses I examined here are not from America. Charlize Theron was born in South Africa and eventually became a naturalized US citizen. Gal Gadot is

Israeli, and Margot Robbie is Australian. I think this is not only indicative of Hollywood working in a global economy, but it says something about talent and beauty and numbers. As I mentioned in the introduction, as the audience grows, the lowest common denominator shrinks. Obversely, when the pool of actors widens, the bar for who we consider talented and beautiful rises. The unpleasant reality is the concept of beauty exists on a bell curve. But that doesn't mean we can't challenge who or what aspects we consider attractive, and competent women most certainly are.

Mulvey would have us believe that looking is a male experience first. While the history of film worked out that way, to assume women don't look means they don't know how to use their eyes. It's true that in American media, many women learned to look at men from *Sex and the City*, a show largely run by gay men. So in a way, initial female gazes seemed very male. But that doesn't mean women can't come up with different ways of looking or different subjects and objects to look at. Of course, the medium reinforces visual pleasure as the prime pleasure, but that's inescapable. I don't want to sound like the villain of another Margot Robbie and Charlize Theron picture, *Bombshell*, but Roger Ailes wasn't lying when he said, "It's a visual medium!" What makes me different from that monster, in addition to a nigh-infinite number of other factors, is I argue women should have the freedom (read: control) to choose how they get to depict themselves.

As in Chapter One, unlike earlier Hollywood major motion pictures in the same genre, George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* is the first to put a woman through the D/M/S trope. Though some would argue it's *Kill Bill*, it's not. The closest The Bride comes to that is her showdown with Gogo Yubari. What's missing from that fight is when Gogo has The Bride chained up, there's nothing indicating that the table leg to Gogo's head is anything other than the

result of happenstance. There's no look, no line, before or after this moment indicating a scheme on The Bride's part, and sadism requires forethought. As I already explained, this kind of "cheating" is antithetical to Martial Arts movies. Furiosa, on the other hand, has no shortage of designs. Not only does she demonstrate D/M/S fully, part of what makes her so impressive is how she supplants the male hero.

Charlize Theron's turn as Furiosa is also indicative of the socio-political progress throughout her entire filmography, and though *Mad Max: Fury Road* is not a gritty biopic like her Oscar-winning role in *Monster*, film scholars will consider her role in this film with just as much critical attention. Notably, Theron's more recent roles are mostly in what one might called feminist films, and if the feminist movement wants to raise consciousness, then the heroines in popular film genres, such as the Action Movie, should perform as well or better than their male counterparts. It's important, too, that this insistence on violent women happens in popular cinema because what is popular is usually what is profitable. The more people who buy tickets to see a heroine like Furiosa on the same level as a hero like Max, the more they will accept the idea of women as heroic.

As in Chapter Two, the tradition of male-centric narratives have been around for as long as Hollywood itself. Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* exists in a genre more commonly led by men, it was up to Jenkins to avoid the male gaze that usually permeates the Hollywood Action Movie. In her 2017 attempt at the character, the director effectively challenges the audience's expectations for how women (even heroines in Action Movies) should be framed. She takes Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and never allows Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman to fall prey to it. While the film industry at large cares primarily about ticket sales, the fact that a movie

as lucrative as *Wonder Woman* can so blatantly interrogate and reject the male gaze is important for audiences to see. When you roast the male gaze in a summer blockbuster, you make feminist criticism accessible and palpable to the masses. Even if her sequel wasn't as good, it didn't do anything to undermine her visual criticism of the male gaze.

As in Chapter Three, *Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of Harley Quinn* is a breakup movie as much as it is an Action Movie. On the one hand, the film's about Harley Quinn ending her long-criticized relationship with the Joker. On the other, it's a way for Harley, Margot Robbie, Cathy Yan, and the audience to break up with a film like David Ayre's *Suicide Squad* and the popular sexual objectification of women in Action Movies. Rather than dwell on the common lust for the character of Harley Quinn, Yan's film deliberately reminds the audience that Harley is her own character, independent of her relationship to the Joker and the audience's often masturbatory relationship to her. That a film starring a popular character in an even more popular franchise capitalizes on women's autonomy is a significant milestone for the Action Movie. If Harley Quinn can choose her own narrative, then so can the women in the audience.

As I was putting the finishing touches on this document, I happened to have caught a new show called *Invincible*. Created and adapted by Robert Kirkman, *Invincible* is about a 17-year-old boy who develops powers, because he's the son of Omni-man, a Superman analog, who also belongs to a Justice League analog. The first episode ends with a twist as Omni-man surprise attacks his allies, and he snaps the neck of War Woman, the Wonder Woman analog. The image is eerily reminiscent of what I discussed in the second chapter, in which they present us with a closeup of the protagonist snapping the neck of the antagonist so that the heads of both face the audience.

Kirkman is clearly aware of this iconic moment in comics, and he isn't afraid to play with it to further shock the audience of Omni-man's sudden betrayal. One might not find the images exactly comparable, or that this cartoon does what a full fledged feature, *WW84*, won't. Yes, one is film and the other streaming, and one is rated PG-13 and the other 18 and older, (not that that's ever stopped a kid from seeing adult material online). Some will say comparing across media like this is unfair, but in the broader medium of moving pictures, we still see a dramatic disparity between images of violent men and violent women. We also see more images of men's violence to women than women's violence to men. Obviously progress has been made, but there's still work to be done.

WORKS CITED

"131: Getting Punished with Lexi Alexander." *Fatman on Batman*. from Smodcast, 14 June 2016, http://www.smodcast.com/channel/fatmanonbatman?audio=131. Podcast.

Alien. Directed by Ridley Scott, 20th Century Fox, 1979.

Aliens. Directed by James Cameron, 20th Century Fox, 1986.

Anna. Directed by Luc Besson, Lionsgate, 2019.

Atomic Blonde. Directed by David Leitch, Focus Features, 2017.

Aurthur, Kate. "Margot Robbie on 'Birds of Prey' and Why It's Different From 'Joker.'" *Variety*, 8 Jan. 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/news/margot-robbies-birds-of-prey-1203461186/. Accessed 24 Oct. 2020.

"Avatar." *Box Office Mojo*. 2021, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl876971521. Accessed 30 Mar. 2021.

Avatar. Directed by James Cameron, 20th Century Fox, 2009.

"Behind the scenes featurette." *Mad Max: Fury Road.* Directed by George Miller. Warner Bros., 2015.

Benioff, David and D.B. Weiss, creators. *Game of Thrones*. HBO Entertainment, 2011.

The Bible. Authorized King James Version, Oxford UP, 1998.

"Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn." *Box Office Mojo*, 2020, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl3640886785/. Accessed 26 Oct. 2020.

"Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn." *IMDB.com*, 2020, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7713068/fullcredits?ref_=tt_cl_sm#cast. Accessed 13 Dec. 2020.

"Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn." *Rotten Tomatoes*, 2020, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/birds_of_prey_2020. Accessed 26 Oct. 2020.

Black Panther. Directed by Ryan Coogler, Marvel Studios, 2018.

Blair, Gavin J. "Steven Soderbergh on Refining His 'Logan Lucky' Experiment, Quieting the Ego." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 9 Nov. 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/steven-soderbergh-refining-his-logan-lucky-experiment-quieting-ego-1056505?fbclid=IwAR0vKXq-1pm2BM7MOjHzAvC3N1Is7_1HzqA6kQFVSZ8Z-Gd-Z03dqfBtQkc. Accessed 31 Mar. 2021.

Bloodsport. Directed by Newt Arnold, Paramount, 1988.

Bradley, Laura. "Gal Gadot Confirms Brett Ratner Has Been Kicked off the Next *Wonder Woman*." *Vanity Fair*, 15 Nov. 2017 https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/11/gal-gadot-wonder-woman-brett-ratner?fbclid=IwAR1kJ8lmpVF3TeXBgM_1hnvA6Dadnp7l_WxWGhfXCtDMjXOVeuz-YJ-9Lyc Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.

Brown, Jeffery. *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*. University Press of Mississippi, 2011.

Brzeski, Patrick. "It's Official: China Overtakes North America as World's Biggest Box Office in 2020." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 18 Oct. 2020, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/its-official-china-overtakes-north-america-as-worlds-biggest-box-office-in-2020?fbclid=IwAR3wWEBnMcbMl2SbyN_I9Xm1sLiQPGRfQbi-oHfpEFHnB0pDtEms5RpvO6A#:~:text=China%20is%20officially%20home%20to,to%20data%20from%20Artisan%20Gateway. Accessed 30 Mar. 2021.

Captain Marvel. Directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, Marvel Studios, 2019.

Child, Ben. "There's no blaming studio interference for the disappointment that was *Wonder Woman 1984*." *The Guardian*, 7 Jan. 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/jan/07/theres-no-blaming-studio-interference-for-the-disappointment-that-was-wonder-woman-1984. Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.

Clarey, Aaron. ""Why You Should Not Go See "Mad Max: Feminist Road"." *Return of Kings*, http://www.returnofkings.com/63036/why-you-should-not-go-see-mad-max-feminist-road. Accessed June 2015.

Conan. "Emmy Blotnick Is Done With Comic Book Movies - CONAN on TBS." YouTube, comedy by Emmy Blotnick, 21 Aug. 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ql8292JT4cY

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. Directed by Ang Lee, Sony Pictures Releasing, 2000.

The Curse of The Jade Scorpion. Directed by Woody Allen, Dreamworks Pictures, 2001.

The Dark Knight. Directed by Christopher Nolan, Warner Bros., 2008.

Deadpool. Directed by Tim Miller. 20th Century Fox, 2016.

Derosier, Michael, Roger Fisher, Ann Wilson, and Nancy Wilson. "Barracuda." *Little Queen*, performed by Heart, Portrait, 1977.

Desta, Yohana. "Harley Quinn Movie *Birds of Prey* Is Changing Its Title, Unless It Isn't." *Vanity Fair*, 12 Feb. 2020, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2020/02/harley-quinn-birds-of-prey-title-change. Accessed 27 Oct. 2020.

The Devil's Advocate. Directed by Taylor Hackford. Warner Brothers, 1997.

Die Hard. Directed by John McTiernan, 20th Century Fox, 1988.

Dockterman, Eliana. “Vagina Monologues Writer Eve Ensler: How Mad Max: Fury Road Became a ‘Feminist Action Film’.” *Time*, 7 May 2015, http://time.com/3850323/mad-max-fury-road-eve-ensler-feminist/ .

Dozier, William, creator. *Batman*. Greenway Productions, 20th Century Fox Television, and 20th Television, 1968.

Ensler, Eve. *The Vagina Monologues*. 1996. Play.

La Femme Nikita. Directed by Luc Besson, Gaumont Film Company, 1990.

The Fifth Element. Directed by Luc Besson, Gaumont Buena Vista International, 1997.

Fight Club. Directed by David Fincher, 20th Century Fox, 1999.

Furious 7. Directed by James Wan. Universal Studios, 2015.

“The Gang Gets Racist.” *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia: The Complete First Season*, written by Charlie Day and Rob McElhenney, directed by John Fortenberry, FX Productions, 2005.

G.I. Jane. Directed by Ridley Scott, Hollywood Pictures, 1998.

Harley Quinn: Birds of Prey. Directed by Cathy Yan, Warner Bros., 2020.

Haywire. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, Lionsgate, 2012.

I, Tonya. Directed by Craig Gillespie, Neon, 2017.

Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Paramount, 1984.

Inness, Sherrie A. *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

Iron Man. Directed by Jon Favreau, Marvel Studios, 2008.

Jennings, Collier. “Why *Wonder Woman 1984* Won’t Receive a Director’s Cut.” *CBR.com*,

https://www.cbr.com/wonder-woman-1984-no-directors-cut/#:~:text=Overall%2C%20Jenkins%20is%20happy%20with,the%20first%20Wonder%20Woman%20film.&text=The%20film%20arrives%20in%20theaters%20and%20HBO%20Max%20on%20Dec. Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.

Joker. Directed by Todd Phillips, Warner Bros., 2019.

Kingsman: The Secret Service. Directed by Matthew Vaughn, Fox, 2015.

Kill Bill. Directed by Quinten Tarantino. Lionsgate, 2003.

Kirkman, Robert, creator. *Invincible*. Skybound and Skybound North, 2021.

Lacdan, Joe. "First enlisted female to graduate from Ranger School reflects on experience." *U.S. Army*, 28 Aug. 2019, https://www.army.mil/article/226137/first_enlisted_female_to_graduate_from_ranger_school_reflects_on_experience?fbclid=IwAR1eu80o0pAE8T79IQAWRivXstUTUlibUHlgTO1p5Aio8273o_KvXQtJ7WU#:~:text=Kristen%20Griest%20and%20then%2D1st,the%20course%20earlier%20this%20year. Accessed 30 Mar. 2021.

Lara Croft: Tomb Raider. Directed by Simon West, Paramount, 2001.

Lara Croft: Tomb Raider - The Cradle of Life. Directed by Jan de Bont, Paramount, 2003.

The Long Kiss Goodnight. Directed by Renny Harlin, New Line Cinema, 1996.

Mad Max. Directed by George Miller. MGM, 1979.

Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome. Directed by George Miller. Warner Brothers, 1985.

Mad Max: Fury Road. Directed by George Miller, Warner Brothers, 2015.

"Mad Max: Fury Road - Official Theatrical Teaser Trailer [HD]" *YouTube.* 17 May 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWNWi-ZWL3c.

Malkin, Mark. “Ewan McGregor and Chris Messina Say Their ‘Birds of Prey’ Villains Are Probably Gay.” *Variety*, 24 Jan. 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/news/birds-of-prey black-mask-victor-zsasz-gay-1203479146/. Accessed 29 Oct. 2020.

Mancini, Vince. “‘Birds Of Prey’ Is Strangely Written But Features Some Of Comic Book Cinema’s Greatest Stunts And Acting.” *Uproxx*, 7 Feb. 2020, https://uproxx.com/movies/birds-of-prey-review/. Accessed 30 Oct. 2020.

Mary Queen of Scots. Directed by Josie Rourke, Focus Features, 2018.

McNary, Dave. “‘Birds of Prey’ Flailing With $34 Million Box Office Opening.” *Variety*, 7 Feb. 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/news/birds-of-prey-box-office-opening-weak-1203496672/. Accessed 26 Oct. 2020.

Mendelson, Scott. “Why $1 Billion for James Cameron’s ‘Avatar’ Sequels Could Be a Bargain.” *Forbes*, 9 May 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2020/05/09/avatar-sequels-james-cameron-billion-disney-hobbit-peter-jackson-box-office/?sh=15494e9326b0&fbclid=IwAR34fkowhS0xgySOgsBs6QDXqjjXyKQdXi85gJeKcy7ws7VzqnMSre6Q7wU. Accessed 31 Mar. 2021.

Monster. Directed by Patty Jenkins, Newmarket Films, 2003.

Orwell, George. *1984*. 1961, Signet Classics, 1977.

Punisher: War Zone. Directed by Lexi Alexander, Lionsgate, 2008.

Raiders of the Lost Ark. Directed by Steven Spielberg, Paramount, 1981.

The Road Warrior. Directed by George Miller, Warner Bros., 1981.

Rucka, Greg. *Wonder Woman*, vol. 2, no. 219, DC Comics, 2005, 23-24.

"Ryan Watson." *IMDB.com,* 2020, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0914870/. Accessed 13 Dec. 2020.

Screen Rant. "Wonder Woman 1984 Pitch Meeting." *YouTube*, parody by Ryan George, 3 Jan. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_Tm0SxIp6w. Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.

Smith, Paul. "Eastwood Bound." *Constructing Masculinity*. Routledge, 1995.

Suicide Squad. Directed by David Ayre, Warner Bros., 2016.

Tasker, Yvonne. *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema.* Routledge, 1998.

Terminator 2: Judgment Day. Directed by James Cameron, TriStar Pictures, 1991.

Thor: Ragnarok. Directed by Taika Waititi, Marvel Studios, 2017.

Tomb Raider. Directed by Roar Uthaug, Warner Bros., 2018.

Turner, Tina. "We Don't Need Another Hero." Capitol Records, 1985, track 1.

Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets. Directed by Luc Besson, EuropaCorp Distribution, 2017.

Warner Bros. Pictures. "Wonder Woman 1984 -- Official Trailer." *YouTube*, trailer by Warner Bros., 8 Dec. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfM7_JLk-84. Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.

Whip It. Directed by Drew Barrymore, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2009.

The Wolf of Wall Street. Directed by Martin Scorsese, Paramount Pictures, 2013.

"Women moving ahead in the Self-Defense Forces." *The Japan Times*, 29 Jul. 2019, japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/07/29/editorials/women-moving-ahead-of-self-defense-forces/. Accessed 31 Mar. 2021.

Wonder Woman. Directed by Patty Jenkins, Warner Bros., 2017.

Wonder Woman 1984. Directed by Patty Jenkins, Warner Bros., 2020.