

ABSTRACT

“Where Are the Wonder Women?”

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As superhero movies continue to grow in popularity, they also grow in the ability to leave drastic impacts on our collective culture. Because of this influence, it is important to consider how these movies portray different minority groups. This thesis serves to examine the ways in which these movies depict their superheroic female leads. By exploring how each standalone female superhero movie frames its leading lady – within the context of her respective films – we are able to gain a better understanding about their representation and how it affects viewers.

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WHERE ARE THE WONDER WOMEN?
REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE SUPERHERO SUBGENRE

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the
Honors Program

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May, 2019

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To my Mom, the real-life Wonder Woman,
thank you for all of your support along the way.

Introduction

I very clearly remember the first time I watched a movie and subsequently wrestled with myself about representation. I wish I could say it was a profound and critically acclaimed movie, but I cannot. It was 2015 and I had just graduated high school. I had gone to the movies with my best friend to see Melissa McCarthy's *Spy*. It was this movie that sparked something in me. As I watched this movie only one thought ran through my mind: "Why are all the women in movies super slim or overweight?" Recognizing this, I began to research my question as I noticed again and again that there was significantly more variety in male than female casting. It was then that I put two and two together to realize why. It is hard to have a variety in female casting when, according to a 2017 MPAA report, only 33 out of the top 100 movies depicted a female lead (2017). When you are being outnumbered 2.3:1 it is easy to fall into stereotypes that stunt character growth. Although this topic first piqued my interest that hot summer day watching a gimmicky Melissa McCarthy movie, it soon turned my attention to other movies, eventually settling on my beloved superhero genre.

Throughout the history of the superhero genre, female superheroes have consistently been restricted to a box of patriarchal gender roles that have reduced their cinematic depiction and not allowed them to reach their potential as heroines. While the comic book industry has begun to boom again thanks to the new-found pop culture affinity for superhero action films, the amount of female representation has remained

terribly stagnant in comparison to their male counterparts. In addition to the small percentage of screen time, female leading roles often fall short and usually end up marginalizing their “intended” female audiences. According to a diversity report done by USC Annenberg, in 2017 out of the 4,454 speaking characters in the top 100 movies, only 31.8% of them were female (Smith), which was only 1.9 percent higher than that of the top 100 movies in 2007. A different study by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film concluded that while woman account for 50% percent of moviegoers, they account for just 24% of protagonists (2017). This statistic is even greater when it comes to the superhero genre, where out of all 155 films, only 12 featured female protagonists. Remove all 7 of the animated DC Supergirl Lego movies, and you have 6 fully fledged live action films, or a whopping 2.95%.

Janet Crawford, a neuroscientist, states in her Ted talk that “your brain is always scanning for repeating patterns and when it finds them it stores them as the way things are or ought to be...if it is associated out there it is likely to become associated in [your brain]” (Crawford). When our brains pick up on patterns, no matter how subtle, then we expect to find those patterns in both the fictional stories we watch and in real life. This can be observed by the colloquial use of the word “superhero.” When someone uses the term, it “usually implies that the hero in question is male, and white, and heterosexual, and able bodied. That is why many people...do not feel the need to say “male superheroes,” but tend to clarify when talking about “female superheroes” or “black superheroes” or “disabled superheroes” (Cocca 6). Additionally, when writing this work, I had to add the word “superheroine” to my computer’s dictionary because it did not

initially recognize it as a word. Although not blatant, it is small patterns like this that, gradually and over time, instill the idea that men are the default superheroes and women are simply sexy sidekicks or victims in need of saving. In this thesis, I will dive into the handful of female-led superhero movies and discover what those movies have meant for women in the world today and their impact on cinema going forwards.

A Short History of Comic Books

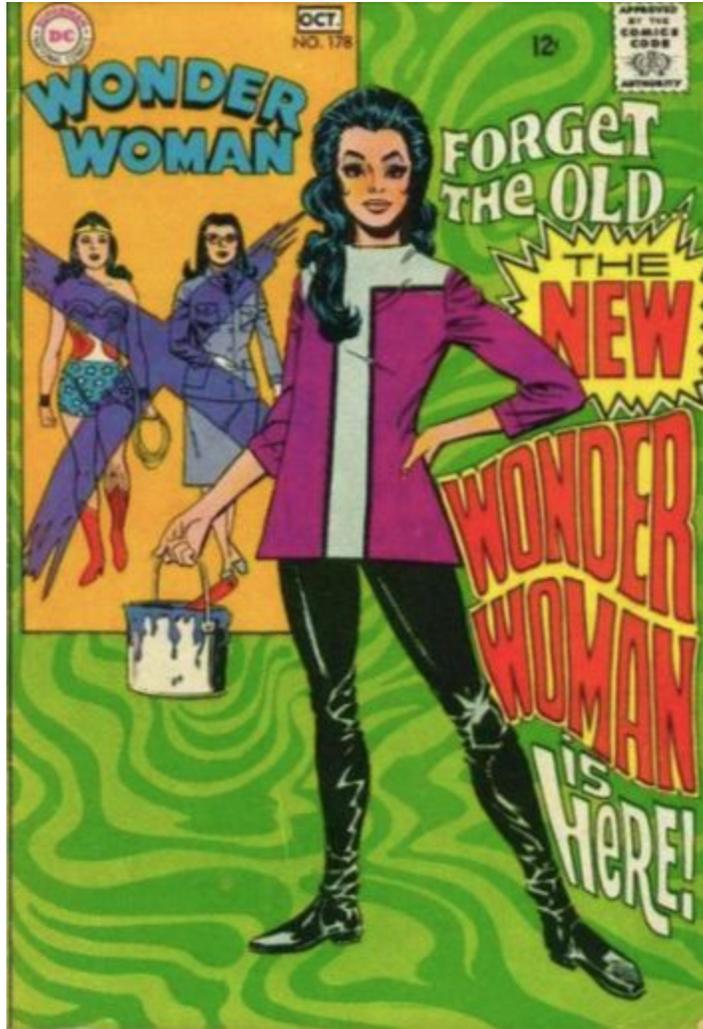
The first modern comic book published in the United States was called *Funnies on Parade* and was released in 1933 as a Procter and Gamble product (Golda). Comic book production increased substantially during World War II as a cheap form of entertainment. The Golden Age of comics officially began in the late 1930s, generally credited to the launch of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's *Superman* comic in 1938 (Golda), and lasted until the 1950s. Many of the characters created in this time such as Superman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman, all pillars of patriotism during the World War II era, still exist in the mainstream pop culture of today (Comics).

In this time period comic books rapidly increased in popularity, and the well-loved superhero archetype was created. In the beginning of this comic book era, female characters were generally clever, strong, and independent-minded. This was most likely encouraged by women's contributions to the war effort and the wartime flux in general (Cocca). Wonder Woman was, and continues to be, the most prevalent female superhero represented in comics. Some other female superheroes created during this time

period included Miss Fury, Black Widow, Mary Marvel, and Miss Liberty (Golda). In the years after the war ended the superhero comic book genre lost its market share, in what was considered to be the decline of the golden era of comics books. The Golden Age of comic books, however, brought the medium into prominence (Cocca).

As the war ended the interest in the superhero comic book genre started to dwindle. It was not until the successful release of the new superhero Flash in 1956 (Golda) that the Silver Age of Comic Books made its debut. The introduction of Flash inspired a new wave of superhero comic books fans. The content of these characters began to take on slightly more diversity than the Hitler fighting, red white and blue wearing superheroes of the Golden Age era.

The average American had returned to life before the war, and comic book stories began to reflect that. They began showcasing ideals from the heterosexual middle class nuclear family that was presented as typical during the postwar era (Cocca). In the ideal nuclear family, the female mother figure usually carried out most of the domestic duties while the male father figure was expected to be the provider and protector of his family. These ideals, while not inherently bad on their own, caused female comic book characters to suffer in both number and substance. The Silver Age of comic books created Supergirl and Batgirl as female knock-offs of male superheroes that already existed. Supergirl, although related to Superman and gifted with the same powers, was limited by her lack of control and confidence in her own abilities. Batgirl was originally introduced as a romance for Robin before being given her own arc (Comics). Wonder Woman became



(Wonder Woman #178)

much more feminine in appearance, and in the late '60s was willing to give up her super powers to stay on Earth with Steve, where she buys a boutique and learns martial arts.

However, these new preoccupations and story direction of female superheroes did not prevent both their male and female readers from being able to see them as the magnificent superheroes they were, even these characters offered an escape from the romanticized domestic life in the Silver Age of comic books.

By the time the 1970s rolled around new waves of feminism were pushing for a more diverse comic book selection. Coincidentally many of the original writers and artists were retiring and younger creators were moving into managerial positions, which opened up space for new creative direction (Golda). More superheroines got introduced and old heroes were given their powers back. Unfortunately, the Comics Code was also relaxed in 1971 (Comics). The Comics Code was a set of rules established in 1954 as a standard for ethics in the previously unregulated industry. While containing an extensive list of regulations, this code stated that nudity and profanity were forbidden and that evil must be justly punished (Comics). With the relaxing of the code these new superheroines were now allowed to be drawn more suggestively and bad guys could be seen in a more sympathetic light.

The Bronze Age of comic books, which began around 1970, also saw a shift into darker themes and plot elements that were relevant to social issues of the time such as political turmoil and the Vietnam war (Comics). Another hallmark of the Bronze Age was a shift in the way that comic books were distributed. Until this time comic books had mainly been distributed in mass at newsstands. But just before the start of the era, in

1968, the first specialty comic books store opened in San Francisco, and the route from publisher to consumer was forever changed (Rosenkranz). The Bronze Age lasted about 15 years (Golda).

The Modern Age of comic books tentatively starts around 1985 with the creation of *Watchmen*. Technically, this age lasts until the present day, but a lot of changes have occurred in the genre since the mid '80s. Some say that comics “grew up” in this age and started to incorporate a high amount of violence and rape. The Bronze and Modern age blend together with the massive growth of local comic book shops and independent publishers. In 1972 there were only 23 comic book stores in the U.S., but by 1993 there were more than 10,000 (Last). The increase in storefront shops allowed for a more diverse and specialized selection of comic books. This phenomenon did not last long, and soon the number of local comic book shops rapidly declined as high prices and low content quality drove customers away (Golda). This quick drop in comic book shops left shop owners to cater to what they perceived to be their largest body of customers. This specialization of comic books catered mostly to older, white, heterosexual men. Female characters, especially superheroes, generally were reduced to sexualized plot points, and many female characters were the recipients of extreme violence. It is often considered, that the years between 1993 and 2000 are the “Dark Ages” in comic book literature. This is further depicted by Gail Simone, a popular comic books writer best known for DCs *Birds of Prey*, she popularized the usage of the term “fridging,” or putting women in refrigerators. After the release of *Green Lantern* #54 , where Kyle Rayner comes home to find that his girlfriend has been killed and stuffed into a refrigerator, Simone brought to

light that female comic book characters were often injured, killed, or depowered simply as a plot device that served to move the male plot line forward. (CITE)

With the new internet age, the fan base for comic books was able to gradually expand in its diversity and interests. The availability of online comic books allowed for niche markets and new characters to form. The additional increase in the popularity of superhero blockbuster films and other transmedia distributions helped the comic book fan base shift from a narrow market to a wider, more representative one (Cocca). Comic books today, combined with a more intense effort for gender equality, have created some great superheroic role models, but the characters popular in the Golden Era still maintain the greatest level of popularity.

A Brief History of Feminism

Feminism has generally been divided into three distinct periods or “waves,” each of which was centered around different ideals and goals. It is important to note that while each wave has a time frame, they are more importantly categorized by the goals and ideals that were being fought for by activists during their respective times. This synopsis will focus on the traditionally recognized three waves of feminism. There is a fourth wave of feminism currently emerging as a culture on social media such as the #metoo movement, although it is currently less universally recognized as its own distinct wave (Shebar).

The first wave of feminism is generally best known for championing women's right to vote. In the early 1800's women generally lived under the patriarchal structure of society that the European founding fathers had established (Green). A patriarchy "is a system of society or government in which the father or eldest male is head of the family and descent is traced through the male line." It can also be characterized as "a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it" (Dictionary.com). Under the legal principle of "coverture", husbands held authority over the person, property, and choices of their wives. Since women were not allowed to own property, and owning property was a prerequisite for voting, women were deprived of participation in the political process that governed them. The beginning of the industrial revolution shifted production from homes to factories, which shifted women away from production and into domestication (Green).

"The moment women begins to feel the promptings of ambition or the thirst for power, her aegis of defense is gone. All the sacred protection of religion, all the generous promptings of chivalry, all the poetry of romantic gallantry, depend upon woman's retaining her place as dependent and defenseless, and making no claims, and maintaining no right but what are the gifts of honor, rectitude and love." – Catherine

Beecher

This quote, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe's sister, helps point out the fact that the idea of true equality between men and women was an extremely radical idea, even for

women. Most American women had no opportunity for work outside their houses, and although some resorted to the profession of teaching, many found work in reform movements such as the prohibition movement. Since women were considered to be the moral compass of the home, they translated this to assuming them as the moral compass of the nation (Green).

In 1848, the Declaration of Sentiments was signed by 68 women and 32 men. This document, principled by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was based on the Declaration of Independence signed 72 years prior but championed rights for women. In 1920, 70 years after the Declaration of Sentiments was signed at the Seneca Falls convention, the United States passed the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote. Out of all 100 people who signed the Declaration of Sentiments, only Charlotte Woodward was still alive (Wellman).

It is also important to note here that although the origins of the first wave of feminism were strongly rooted in the abolitionist movement, after it gained its footing some white activists worked to exclude people of color from the fight for equality. This is obvious in their racist rhetoric, unwillingness to include women of color in the right to vote, and the establishment of the National American Woman Suffrage Association to ensure that “inferior” black men would not have power over white women.

After the passage of the 19th amendment, first wave feminists felt as though their main goal was achieved, and the energy of the group as a whole dwindled. Not long after, the United States slipped into the Great Depression, which was then followed by World War II. World War II was the first time that large numbers of women were found in the

workplace instead of the home, and once the men returned from war there was massive pushback to the idea of women working. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, which is often seen as the beginning of the second wave of feminism. Friedan's book was revolutionary in simply stating that sometimes women find personal fulfillment outside of their traditional role as a homemaker (Friedan).

In the mid sixties, the Civil Rights Movement and the Peace Rights movement were in full swing preceded by both the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. In all of these movements, there is both a liberal branch trying to work within society to create the changes they want to see and a radical branch that thinks that the social structure as a whole must change for justice to occur (Hannam). Liberal feminists were generally middle-class white women looking to establish anti-gender discrimination laws in the job market. while radical feminists were trying to deconstruct gender roles as a whole. Because of the extreme views of the radical feminists, liberal feminists seemed far tamer and were able to achieve more of their goals (Hannam). During this time the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was created, which granted women legal entrance to the workforce; there was an increase in divorce rights; more women ran for political office; Title IX was passed; and the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalized abortion (Hannam).

Unfortunately, much like the first wave of feminism, the second wave feminist movement failed to include non-white and lower class women. This failure led to the rise of a third wave of feminism, which first emerged in the mid-1990s. There were three main differences between the second and third waves. First, the third wave was

influenced greatly by academic criticism, which means that third wave feminists were more aware of exclusive language that tended to leave out identities outside of the cisgender, heterosexual norm of the time. Additionally, a main goal of third wave feminism was to be intersectional and include women of all backgrounds, color, races, and ages (Hannam).

While tremendous progress has been made since the start of the first feminist movement, there are still many micro policies and patriarchal ideals feminists continue to fight for. Today, the feminist movement continues to push for equal pay, reproductive rights, and protecting women from violence.

Where Are the Wonder Women?

The subsequent chapters in this thesis each take into consideration a distinct female comic book superhero and how her character was affected by the circumstances surrounding her development. Each hero stars in her own feature-length film where her name doubles as the title of the movie. Each chapter will bestow detail about each of character's story while simultaneously diving into how they were each specifically and distinctly characterized in their respective film adaptations.

I am thankful that while I was writing this thesis the opportunity for far more female representation in the superhero movie genre was presented and production companies capitalized on it. These women included the Dora Milaje warriors (*Black Panther*), the Wasp (*Ant-Man and the Wasp*), and even Hela (*Thor Ragnarok*), to name a

few. Unfortunately, none of these women were the main protagonist a feature film. In addition, a movie following the story of Jean Grey and a movie featuring Captain Marvel are set to be released this spring. It is a time of change for the representation of leading women in superhero movies, and I am excited to be a part of it. In this critique, each superheroine covered originates from either the DC or Marvel Universe. Choosing to limit the publishing houses eliminates a lot of possible characters such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Hit-Girl from the Kick-Ass movies, and Elastigirl, but puts all the characters on a similar playing field when it comes to funding and opportunity for feature-length films.

Each one of the chosen superheroes represents a different issue concerning female representation, sometimes specifically for the superhero subgenre, sometimes not. Chapter 1 on Supergirl will look into the origins of the superhero female film and how its shortcomings set the foundation for future superhero movies with female leads. Chapter 2 on Catwoman will look at the sexy dominatrix character, as well as how villains play a role in sculpting each hero. Chapter 3 will look at Elektra and how her movie further solidified the idea that female-led superhero movies were a waste of time and production expense. Chapter 4 will take a look at the recently released theatrical feature directed by Patti Jenkins; *Wonder Woman*.

These chapters are intended to spark an understanding as to how and why certain representations and subsequent stereotypes develop and are perpetuated over time. As you read through these chapters, I encourage you to consider how the one-sided representation of these characters shapes not only your own worldview, but that of those

around you. When stories are constantly told *at* minority groups and not *by* them, we get stories that are harmful and based on stereotypes that do not reflect the real experiences of the group. We should continue working to improve cinematic representation because, as the Nigerian author *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie* said, “the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete ... stories have been used to disposes and misalign but stories can also be used to empower and humanize.”

Chapter One

Supergirl 1984

Supergirl is a young, female, superhero created by Otto Binder and originally published by DC Comics, appearing for the first real time in *Action Comic* #252 in May 1959. In *Action Comics* #252 “The Supergirl From Krypton,” Superman heads out to investigate a mysterious flying purple object and finds Kara at the source. She explains that she is from Krypton just like Superman and that she had survived the initial destruction of their planet by sheer fortune and had grown up on a small bit of Krypton planet, separated from the rest of the planet during its explosion. Unfortunately once Kara was in girlhood, meteors hit their tiny planet, destroying what was left. To save his daughter, Zor-El, Kara’s Father, created a special rocket ship that would save Kara by sending her to another civilized planet, the one with the only other surviving Kryptonian, Superman.

Supergirl was reintroduced in *Action Comics* #869, where her backstory was changed so that she is older than Superman and was simply suspended in animation in an asteroid for 30 years, un-aging. This is the backstory that the producers of the recently developed *Supergirl* television series (2015– Present) decided to adopt. However, for the purpose of this thesis, we will be looking exclusively at the 1984 Supergirl feature-length film adaptation.



(Action Comics #252 The Supergirl From Krypton)

Supergirl Soars to the Cinema

Supergirl's journey to the cinema screen starts, of course, with her cousin's. Alexander Salkind purchased the film rights for Superman from Warner Brothers for \$3 million, which counted the "entire Superman family," including Supergirl (Knight). After the premier of the first two movies in the franchise, *Superman* (1978) and *Superman II* (1980), Salkind was confident enough to ask Warner Bros. to allow Supergirl to be included as a character in the third *Superman* movie. This was vetoed by Warner Brothers, but as soon as *Superman III* began principal photography, Salkind announced his plans to take a chance on a *Supergirl* spin off (Knight).

Christopher Reeve, who was contracted to play Superman at that time, was initially interested in appearing as a cameo in the *Supergirl* movie and suggested that the film be directed by Jeannot Szwarc. Although Christopher Reeve eventually backed out of the movie, the producers hired Jeannot Szwarc, and principal photography began around April 18, 1983 (Knight). The *Hollywood Reporter* reported that the film's budget was \$35 million in July 1983, but other reports have suggested the budget could have been as high as \$60 million (AFI). The film was release in the U.S. on November 21, 1984, and to date has a lifetime domestic gross of \$14 million (Box Office Mojo). The film failed to impress anyone and eventually lead Salkind to sell the rights to the franchise two years later (Knight).

One of the people whom the movie failed to impress was Robert Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, one of the most widely respected movie critics of the day. He gave Supergirl a 2-star review, writing that it “is an unhappy, unfunny, unexciting movie. Why even go to the trouble of making a movie that feels like it’s laughing at itself?” (Ebert) This quote highlights what most of the audiences at the time thought about the movie. The production was disappointing, the acting was campy, and the script made no sense. Director Jeannot Szwarc’s post-release interviews about indicate what he was most interested in when making the film. Szwarc was very occupied in creating a visually appealing movie, and not one that had a great plot. He also said that it was a fantasy film, so if something does not make sense, it is not necessary for us to understand. This leaves the film with an irrational sequence of events. The visual effects of this movie, however, are outstanding. There is a lot of creative set design and some fabulous practical special effects. The bulldozer scene in which the main villain of the movie Selena (Faye Dunaway) casts a spell on a bulldozer so that it will track down the man she wishes to seduce, for example took 22 days to shoot. The attention to visual detail is obvious, the possessed bulldozer wrecks havoc on the small downtown in a practical effects scene that is quite exciting to watch. This attention to detail was lost however on the script. For a film to be great, the visuals must work in tandem with the script, helping to highlight the important aspects, to bring greater light to the story it is telling.

The film begins with a small colony of Kryptonians, who managed to survive the destruction of Krypton many years earlier, now living in inner space on Argos City. However, set and costume design were changed to be much softer with pink tones and

round edges, which made it difficult to piece together that the people of Argos City, were a colony of Kryptonians. It is on Argos City that we find Kara (Helen Slater), who will



Superman (1978)



Supergirl (1985)

become Supergirl. She is so naive that she borders on becoming unrelatable. In his adolescence, Clark Kent grappled with the universal theme of alienation. Kara, however, struggles with geometry and asks Zaltar, “What is a tree?”. Zaltar (Peter O’Toole), bored with life on Argos, ends up letting Kara play with the very force that keeps all of the Kryptonians alive, The Omegahedron. In a freak accident of Kara’s recklessness, the Omegahedron gets sucked into outer space and onto Earth. To atone for her mistake, Kara boldly hops into Zaltar’s spaceship pod in an attempt to catch the Omegahedron. Unlike Superman, Supergirl is not an infant, and while she is aware of her journey from home, she does not comprehend the sheer enormity of it. One might have assumed that Kara felt extremely guilty about losing the very object that keeps her entire race of people alive and that this guilt would propel her into a character arc where she learns about responsibility and becomes a fully realized adult. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

After traveling through inner space, Kara emerges from under the surface of the water completely draped in a Supergirl suit. Meanwhile, the villain of the movie, Selena, lounges at an expensive picnic with her consort, Nigel (Peter Cook). Suddenly, the Omegahedron falls from the sky and lands in Selena’s soup. Selena instantly knows that this tiny ball holds unimaginable power and decides to ditch Nigel and seize all the power for herself. Now in possession of the Omegahedron, Selena hosts a party for her foot soldiers while dismissing Nigel’s advice. Nigel still insists that he holds all the necessary

magical wisdom, and he even tries to warn Selena of what horrors might befall the untrained use of such power, but she still dismisses him, picking up a witch he is fond of and publicly embarrassing her. The gender politics here are disheartening. Nigel, the man, holds all the knowledge, while Selena, a petty and jealous woman, only abuses the power she now possesses.

Setting out to find the Omegahedron, Supergirl runs into her first humans. They turn out to be two grimy truckers who are “out looking for a good time” and attempt to rape her. This does not go well for them as we get to witness Supergirl’s powers on full display for the first time. When Superman first demonstrated his powers on earth, he did so by rescuing Lois Lane and the citizens on the street below from a helicopter accident. It was an inspiring and heroic moment for him. Supergirl gets no such moment, as her first demonstration of power publicly is defense against two ultimately unchanged attackers, which degrades both genders by showing that women, even superhumans like Supergirl, are objectified and defensive while men are mere slaves to lust and justify their behavior saying it is “just the way we are.”

Kara, with absolutely no sense of urgency at the fact that everyone on her home planet is dying without the Omegahedron, decides to disguise herself as Linda Lee and spends a good chunk of time developing this secret identity at a nearby all-girls boarding school run by men, where Nigel happens to be one of the strict math professors. Linda only manages to secure a place at the school by quickly forging a letter from her cousin, Clark Kent. Supergirl’s agency is thus bounded on all sides by the authority of men. Once enrolled in the boarding school, Linda gets randomly placed as the roommate of Lucy

Lane (Maureen Teefy) —Lois Lane's spunky little sister. Of course, Lucy has a Superman poster in her room, and Kara, now Linda, takes a moment to take in its majesty. The moment is shot as something thematically reverent, but since she already wears an identical costume, it does not serve any real function except to remind the audience that this is supposed to relate back to the already successful *Superman* franchise.

While Kara is off playing sports, impressing folks with her 6th-dimensional geometry skills, and hanging out with her new friends, Selena chooses to seduce hunky gardener Ethan (Hart Bochner) simply because her best friend and roommate expresses a faint attraction to him. After Selena sees Ethan, her plans of total world domination get put on the back burner while she attempts to seduce him. Ethan is unresponsive to her advances, so Selena uses her witchy magic and brews a love potion to enchant him. Nigel interrupts Selena's seduction plans to offer his help and knowledge, but she turns him down once more, rebutting that she is only playing with fire because she holds all the matches, which reinforces the idea that women may possess power, but they do not know how to wield it.

This is further solidified by the next scene, in which Ethan, dazed from Selena's love potion, has wandered away and Selena sends an animated bulldozer to snatch him back to her. This lifelike bulldozer forages its way through downtown Chicago, destroying buildings and cars and causing mass hysteria. It is interesting to note that Lucy Lane, without any super powers or weapons, runs into the middle of the street to try to hop into the bulldozer and save Ethan, who has been snatched into its clutches.

Unfortunately, her truly heroic actions are for naught, as she immediately gets hit on the head and passes out in the driver's seat. Kara quickly changes into her Supergirl costume and races to save her friend and the man in the bulldozer. After she rescues Ethan, the spell Selena has put him under comes full swing and he professes that he loves Linda "with all his heart, forever" and kisses her.

Selena is absolutely enraged that Ethan is in love with Linda, and she calls upon the "Power of Shadow," which is essentially a manifestation of her sexual frustration and jealousy, to go and destroy "the annoying one," which is not Linda, but rather Lucy. This monster, created by Selena to be invisible, crashes across the town to the dorm that Lucy and Linda share. When Supergirl spies this wave of destruction, she flies out to face it and runs straight into an invisible wall. She does demonstrate her intelligence by deciding to confront the invisible villain by striking it with an electrified lamp post, revealing some of the monster's form. Supergirl is faced with a manifestation of Selena's lust and manages to drive it away. The beast, however, is not completely defeated because Supergirl's own sexual awakening with Ethan is just beginning.

On the surface, *Supergirl* seemingly subverts typical fairy tales by having the female superhero rescue a male damsel in distress. Unfortunately, Kara comes off as uncaring and oblivious because the filmmakers gave her, soft, childlike feminine innocence that is the opposite of Superman's traditionally masculine boldness and bravery. Additionally, Superman is set up as a Christ-like figure who inspires others to do better. He is extremely moral, does not lie and learns that his father sent him to earth to be humanities guide. Supergirl on the other hand is a naive girl who sets aside her initial

mission of rescuing the Omegahedron to pursue the first boy who ever kissed her. This crucial distinction sets up the male hero as the true savior.

Once Kara remembers that she must find the Omegahedron, she finds her way to Selena's apartment, which is nestled in an abandoned carnival haunted house. Ethan has also found his way to Selena's apartment, with flowers and chocolates for new lover, Linda. Just before Linda is about to confront Selena, Ethan shows up and tells her that if she were just to say his name one time he would "die a happy fool." Linda is not initially receptive to Ethan's advances, but once he proposes, Linda is enamored with him and they kiss. Up to this point, Ethan has done absolutely nothing to gain Linda's love. It takes but a mere mention of getting married and suddenly Linda, who was previously only partially interested, is suddenly enamoured with the idea of being with Ethan. The narrative all but forces her into this unnecessary relationship.

By introducing Ethan into the plot, the story that once had the potential to embody an empowering take a drastic step back. Selena, who was once focused on world domination, throws that all away to make sure that this mildly attractive landscaper is her very own "Prince Charming." The first part of the film establishes two powerful female characters with the potential for a strong movie. Unfortunately their stories shift, from Kara saving her city and Selena taking over the world, to a film about two women pining after the same man. Good movies have a simple plot, where the main protagonist makes decisions that propel her story forward. Besides her initial decision to leave Argos, Kara hardly has any agency or character development. She is essentially the same character at the end of the movie as she was at the start.

The End of a Very Short Era

Throughout *Supergirl*, Kara unintentionally comes off as uncaring and oblivious because she is supposed to be emulating some generic, soft feminine innocence, which undercuts her “hero” persona. Agency involves a character having the ability to make choices that affect the story. If Kara were an active agent in the narrative, she would have motivations that were all her own. If she were to have true agency, she would be more active than reactive and push the plot forward instead of constantly being swept into it. The story should exist because of Kara and her motivations; instead she exists because of the story. If Kara were to do something that followed her motivations, such as looking for the Omegahedron to save her people instead of going to a boarding school, it would change the plot of the movie and endow her with genuine agency.

Supergirl was ultimately considered as a flop. This movie, which combines superheroic abilities with witches and love potions, sealed the fate of the superheroine for the next 20 years.

CHAPTER TWO

Catwoman 2004

Catwoman made her comic book debut in *Batman* #1 in 1940. She was originally created by Bill Finger and Bob Kane and was allegedly inspired by both Jean Harlow, a Hollywood sex icon, and Bob Kane's cousin, a woman named Ruth Steele. In Catwoman's first appearance in *Batman* #1 she is simply known as "The Cat" who, along with Joker, is one of Batman's main enemies. The Cat was well received and began making regular appearances in the *Batman* comics, flirting the line between hero and villain. Eventually she became known as Selina Kyle and has been given several different backstories throughout the comic book ages.

In the Golden Age, Selina was a flight attendant who had survived a plane crash, but suffered some amnesia. This was later revealed to be a ruse so that she could escape her life of crime and start over. In the Silver Age of comic books, Selina Kyle was a true villain who would often kill people. This version of Catwoman did not last long and she was later revealed to have been on "Earth B," an alternate universe where character arcs that did not make sense with their Golden Age counterparts ended up (Golda). In the Bronze Age, Selina was given a new backstory, this time as a prostitute who loved cats

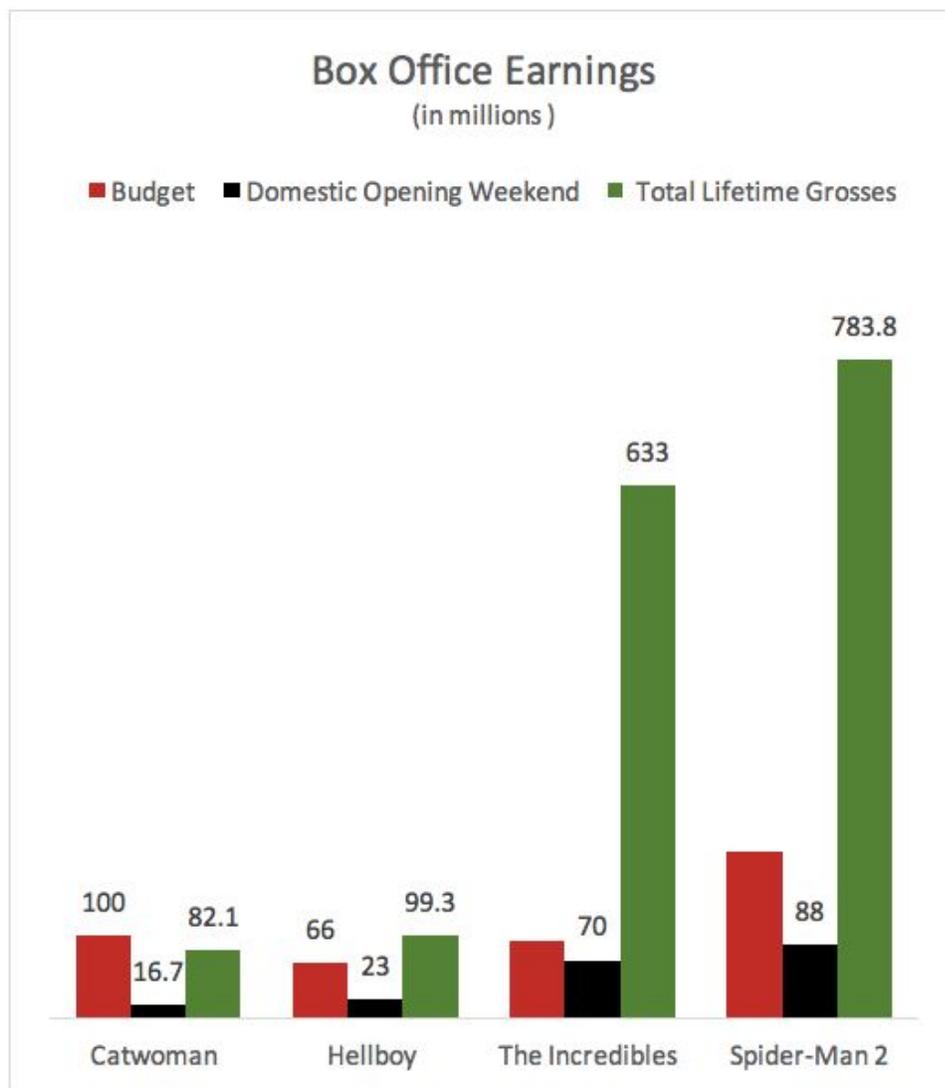
and lived with a roommate, Holly Robinson. She was inspired to become Catwoman after seeing the Dark Knight one evening in a park. Later, the prostitute backstory was changed so that she was instead simply pretending to be a prostitute to steal money from sleazy men. After Catwoman's 77th issue Jim Balent, who wrote Catwoman from 1993 to 1999, left DC Comics, and Catwoman's story took a very dark congruent with many of the other comics books in this time period. In 2011, DC re-launched "The New 52," which started the DC universe storylines over. The Catwoman comic of today now has Selina serving as an unofficial member of the Justice League and has almost married Batman (Golda).

Catwoman's Cinematic Journey

A Catwoman movie was originally announced in 1993, just a year after Michelle Pfeiffer's portrayal of the character in *Batman Returns* (1992). Michelle Pfeiffer left the project, after which Ashley Judd was rumored to play the part, but she did not end up picking up the role. Meanwhile, while only three were credited, there were 28 screenwriters who got involved in the script. Finally, after DC's Catwoman had essentially been written out of her own movie and 20 years after the Supergirl flop, our favorite feline fiend pounced her way onto the big screen.

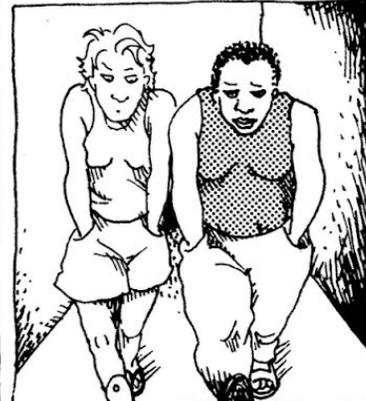
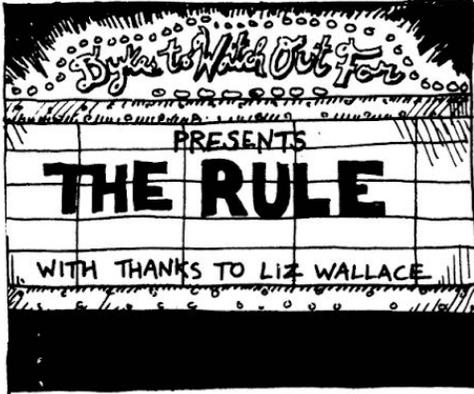
Catwoman is considered to be one of the biggest box office failures of our time, but prior to its debut it was actually positioned to be a massive hit. Casting Halle Berry in the lead was a huge win for Warner Bros. Her career was taking off, and she had won an

Academy Award for Best Actress two years prior. Coupled with the film's \$100-million budget, it was set to be a sensation. When *Catwoman* opened in theatres on July 23, 2004, it made just \$16.7 million over its opening weekend. For comparison, *The Incredibles* grossed \$70.6 with a \$92-million budget during its November weekend opening, *Hellboy* grossed \$23.2 with a \$66-million budget on its April weekend opening, and *Spider-Man 2* grossed \$88.2 million with a \$200-million



budget during its June weekend release. All of these films found their way to the box office in 2004, and yet *Catwoman* was the only superhero film released during this time that never made back its budget (Box Office Mojo). The early 2000s marked a resurgence in comic book movies, bringing back new versions of the old favorites. *Catwoman* promised an exciting new look into an old character who had not yet gained her own feature-length film. Unfortunately, *Catwoman* was an all around failure. From the story, to the acting, to the special effects, to the score, the entire movie turned out to be an absolute mess. Our anti-hero received nothing but harsh criticism from both critics and fans alike, which is evidenced by its 9% Rotten Tomatoes score.

Interestingly, the movie does pass the Bechdel Test. The Bechdel Test, sometimes called the Bechdel Rule or the Mo Movie Measure, is a simple gender-bias test in which a movie must meet the following three criteria: (1) it has to have at least two [named] women in it, who (2) talk to each other about (3) something other than a man. This was popularized by comic book artist Alison Bechdel, who said she got the idea from her good friend Liz Wallace (Bechdel). This criteria for movies became relatively popular and now is home to a website where you can search your favorite movie to see if it passes this feminist test. Something seemingly so simple is surprisingly lacking in a good chunk of popular movies. It is important to note, however, that this theory works on a very surface level to determine if movies can be considered “feminist.” It also is intended to encourage filmmakers to make more movies with three-dimensional women characters in them and to act as a starting point for a conversation about female representation.



In *Catwoman*'s case, it does pass the Bechdel test. Patience Phillips (Halle Berry), who becomes Catwoman, often finds guidance in what to do from her confidant Ophelia (Frances Conroy). However, her two best friends, a stereotypical gay man and a chubby woman obsessed with sex, mostly talk to her about her love life. Catwoman does take down a woman as her main villain, with very little discourse about love happening between them. However, while *Catwoman* does pass the Bechdel test, it relies on girl-on-girl hate to propel the plot forward. I am arguing that this particular set of plot devices undermines the movie's feminist aspirations. Having female characters does not necessarily mean a movie is a feminist victory. The villain, Laurel Hedare (Sharon Stone), an extremely successful and wealthy beauty industry tycoon, is wildly upset at the thought of being replaced as the face of her brand by 20-year-old Drina (Kim Smith) because she is aging. Laurel even says, "I was everything they wanted me to be. I was never more beautiful. Never more powerful. And then I turned 40 and they threw me away." The "they" to whom she is referring is both society and her business partner husband, George Hedare (Lambert Wilson). Her statement implies that after a woman reaches a certain age, it does not matter how much power or beauty she had before; she is now disposable. This kind of discourse is rooted in the ideals that women have to maintain a certain set of unrealistic beauty standards set for them by others.

After Laurel's husband begins to cheat on her with Drina, she begins to market skin cream that promises to stop aging. The plot of this movie has painted all women as obsessively narcissistic and male-dependent, as if once they are no longer attractive to the male eye, they are no longer worth anything and can be replaced by a younger model. To

get back at the society that has rendered her worthless, she constructs a powerful anti-aging skin cream. This cream, called Beuline, contains chemistry where if “you stop using it ... your face disintegrates,” but if “you keep using it, skin like living marble”—which is what Hollywood is constantly telling its female viewers is what men really want: a subservient sexy statue.

It seems as though all 28 writers of this movie concluded that physical appearance was the only thing that women could possibly be concerned with. In fact, Laurel Hedare never appears in the *Catwoman* comic books; her only appearances are the movie and two subsequent video games. The screenwriters purposely created this villain on their own instead of borrowing a storyline from the *Catwoman* comics. Although Laurel Hedare does end up reclaiming some of her agency by murdering her cheating husband and blaming it on Catwoman, the plot still centers around females in harsh competition with one another for the benefit of their male viewers. In Laurel’s last moments, she is hanging out of a window, seconds from falling to her death. As she is dangling, Catwoman actually offers to help her back inside to spare her life, but Laurel catches a glimpse of her skin in some fractured glass and sees her face disintegrating. Presumably, she has not used her face cream recently enough and is falling victim to her own poison. This moment where she sees herself disfigured causes her to miss her opportunity to be saved and her hands slip, and she dies. The villain, and her demise, further solidifies the idea that female superheroes are more inadequate when it comes to taking on significant villains. Having a female superhero whose main villain is the beauty industry helps to

solidify the idea that women, even ones with superpowers, cannot be interested in anything other than physical beauty.

If there were as many female superhero movies as there were male superhero movies, this hero and villain pairing might not be so much of an issue. But, when the representation of female superheroes is so incredibly limited and the best conflict that 28 people can imagine for a female hero/female villain pair is cosmetics, it just goes to prove that movies, especially superhero movies, have a long way to go. The more representation each character receives, the less they have to stand in place as the “whole” of their group.

Bondage Babe

One of the most iconic characteristics of Catwoman is, of course, her outfit. Through this, she is defined first by her sexuality. She remains a highly sexualized and is often labeled as a deviant in the comics. In fact, DC even labels her as a villain, as she has been known to walk a fine line between good and bad. While my personal favorite costume dates all the way back to the 1940s when she still went by “The Cat,” Catwoman is usually depicted wearing a skintight bodysuit that is either black or dark purple and that caters overtly to the male gaze.

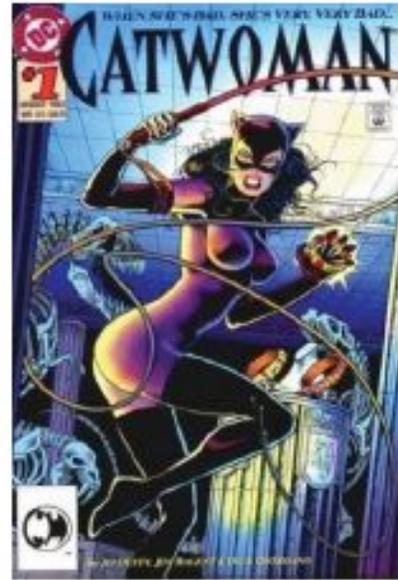
The “male gaze” is one of the key pillars in feminist film theory and was coined by filmmaker Laura Mulvey in 1975 in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey was one of the first scholars to analyze film from a feminist

perspective, pioneering a new field of study. She argued that the viewer tends to adopt the camera's gaze as their own. Subsequently, because most people in positions of creative importance are men, their art is filtered through their masculine perceptions of the world, no matter how subtle. Mulvey, using elements of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, argued that men are ultimately afraid of castration and the emasculation that it brings. Because of that, and the idea that women are the perfect representation of what it means to be without a phallus, men are left with two choices with which to deal with women. Men can escape by a "complete disavowal of castration by ... turning the object into a fetish, so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous" or they can create a sort of scopophilia where one "builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it to something satisfying in itself." The second option is the one that often gets associated with the male gaze, which has entered popular culture to describe a sexualized way of viewing that empowers men and objectifies women. Generally, in the male gaze, the woman is positioned within the *mise-en-scène* as an "object" of heterosexual male desire (Mulvey).

Catwoman has consistently been a highly sexualized character, generally seen as the "bad girl" who offers a complicated relationship between the feminine psyche and the "pussy cat" (Schubart). Her representation in *Catwoman* (2004) is clearly one of a seductress, as she woos



The Cat, Batman #3



Catwoman #1 (2003)



Batman Returns (1993)



Catwoman (2004)

the very police officer who is trying to track her down. Her tight black suit, the harness across her flat stomach, the black gloves, the whip, her pants already halfway ripped off of her, and the stiletto boots are all reminiscent of a dominatrix persona. Men and women have been drawn to this archetype and the power she represents. Even Pitof, the film's director, said in response to how he decided to direct *Catwoman*, "I mean, I'm a French man, I love women...how can you say no to Halle Berry?" He went on to say that Berry was "the best part of the movie" and he got to "kiss her every morning and every evening" (Popvic). This illustrates the idea that movies are often glimpses into male fantasy. Patience, and thus Halle Berry, finds herself at the capitalist intersection of "sex sells" and her struggle to claim power as a strong, independent woman. Every time Patience puts on her bondage-inspired costume, protecting her from nothing, her sexuality and her power become confused, thus minimizing her heroism. Although *Catwoman* might be sexually liberated, the lens through which she is viewed in in the film as she struts across the rooftops, booty rocking from side to side in the moonlight, privileges male desire and fantasy. Additionally, according to a diversity report done by USC Annenberg female characters (28.4%) were far more likely than male characters (7.5%) to be shown in tight or alluring apparel, and with some nudity (M=9.6%, F=25.4%). Females 13-20 years old were just as likely as females 21-39 years old to appear in sexy attire or with some nudity (Inequality). This is a disheartening trend exposes the idea that women in the media are often pandering to the male gaze, this is dangerous as it continues to create societal pressure for even young girls to be sexy not only in real life, but when they are being portrayed on the screen.

If this movie were written for women, it completely misses the mark; its depressing and regressive portrait of its female characters alienates its female viewers. However, this movie is not really for men either, except for maybe the two scenes where Halle Berry prances across the moonlit rooftops in little more than an S&M costume. Strangely enough, this movie is not even for comic book fans. The original Catwoman, Selina Kyle, is not anywhere to be found and it follows little of the canon Catwoman stories. My only conclusion is that this is a movie made for cats, by cats, but the jury is still out on that one.

CHAPTER THREE

Elektra

Elektra made her comic book debut in 1996 in *Daredevil* #168. In this issue, she is introduced as an assassin who knocks Daredevil out the second she sees him. We come to learn, in a knocked-out flashback, that she and Matt Murdock, Daredevil's alter ego, were in love in college (the cover of the issue even features the come-on "Once he loved her ... now she is his most deadly enemy!"). This flashback reveals that the two of them fell in love and had a euphoric year before Elektra witnessed the murder of her father on her birthday. This prompted her to return to Europe, as she originally hails from Greece. Elektra, now fueled by hate and looking for revenge, seeks out The Hand to be trained as an assassin. The Hand is a ninja order that serves a demon referred to by members as the Beast. Now, a great Hand warrior Elektra will work for anyone willing to pay her price (Hand).

In 2005, director Rob Bowman tried his hand at Hollywood's third major superhero movie starring a woman. *Elektra*, starring Jennifer Garner as the titular assassin, debuted on January 14 and made almost \$13 million in its opening weekend on a \$43 million dollar budget (Box Office Mojo) Elektra was prominently featured in the 2003 *Daredevil* movie starring Ben Affleck, and *Elektra* was meant to be a spin-off. Sadly, the film did not make back its budget in domestic release. Elektra is first seen

diligently scrubbing away at the floor to leave no trace of her murderous presence. She then is offered \$2 million for her next kill; all she must do is arrive two days early for the job. She arrives early to a fantastic lakeside mansion where she soon meets Abby (Kirsten Zien), who lives next door with her father. The movie is sprinkled with flashbacks to Elektra's childhood, where her semi-abusive father relentlessly teaches her survival and combat skills. Elektra befriends Abby and her father before learning that they are the target of her next paid assassination gig. She refuses, after which other paid assassins from the evil organization called The Hand appear and attempt to finish her job. Elektra takes it upon herself to save Abby and her father and comes to learn that Abby is, in fact, The Treasure, a martial arts prodigy the Hand seeks to use for evil. Elektra returns to her childhood home to fight the leader of the Hand, Kirigi (Will Yun Lee). They fight an anti-climactic battle in a room filled with floating sheets, and Abby comes to help Elektra. Unfortunately, Abby dies in the fight. Elektra lets out all of her rage and performs a ritual on Abby to bring her back to life. Elektra then tells Abby to live a normal life and not become an emotionally reserved assassin like her.

Earning a tragic 10% on Rotten Tomatoes, *Elektra's* poor critical and box office reception arguable hobbled the possibility of the major studios investing in a big-budget superheroine film for the next 12 years. Forty-one superhero movies premiered between *Elektra* and *Wonder Woman* (2017): *Fantastic Four* (2005), *Batman Begins* (2005), *X-Men the Last Stand* (2006) , *Superman Returns* (2006) , *Ghost Rider* (2007), *Spider-Man 3* (2007), *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Iron Man* (2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Punisher: War Zone* (2008), *X-Men*

Origins Wolverine (2009), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance* (2001), *Green Lantern* (2011), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *X-Men: First Class* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), *The Wolverine* (2013), *Man of Steel* (2013), *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014), *Ant-Man* (2015), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Fantastic Four* (2015), *Deadpool* (2015), *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016), *Suicide Squad* (2016), *Doctor Strange* (2016), *Logan* (2017), *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017), and *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017).

These movies comprised a superhero movie boom. Although having no clear defined parameters, this movement started as early as the release of *X-Men* in 2000. Even though superhero movies existed before 2000, the the *X-Men* series revitalized the genre and proved that superhero movies were a good investment with a high box-office payoff (*X-Men* earned \$296 million worldwide; Box Office Mojo). Now, 19 years later, superhero movies routinely break box office records. However, none of those films following the release of *Elektra* boasts a female lead (although some of them include prominent female superheroes as part of a team). This is not for lack of diverse superheroes in their comic book counterparts, but rather in perceived audience desires.

Elektra was created at an interesting time in the history of comic books, where women were hypersexualized and often given much unnecessary baggage in order to

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forward the plot of their male counterparts. This is particularly evident in the creation of Elektra, where she has a torturous existence fueled by her father, only to eventually witness his murder and fall into a life marked by an identity as a femme fatale who falls in and out of love with Daredevil (Daredevil # 168 1981). Because of all this baggage, faithfully adapting such a character can prove to be a challenge. Additionally, as with many female superheroes, she is clad in an impressively impractical but incredibly irresistible costume. Unfortunately, the sexiness of her costume coupled with her Greek origin and tantalizingly gray morals makes her a bit of an exotic bad-girl fetish.

Tortured-childhood-turned-assassin Elektra is not a direct adaptation of her comic book counterpart, as Jennifer Garner's portrayal is not quite the femme fatale that her comic book counterpart embodies. Elektra in the comic books is a representation of Daredevil's darkest wishes and greatest fears; while he refuses to kill, Elektra does so for pay. In the movie, however Daredevil does not even make an appearance. Elektra battles, quite literally, the demons from her childhood in an attempt to save a girl destined to the same fate as she.

Elektra's sexy red wrap from the comic books would have been impossible to incorporate into a film with a less than NP -17 rating, so the billowing red fabric was exchanged for a something a little more family friendly. Sexy red leather costumes aside however, the plot and character development had a lot of potential. Elektra exhibits prospective agency, which is integral to creating strong characters, not physical strength alone. It is easy to fall into the lucrative cycle of creating "strong" female characters who embody little more than physical strength but still exist only to further the story of other

characters (Trites). Giving a character the ability to choose her own destiny, which in turn shapes the story around her, is the best way to create strong characters. Too often fictional female characters fall victim to being presented as objects—pieces to move around in a story to elicit heartbreak and motivation for the main protagonist, who is invariably a man (Robinson).

Elektra, however, does not seem to fall into that trap completely. At the beginning of the film she blindly accepts her assassination mission, but she eventually decides to defy her employer and protect Abby and her father, rather than kill them. *Elektra* easily passes the Bechdel test via Elektra and Abby's relationship and even fulfills the Mako Mori test, which, much like the Bechdel test, is comprised of three rules. The first is that the film must have at least one named female character; secondly, this character must experience her own narrative arc throughout the movie; and, finally, this arc must not exist solely to support a man's arc (Does). Elektra meets all of these. Even though she does kiss Abby's father several times, her narrative arc is more about protecting Abby than it is saving her father. So, if *Elektra* had the potential to be a well-represented female superhero movie, why did it fail so badly?

The Demise of the Female Lead Comic Book

Elektra nearly killed itself and the genre it was representing. As the third major studio superhero movie starring a female, it had a lot to live up to. Other female superheroes were looking for *Elektra*'s success in hopes that their own action film would be soon to

follow. *Elektra* could not meet expectations with a script that was painfully slow, missing much of the action that audiences have come to expect from superhero movies and giving viewers a terribly boring experience.

The *Elektra* movie is only 97 minutes in run time but the plot of the movie does not even start until almost 20 minutes into the movie when a member of The Hand attacks Elektra while she is having dinner with Abby (Kristen Proust) and her father (Goran Višnjić). Good movies hit specific beats at specific times that help to further the plot. *Elektra* fails to meet them, which greatly slows down the pace of the movie. A lot of the acting in this movie is extremely flat as well. In an attempt to make Elektra seem like a solemn and heartless assassin, most of her lines are quite monotone. The only life in the film is the fiery Abby. Even the ninja fighting scenes are a bit disappointing. One of the climactic fights happens in a room where all of the furniture is covered in sheets and the villain Kirigi (Will Yun Lee) makes them come alive and float around the room. Instead of the boss battle the movie has been building towards its just Elektra slashing her swords around a bunch of white sheets floating in the air. Ask anyone who has seen the movie and they will probably tell you one of two things: They either remember it as a terrible film or they simply do not remember it at all.



An email exchange between Marvel CEO Ike Perlmutter and Sony CEO Michael Lynton was made public on WikiLeaks following the Sony hack. The following page contains an email from Perlmutter to Lynton following a conversation the men had about whether or not to greenlight more “female movies”:

“From: “IP”

To: “Lynton, Michael”

Subject: Female Movies

Date: Thu, 7 Aug 2014 05:32:50 -0400

Michael,

As we discussed on the phone, below are just a few examples. There are more.

Thanks,

Ike

1. Electra (Marvel) – Very bad idea and the end result was very, very bad.

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=elektra.htm>

2. Catwoman (WB/DC) – Catwoman was one of the most important female character within the Batman franchise. This film was a disaster.

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=catwoman.htm>

3. *Supergirl* – (DC) *Supergirl* was one of the most important female super hero in *Superman* franchise. This Movie came out in 1984 and did \$14 million total domestic with opening weekend of \$5.5 million. Again, another disaster.

Sadly, I have to agree with the CEOs. Female lead movies *were* terrible prior to 2017. However, the reason that they failed at the box office and in reputation was not because the characters were female, but rather because the production teams behind the films were not. A great number of the movies created between the release of *Elektra* and the release of *Wonder Woman* were also critical and financial failures, including *Fantastic Four* (2005), and *Green Lantern* (2011) These movies were based on popular male comic book characters, but the fact that they are male never plays a part in why their movies tanked. Their failures are always attributed to production fails such as poor screenwriting or disappointing visual effects. Although it is easy to be disappointed, it is hard to be surprised that male-centered movies that fail are anomalies while female-centered movies that fail are blamed on the gender of the protagonist. With the number of female-led movies account for only 2.95% of 210 major studio superhero films (2017), the stakes for each one to represent the entirety of their gender becomes staggering. And, when that same movie does not draw big numbers, it gets cited as an example of how movies about women do not make money, an assertion that is not borne

out by the numbers. New research shows that the top grossing movies from 2014 to 2017 with female leads out-earned movies starring men across all budget level (Newburger).

One solution to this problem is surprisingly simple: Hire female creatives. When you fail to have women on your production teams, in your screenwriting meetings, and on your executive boards it shows. You get terrible movies that seem unsure about how they could possibly combine the eroticism so apparently inherent in the nature of women with the power that comes with being a superhero.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wonder Woman

Wonder Woman made her comic book debut in 1941, as the product of Dr. William Marston. Dr. William Marston is credited with inventing the lie detector, but he was also involved in a polyamorous relationship for much of his life with two women, Olivia Byrne and Dr. Elizabeth Martson. Dr. William Marston often noted that Wonder Woman was the woman of the future, a combination of the two loves of his life. Dr. William Marston also received backlash against the character because of the obvious integration of his sexual fetishes into the writing of his comic book characters. Amazon women have many binding games, villains often tie Wonder Woman up, and Etta Candy, the leader of a sorority on campus, seems to sexually dominate all of the freshman initiates. It is a strange amount of fetish for a medium which, at the time, was read primarily by children and young adults. Thankfully, Wonder Woman has gotten away from the overt sexualization, but two prominent things remain, her costume and her lasso. It is impossible to separate Wonder Woman from these two iconic pieces of who she has become and so these items will continue to appear in the mediums alongside her.

Wonder Woman has always served as the sort of singular entry point for women into comic books, few characters have the incredible reach that she does, and even fewer of those are women. Ask someone to name as many female superheroes as they can and Wonder Woman is almost the first one on everyone's list. Because she is a representative icon, she also has the heavy task of representing female power, and, by associated, female equality with males. Wonder Woman has continued to demonstrate since her creation in the 1940s that intelligence and strength are not exclusively male traits. She is the superhero that professes that anyone can be a hero. Rather than despite her controversial origins, Wonder Woman's innately feminist advocacy is actually due in part to them. From the start, Wonder Woman has been involved in critiquing the subordination of women to men. Her power and strength helped elevate her, and all of the women reading her comics. Seeing themselves represented in a form of mainstream media told them that it was not just Wonder Woman who could fight for injustice, but all women. As the saying goes, with great power comes great responsibility and Wonder Woman sure carried her fair share of responsibility as Diana has always been hated for the same reason she is loved.

Often the sheer iconography of Wonder Woman and all that she claims to stand for, equality, compassion, strength, morality, and heroism, does not quite hit the mark of her intention. Since she is the most prolific female character, she has been given the most amount of media attention, from TV shows, books, and of course, movies. It is often remarked that her character is tricky, or that her portrayal is often difficult to achieve. But it is not Wonder Woman that proves difficult. Her supernatural origin is not that much

stranger than the origin of her comic book counterpart, Superman. Both not truly of Earth, vow to protect those who inhabit it. What is difficult about Wonder Woman is the political climate that she finds herself embedded in. In our society, women and girls are systematically devalued. Femininity is often synonymous with bad, obvious in common colloquial insults such as “you run like a girl” or “stop being a sissy”. Women dressing up in male clothing is seen as normal, but when a man does it, it is the end of the world. Many people assume that women and girls are content to consume media that depicts a strong, white, male protagonist because those are the figures that our society has elevated. These same people often assume that men and boys do not want to consume media that depict strong female characters (Cocca). In media, “Boys are the norm, girls the variation; boys are central, girls peripheral: boys are individuals, girls types. Boys define the group, its story and its code of values. Girls only exist in relation to boys” (Pollitt) Often in media, women are expected to be able to relate to the Male story, but this is rarely reversed.

From Diana to Wonder Woman

Patti Jenkins’ *Wonder Woman* aired June 2nd. 2017 and changed the way the world interacted with the Superhero blockbuster. For arguably the first time in film history, a female superhero graced the screen in a movie that on par with her male . With production budget of \$149 million. *Wonder Woman* exceeded all expectation and had an impressive \$100 million opening, the largest opening for a female directed feature at the

time of its release. The title was previously held by *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which had an \$85 million opening weekend in 2015 (Box Office Mojo). *Wonder Woman* was the 16th largest opening weekend for a comic book adaptation and holds the spot at number 7 for highest domestic lifetime grossing comic book adaptation at \$412,563,408 (Box Office Mojo)

Set against the backdrop of World War I, *Wonder Woman* depicts Diana (Gal Gadot), a young Amazon princess, who dreams of training to be a warrior. Diana, mesmerized by the duty of her people to protect humankind from Ares, the God of War, longs to fight alongside the her fellow Amazons. When an Allied spy named Steve (Chris Pine) crash lands on her island and tells Diana of the warring world of man, she knows that it is her duty as an Amazon to save them. Diana steals a sword called the Godkiller and runs off with Steve. Once in London, the two of them deliver a book of secrets that Steve had stolen to Sir Patrick (David Thewlis) a leader in the war. Against Sir Patrick's apparent wishes, Steve and Diana assemble a group of misfits and head to the front lines in an attempt to find General Ludendorff (Danny Huston), the man Diana suspects is Ares. It is here at the front lines that Diana proves herself by leading the troops across "no man's land" to rescue a village held by the Germans. The finale of the film takes place at a military base where a group of men are loading bombs onto a plane headed for London. Diana faces off with General Ludendorff with great ease, but to her dismay his death stops nothing. Steve explains to Diana that there is not always just one bad guy because humans are complicated. As Steve leaves to stop the bomb-filled airplane, Diana turns to spot Sir Patrick behind her who reveals himself to be Ares. Diana

tries to kill him with the Godkiller sword, but he shatters it easily and explains to Diana that *she* is the Godkiller. They face off on the tarmac, and Ares, clearly with the upper hand, tells Diana that humans do not deserve her protection. As Steve sacrifices himself to save all of London, he tells Diana that he can save today, but she can save the world. Diana realizes the full potential of her power in Steve's death and tells Ares, "It's not about deserving. It's about what you believe, and I believe in love." With that, Diana destroys Ares, effectively ending the war. The movie closes 40 years later, with Diana receiving a picture that she took with Steve the night after they saved the village. She reflects on her experience, fondly and leaves to save the world once more.

Wonder Woman and the War Movie

Patti Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* is not without feminist fault. She is a direct study of the idea of the Smurfette Principle (Pollitt). This principle describes a single, token, and often quite privileged female character among the sea of males. Much like Smurfette in all of her movies, Wonder Woman is the only girl on her team of heroes. The Smurfette principle notes that one of the main traits of this token female is simply "being female". It is obvious that the viewers that Diana's femaleness is a big deal to the men she is in company with throughout the movie. When Samar, one of the men that Steve recruits for their mission, first meets Wonder Woman he interrupts himself mid-sentence to remark "My goodness gracious, that's a work of art." Charlie, the expert marksman that is assembled onto the team hears that Diana will be accompanying them and says to her

“No offense, Cherie, but I don’t wanna get killed helping a girl out of a ditch, ya know what I mean?” undercutting her power because she is a woman. Even though *Wonder Woman* was directed by a female, it was still written by a team of four men, led by Allan Heinberg.

Wonder Woman (2017) takes place in the middle of World War II. Much like any cinematic trope, war movies follow a very specific type of structure. War films are not so much about the war itself, but rather the historical socialization of men. War has been a natural part of the male existence since the beginning of time. It is subsequently unnatural for a female to decide to join in on the action. While audiences do not need an explanation for why a man is present, it is important that a female explain herself because it is blatantly obvious to the viewer that women are not welcome there and are often, and too easily, written out of important historical moments (Schubart) “The female war film establishes the female soldier as heroic, but.. the softness, sensitivity, and penetrability linked in our imagination to the female body, remind the soldier of the repressed fact that his body, too, is soft, sensitive and penetrable” (Schubert) Diana’s power is often initially negated by her beauty. Many people throughout the movie question her because of her gender and Samar, as mentioned earlier, is enamored by Diana saying when he sees her fight for the first time “I am both frightened and aroused.” Even though this movie is about Diana, she is constantly having to prove herself to the men around her because her femininity is so contrasted by the harsh features of war.

Agency and Wonder Woman

The strongest element of *Wonder Woman* is the character's agency. Diana is strong in her moral code and sets out to save the human race without realizing all of her powers. In contrast to other superheroes, and especially female superheroes, Diana's powers are discovered through her action, rather than the other way around. While Superman, Spider-Man, and Green Lantern are spurred to become superheroes after discovering their superhuman abilities, Diana embarks on a quest because it is the right thing to do and discovers the extent of her powers along the way. Her agency moves the story forward and through it she discovers what it means to be a true hero. Jenkins's *Wonder Woman* is not driven by the character's desire to prove herself to others, but rather by her desire to help them. When Diana leaps across the great chasm to get to the Godkiller sword at the beginning of the movie, the sly smile of realization tugging at the corner of her mouth makes it clear that she has never done that before. Every time her powers emerge stronger than before, it is because of her strengths as a character. Diana is far more active than she is reactive. She constantly makes decisions that push the story forward, and the plot simply would not exist without her actions, which makes for a truly exciting character



When you compare Wonder Woman to her superheroine predecessors, the difference is obvious. Supergirl lands on Earth with a very expansive set of powers, but she only uses them when something is directly threatening her. She fights monsters that attack her or bulldozers destroying a town, but she never sets out to be a hero. Although Kara does leave Argos City to retrieve the Omegahedron she lost, after that almost all of her actions are reactionary to the plot. Wonder Woman does not suffer from this problem and instead the actions she takes, like jumping across the ravine to get the God-Killer sword, or marching through no mans land, shape the story. Without her actions, the story would not exist.

Action movies have always been a tough market for female characters, with an average of only 23% of all speaking role (Smith). So, when an action movie does hit the screen that not only stars a female character, but frames her in such an empowering way, it is hard not to come to her defense. However, as much as I wanted to love *Wonder Woman*, it was hard not to find faults with it. Even though Wonder Woman has a great deal of agency, she is essentially the only prominent female character, sandwiched between a you-do-not-belong-here war movie and her Amazon stereotype. Additionally,

Etta Candy (my favorite character from the *Wonder Woman* comic books), a plus-sized superhero who fights alongside Wonder Woman while professing her love for chocolate, is reduced to being Steve's secretary in the movie.

Wonder Woman is particularly important, especially when put in contrast with *Justice League* (2017), due to the general absence of the male gaze. As noted in a previous chapter, the "male gaze" is one of the key pillars in feminist film theory and was coined by film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." The term has since entered popular culture to describe a sexualized way of viewing that empowers men and objectifies women. Generally, in the male gaze, the woman is positioned as an "object" of heterosexual male desire (Mulvey). The fact that *Wonder Woman* was directed by a female is obvious in this regard. While Diana's costume is not exactly modest and her lasso of truth is reminiscent of Bondage Discipline Sadism and Masochism (BDSM), the camera is not placed just so that we get a sneak peak of what is underneath the suit of amour. In *Justice League*, director Zach Snyder focuses the camera's gaze on Wonder Woman's butt a handful of times, giving the viewer a sexy little peek up her skirt. In Jenkin's *Wonder Woman*, this does not happen. There is only one shot where we get a pan up her leg, but the camera cuts before it reaches her rear. While previous superheroine movies, and even those with female sidekicks, made sure that we noticed the character's womanly features, Jenkins focuses the camera on Wonder Woman's strength and her pure heart. Jenkins never had to rely on Diana's figure for a victory, she simply showed the audience that Diana was both feminine and strong. That is empowering representation.

However, *Wonder Woman* remains my modern conundrum. How does one effectively wrestle what it means to be a “woman” onto the big screen? If she is too strong, rugged, and not conventionally beautiful, she runs the risk of being viewed as simply a male character in drag. However, if she is given beauty, gentleness, and compassion, she becomes another just-submissive-enough woman caught up in a man’s world. It is a tough grapple for me as I try to pinpoint how to create a feminist superhero character. What should she be wearing? Is she allowed a romantic love interest? Should she be allowed to be beautiful? How do her supporting characters interact with her? How does the camera frame her as a strong individual without objectifying her? These are all fine lines, and I am not quite sure I have the balancing act mastered.

I believe that we cannot have an accurate portrayal of a female superhero if there is only one movie. The three superheroine movies that predated *Wonder Woman* are basically forgotten in the popular imaginary, leaving *Wonder Woman* to represent all women in the superhero genre, a task that no one can do effectively. There are powerful women who are not the Western idealized version of beauty, and there are women whose greatest strength is their gentility, but it is impossible for *Wonder Woman* to do it all. While it may feel like female representation in films is increasing, between 2007 and 2017, the prevalence of female speaking characters in movies increased from 29.9% to 31.8% (Smith) . So, the superhuman pillar of female strength may remain relatively empty for a while.

CONCLUSION

Why Representation Matters

So why does the plight of superheroines in film matter? Why should anyone care that Catwoman's main personality trait was that she was sexy, or that Wonder Woman still was the only prominent female in her story? Why is it important that we can recognize the effect of representation in the media? James K.A Smith, a philosopher and theologian has said that our modern culture is often subconsciously formed through liturgies participated in by the whole of society. These liturgies, he goes on to explain, are repeated actions, messages and images which grow to shape our desires and affections, not just our thoughts. Smith even argues that these liturgies shape our beliefs about life correct or not (Smith). This is why we must be explicit about counter-formation. We must be aware of the inevitable deformities that our culture shapes into us. We have to be aware that when we watch repeated examples of one specific message (i.e women are only super if they are beautiful) it can start to have an effect on us. When we consume these liturgies, as Smith would call them, they shape our actions, which shape our culture. We, in turn, are shaped by our experiences and interactions with that culture. How we view the world is directly defined by what we see and hear. With so much of our time being consumed by media, from social media, to advertisements, to films, it is important

to recognize its effects on how it is shaping our mindsets. The way we interact with it and one another is undeniable, especially as social media and streaming services come to the forefront of our media consumption.

In regard to superheroes, and specifically females ones, this matter is of even more importance. In this new era of cinema, there are certain types of movies that are destined to be big box office hits. Comic book adaptations are at the forefront of that group. Each new Marvel or DC movie that is released is bigger and better than the last. These movies bring in huge amounts of profit for their studios and attract an extremely large budget. The last Avengers movie, *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) holds the record for largest box office opening weekend and is the fourth highest grossing movie of all time worldwide (Box Office Mojo) every time a new Marvel or DC movie is set to release, the midnight premieres are packed, some people even dress up like their favorite characters. The influence of the superhero movie boom on pop culture is undeniable.

With superhero movies crushing the box office with every opening. It is a no brainer for studios to continue to crank them out, it is just good business. With the recent rise in interest for female superhero movies, there have been more attempts to place females in prominent roles. *Guardians of the Galaxy*, for example now stars Gamora (Zoe Saldana). There are definitely more women in prominent roles and that is something to be excited about. Unfortunately, these characters can sometimes become tricky to translate from their origins in comic books to the big screen. The blockbuster hits that we see on the silver screen are not the first time that these specific stories are being told. These stories find their roots not in the midst of 2019 but in the day and age in which

their characters were published. Some characters, Wonder Woman for example, date all the way back to the 1940s (Golda). It would be ridiculous to say that times have not changed since World War II. There have been so many progressions in our society that superhero's sometimes find themselves battling. Female superheroes that survived through the bronze age now had to deal with a disturbing amount of sexual violence (Cocca) and costumes that were as impractical as they were scandalous.

It is important to take into consideration the enormity that comic books movies are becoming in conjunction with the topics of my thesis because even though these movies already have a massive reach, their audience will only continue to grow. These movies are becoming a cultural liturgy that James Smith was warned us about. We must make sure that people of all types and varieties are represented in them so that when we see these specific messages repeated over and over they are drilling positive impacts into our culture.

Representation is also great for business. It was a previously held belief that movies starring minorities were not good investments because minorities were not a large enough audience to be pandering to. This has proven time and time again to be incorrect. People flock to the movies to see themselves on the big screen. *Black Panther*, *Wonder Woman* and were all movies that did incredibly well at the box office earning \$202,003,951 and \$103,251,471 in their opening weekends respectively (Box Office Mojo). Movies that star people who are not usually represented in movies always tend to bring in flocks of people to the theatres.

A study completed by USC Annenberg titled *Inequality in 1100 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT & Disability from 2007 to 2017* seeks to look at popular films spanning the past decade to get a clearer picture of diversity in Hollywood. Over the past 10 years the topic of representation and diversity in cinema is undeniably on the rise. From the Oscars-so-white to movies like *Get Out* and *Wonder Woman* it seems like diversity is rising to the forefront of cinema, but is it? This report explains the numbers and looks back across the top 1100 movies from 2007 to 2017 to see what progress has been made.

Hollywood seems to be a central point for progress in the media, celebrities who speak out about politics and social reform often get criticized for stepping out of their boundaries. By just looking at the number of times that Hollywood professes to be making a change, a casual observer would assume that they are the front runners for progress. But the research done by USC Annenberg reveals that Hollywood is virtually all talk and no action. Out of the 4,454 speaking characters that appeared in the top 100 films of 2017 3,037 of those were male characters, leaving only 1,417 speaking characters to be women (Smith). On top of this, only 33 out of the 100 movies were lead or co/lead by a female character, and only four of those were women of color. This is a revealing figure since females comprise more than half of the U.S population and buy 49% of movie tickets at the box office each year (Smith). Given the industry's professional attention to inclusion, it is difficult to understand why the numbers remain resistant to change.

The final question then becomes how do we portray people correctly in the cinema? If creating a place where more diverse stories can be told is important, how can the movie-going public ensure that these stories are authentic? The most important place to look would not be in front of the camera with the actors, but behind the camera. Hollywood must look and look to roles that make an impact on the story. We have to hire a more diverse group of above the line personnel. People hired above the line are individuals who guide and influence the creative direction, process, and voice of a given narrative in a film and related expenditures. These roles include but are not limited to the screenwriter, producer, director, and actors. These are the people who are given the power of storytelling and voice. They shape the media that the public consumes. Out of the most popular 1,100 Films from the past 10 years and 1,223 directors, there were only 43 female directors. Only 4.3% of all directors across 1,100 movies were women (Smith). That leaves 1,180 male directors to tell stories. While the scope of my thesis does not discuss racial representation in much detail it is important to note that out of these 1,180 male directors some of those were people of color, however, over 90% are not. Having white, male directors is not necessarily a bad thing, many of them are talented creatives who contribute art to the cinema. The problem arises when it appears that only they have amazing stories to tell. Everyone's experience in life is so different and unique! There are an infinite amount of compelling, life changing stories in the world. We do ourselves a disservice by only allowing one group of people to tell them.

Moving Forward

Although hiring a more diverse above the line crew is a major step forward for inclusivity, it is also important to look at how our culture engages in viewing these works of art as well. For a long while the ideas of “femininity,” “feminine” or have been aligned with a very specific type of character often conflated with weak, while “feminist” characters are aligned with strong, emotionless, and “badass.” I propose that screenwriters and directors create more strong female characters, but not physically strong and overtly “feminist” as they have been labeled in the past. I propose that we create strong female characters, characters who are nuanced and complicated, who have faults, and emotions, and hardships, who have close friends, different body types and a multitude of different heritages. But the only way we get well-written, strong female characters is to write more of them. As we have seen before, as with these female lead superhero movies, if there is only one woman in a cast, she must represent the whole of her group. Make her physically weak and you have misrepresented an entire group of people as weak, but if you have one woman who is physically weak and another who is strong, no one character has to bear the weight of representation.

Women who have been underrepresented or misrepresented in the media still consume it. Sometimes it leaves them feeling degraded, or left out, or they must relate to a character entirely unlike them. This leaves underrepresented people as the only ones gaining an important skill, the ability to identify with someone who is different than them. This ability allows people to empathize beyond looks, and connect with people

through the humanity that we all share. Majority groups need to see heroes who do not look like them. People are inspired by superheroes and what they represent. They are invested in them. They love them. They find great comfort in seeing characters with extraordinary powers struggle with ordinary problems. With Superheroes becoming the unstoppable force in the media that they are today, it is no longer acceptable to allow misrepresentation in their genre. That is why, as Wonder Woman says, "I know that only love can truly save the world. So, I stay I fight and I give...for the world I know can be. This is my mission now. Forever."

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APPENDIX

Sample of 100 Top Grossing Films of 2017

1	Star Wars: The Last Jedi	43	Captain Underpants: The First Epic Movie	86	The Nut Job 2: Nutty by Nature
2	Beauty and the Beast	44	A Bad Moms Christmas	87	Rings
3	Wonder Woman	45	A Dog's Purpose	88	Logan Lucky
4	Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle	46	The Shape of Water	89	Home Again
5	Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2	47	The LEGO Ninjago Movie	90	Resident Evil: The Final Chapter
6	Spider-Man: Homecoming	48	Baywatch	91	The House
7	It	49	The Shack	92	All the Money in the World
8	Thor: Ragnarok	50	Darkest Hour	93	Gifted
9	Despicable Me 3	51	Happy Death Day	94	Downsizing
10	Justice League	52	Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri	95	The Bye Bye Man
11	Logan	53	Atomic Blonde	96	Victoria and Abdul
12	The Fate of the Furious	54	American Made	97	Rough Night
13	Coco	55	The Dark Tower	98	My Little Pony: The Movie
14	Dunkirk	56	Lady Bird	99	Leap!
15	Get Out	57	Tyler Perry's Boo 2! A Madea Halloween	100	The Disaster Artist
16	The LEGO Batman Movie	58	Snatched		
17	The Boss Baby	59	The Great Wall		
18	The Greatest Showman	60	Smurfs: The Lost Village		
19	Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales	61	Going in Style (2017)		
20	Kong: Skull Island	62	All Eyez on Me		
21	Cars 3	63	xXx: The Return of Xander Cage		
22	War for the Planet of the Apes	64	47 Meters Down		
23	Split	65	The Big Sick		
24	Wonder	66	Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets		
25	Transformers: The Last Knight	67	The Star		
26	Girls Trip	68	Ghost in the Shell (2017)		
27	Fifty Shades Darker	69	King Arthur: Legend of the Sword		
28	Baby Driver	70	Jigsaw		
29	Pitch Perfect 3	71	American Assassin		
30	Daddy's Home 2	72	The Foreigner		
31	Murder on the Orient Express (2017)	73	Everything, Everything		
32	Annabelle: Creation	74	Wind River		
33	Kingsman: The Golden Circle	75	Geostorm		
34	Blade Runner 2049	76	Monster Trucks		
35	John Wick: Chapter Two	77	Fist Fight		
36	The Emoji Movie	78	How to be a Latin Lover		
37	Power Rangers (2017)	79	Kidnap (2017)		
38	Ferdinand	80	Underworld: Blood Wars		
39	The Post	81	The Mountain Between Us		
40	The Mummy (2017)	82	Life (2017)		
41	The Hitman's Bodyguard	83	I, Tonya		
42	Alien: Covenant	84	Hostiles		
		85	Molly's Game		