

## ABSTRACT

### The Evolution of Feminism in Film: How the Last Decade (2010-2019) Became the Turning Point for Female Representation

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Female representation in movies has seen tremendous growth and change during the history of film, but it has seen ground-breaking success only within the last decade. The top-grossing movies from 2010-2019 with a female lead or co-lead show women in particularly feminist roles that depart from the traditional characterization of women as submissive, sexualized, and romantic characters only. Instead, these movies prove that there can be box-office success by putting well-rounded, independent, action-driving, and unapologetic female characters at the front and center of the screen. The feminist movement has made its mark on Hollywood by calling for greater female screen time, increased female-to-female interactions, more female filmmakers behind the scenes, and by debunking restrictive gender tropes.

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THE EVOLUTION OF FEMINISM IN FILM:  
HOW THE LAST DECADE (2010-2019) BECAME THE TURNING POINT IN  
FEMALE REPRESENTATION

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And of course, to my parents – for constantly reminding me of my worth and for teaching me to never settle for anything less.

## DEDICATION

*To my little sister, for loving me unconditionally. You're the Anna to my Elsa.*

## INTRODUCTION

### The Unique Overlap of Feminism and Film

Feminism hasn't always been historically well-received in society, and even today it is a movement that requires immense patience to bring about change to the ingrained mode of thinking and established socio-economic structures we see today. The use of the word itself is credited to French socialist Charles Fourier in 1837. It described the emancipation of women that he envisioned in his utopian future (Offen, 1998). While the word's origins and context of use can be debated, the concept of feminism arises from the feeling of exclusion. It calls to attention how women's social and cultural lives have been overlooked and trivialized by male-centric systems. At the core of feminism is choice. If women cannot choose freely how to dress, speak, and act, then they will forever be stuck in an endless cycle of sexualization and subordination. The movement is not one that views women as superior to men, or one that is aimed at "man-hating," but one that calls for equality. The modern-day definition of feminism explains precisely this notion:

the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes ("Feminism," 2020).

The film industry, one that sees feminism's far-reaching effects, has a unique ability to directly change the portrayal of women in real time. Films don't have to adhere to societal norms of what constitutes the ideal woman. Their creative flexibility allows them to align their depiction of women with the interests of the feminist movement. Furthermore, the accessibility of movies makes film an ideal device that allows women to make sense of how patriarchal systems directly affect their own lives. Especially now,



with the direct involvement of Hollywood Actors in the largely feminist #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, Hollywood will undoubtedly change. It would not be far-reaching to assume that there will be a pre- and post-#MeToo era of film.

In a time when women are required to defend themselves over how they should act and present themselves in modern-day society, tracing the evolution of feminism over time provides the history necessary to understand the deeply intertwined roots of feminism in film today. The following chapters will begin with a historical overview of the four waves of feminism in Chapter One. Chapter Two will analyze how feminism affected representation of female characters in the top five-grossing movies of all time as the basis of comparison for the next chapter. Chapter Three will narrow this analysis to the last decade, 2010-2019, with movies that specifically have a female lead or co-lead to constitute the focus of this paper. And Chapter Four concludes how the past and present characterization of women in film should affect future representation of female characters.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Four Waves of Feminism

One of the most overlooked components of understanding modern feminism is history. The history of feminism is quite slow compared to the events that have shaken the nation in the past couple of years. The philosophy of feminism has changed over time, creating separate “waves” of feminism defined by different goals, activists, and methods. While there are three universally recognized waves of feminism that take into account each time period’s politics and culture, there is also a newly emerging fourth wave of feminism that only began within the last decade. The following sections will describe each wave of feminism and provide an overview of movies that conveyed each wave’s message on-screen.

#### *First-Wave Feminism*

First-Wave Feminism lasted longer and was more focused than any of the other subsequent waves. Officially beginning in 1848 with the Seneca Falls Convention and ending with the legal victory of the right to vote in 1920, this decades-long endeavor focused on one primary outcome: women’s suffrage.

In the United States, feminism actually took root in the midst of the abolitionist movement. At the beginning of the 19th century, women increasingly identified with the struggles that slaves faced and called for their immediate emancipation by getting involved in the anti-slavery movement. Many women drew parallels between the conditions that slaves had to endure in the colonies and the social restrictions placed on

women. As a result, secret correspondence occurred with women all over the country in the States, with the anti-slavery support continually expanding as funds were received from their overseas counterparts, such as England and Ireland (Moynagh and Forestell, 2012).

While Elizabeth Cady Stanton is widely recognized as the woman that spearheaded the feminist movement by organizing the Seneca Falls Convention on Women's Rights, many are unaware of the events leading up to this monumental gathering. In 1840, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott arrived at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, but they, in addition to other women delegates, were refused admission simply due to their gender. And thus, the Seneca Falls Convention was held eight years later in New York, effectively launching the women's right movement (Lerner, 1998).

The success of the Convention and the attention that it gained was largely due to Lucretia Mott's established presence in the public sphere. She was a highly acclaimed public speaker, a Quaker minister, and a longtime abolitionist. She joined four other women, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Martha Wright, Jane Hunt, and Mary Anna McClintock in issuing the call to this convention. The two-day event consisted of debating, paragraph by paragraph the Declaration of Sentiments prepared by Stanton. While the first day of the Seneca Falls meeting was only reserved for women, the second day invited men as well. By the end of the second day, 68 women and 32 men signed their names to the Declaration of Sentiments (Lerner, 1998).

The Declaration of Sentiments itself was a document modeled after the Declaration of Independence. It followed its' preamble almost verbatim, with exception to the insertion of the more inclusive language:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal”(Stanton, 1848).

The rest of the Declaration was a list of grievances that women formed over the days of discussion and deliberation. The women declared that man denied her to equal access to education, deprived her of her liberty in the covenant of marriage, deprived her of owning property, kept her out of professions, held her in an insubordinate position in the Church, assigned her to the domestic sphere, and denied her voice in the making of laws, all while destroying her confidence and lessening her self-respect. The naming of “man” as the culprit explicitly identified patriarchy as a system of “tyranny:”

“The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her” (Stanton, 1848).

The above assertion was considered the most radical statement in the Declaration, in addition to Stanton’s controversial resolution that advocated voting rights for women. The following conclusion was the only one that was not approved unanimously at the convention:

“We insist that (women) have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of these United States” (Stanton, 1848).

It is important to note that the Seneca Falls Convention only aimed at obtaining rights for middle-class, white women. The progress for women of color was much more uneven. Sojourner Truth, a former African-American slave, was one of the first to publicly identify this disparity. She refused to take on a silent and passive role in the anti-

slavery sisterhood. At a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851, Truth delivered her famous "Ain't I A Woman?" speech in which she challenges the idea that women are not necessarily weaker than men or that enslaved black women were not real women (Phoenix, 2004):

"That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?" (Truth, 1851).

While popular novels such as "Uncle Tom's Cabin" by Harriet Beecher Stowe further brought attention to the African-American woman's struggle within slavery, the extra layers of discrimination that some women faced would unfortunately not be addressed until well into modern-day feminism in the 21st century.

Part of the reason that the suffrage movement spanned over so many decades was because of periodic political interruptions, such as the Civil War and World War I, during which women put their energies toward the war effort and set aside their duties to the suffrage movement. Susan B. Anthony's feminist agenda put her alongside Elizabeth Cady Stanton as both continued to lead the battle for women's suffrage post-civil war. Feminists set about creating organizations that were international, such as the International Council of Women (ICW), in addition to more local communities as well, like the Inter-American Commission of Women (Moynagh and Forestell, 2012).

In 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified, in which “citizens” and “voters” were defined exclusively as male. Two years later, the Fifteenth Amendment gave African-American men the right to vote. In 1878, a Woman’s Suffrage Amendment was proposed in the U.S. Congress, but not ratified. When the 19th Amendment passed forty-one years later, it was worded exactly the same as this 1878 Amendment. It took the support of President Woodrow Wilson at the end of World War I for the law to pass. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment finally passed and American women won full voting rights. And with this victory, first-wave feminism culminated after almost a century of protest. (Women’s Suffrage Timeline, n.d.).

While women started to increasingly get involved in the political sphere before the Nineteenth Amendment passed, there was a scarcity of women in the film industry. From 1896 to 1906, French-native Alice Guy was the only woman film director in the world. She directed and produced hundreds of short silent films. In 1910, she started her own company, Solax. She was one of the first women to manage and own her own studio. Many of her films critiqued the social system, and films like *A House Divided* (1913) and *Matrimony’s Speed Limit* (1913) were two examples of films that emphasized equal partnership in marriage (McMahan, 2013). She was also known for making many action films with lead female heroines. American-born Lois Weber was also a pioneer in film-making, involved in all aspects of production, from acting and writing to producing and directing. Like Guy, she brought to the screen her passion for social justice and was also one of the first women to manage and own her own studio - Lois Weber Productions. She was way ahead of her time, as her controversial *Hypocrites* (1915) featured the first full female nude scene, *Where Are My Children* (1916) discussed abortion, and *Shoes*

(1916) brought to light the devastating effects of poverty on a young woman's life (Slater, 2001). Frances Marion, an assistant to Lois Weber, became one of Hollywood's most influential female screenwriters. More than half of all silent films in this era were written by women, and Marion's partnership with silent film star Mary Pickford, the highest paid performer in Hollywood at the time, was paramount to her success. Marion became the first writer to win two Academy Awards (Beauchamp, 1998). Thus, the early 20th century brought about the first female filmmakers, inspiring women in the movie industry for decades to come.

### *Second-Wave Feminism*

The end of first-wave feminism did not mark the beginning of second-wave feminism directly. Beginning in 1949 with the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's ground-breaking "The Second Sex," and ending after the feminist community became divided on the issue of participation in sexual relations, second-wave feminism was characterized by a rejection of the woman's traditional role in the domestic sphere and the fight for equal opportunity and pay in the work force.

The French-original films of the 1920s were known for their female perspective and feminine contribution. Female visionary and director Germaine Dulac holds the title of the "first feminist film" with her 1923 silent film *The Smiling Madame Beudet*, which told the story of an intelligent woman stuck in a pointless marriage. Many of her films, such as the controversial *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928), challenged the status quo of traditional women's roles as submissive and critiqued the patriarchy in state and church to such a degree that it was banned by the British Board of Film Censors (Williams, 2014). The 1928 silent French historical film, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, was

widely regarded as a landmark film in cinema, known for its close-up shots of the film's characters, bringing the intensity to the movie. Following the trial of Joan for heresy and cross-dressing, the film captures the blunt oppression and misogyny of a bandy of clergymen that threaten and intimidate her into confessing, leading to her ultimate death. Renee Falconetti's performance as Joan has been described as one of the greatest of all time for portraying the courage it took to be an inspiring, truthful, strong woman in this male-dominated world (Guomundsdottir, 2016).

American filmmakers Dorothy Arzner and Maya Deren were deemed feminist pioneers of second-wave feminism. One of the only working female directors of the 1930s, Arzner gave the world *Dance, Girl, Dance* in 1940, a movie about two dancers struggling to make it in show business. Maureen O'Hara's character, Judy, was known for her iconic moment of shaming an audience of catcallers in her monologue:

I know you want me to tear my clothes off so you can look your fifty cents worth. Fifty cents for the privilege of staring at a girl the way your wives won't let you. What do you suppose we think of you up here with your silly smirks your mothers would be ashamed of....What's it for? So you can go home when the show's over, strut before your wives and sweethearts and play at being the stronger sex for a minute" (Kay, 1973).

*Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), written and co-directed by the trailblazer Maya Deren, allowed audiences to experience the psychological drama of a woman via a dream narrative, in which we find that the lead female feels so caged in her home, her body and her romantic life that her only release is through death (Deren, 1943). During the height of World War II, Deren had identified the typical housewife's mental dilemma before second-wave feminism even took form later that decade.

Second-wave feminism began as a response to the journal and media depiction of women's roles after World War II, decades after the Nineteenth Amendment granting



women's suffrage passed. Postwar authors urged women that were previously active in war efforts to return home to the domestic sphere and fulfill their household duties. An overarching assumption was made, especially among magazines, that all women wanted to marry and that being a wife and mother would be fulfilling enough. Some articles glorified the housewife during the heart of the baby-boom. Praise was given to devoted and loyal married women during the war due to the fear of family breakdown, but this post-war promotion of motherhood continued as magazines stated that a mother's primary duty was to her children (Meyerowitz, 1993).

Post-war magazines also characterized what constituted appropriate behavior for a woman. The wartime Rosie the Riveter's ("We Can Do It") challenge against gender discrimination when it came to labor completely disappeared as magazines stopped presenting women in heavy-duty professions. Instead, glamour and beauty was emphasized, encouraging young women to make themselves attractive to men. Sex was only mentioned in regards to procreation. A particular Ladies Home Journal article titled "How to Be Loved" featured movie star Marlene Dietrich, who appealed to self-subordination for women to appear desirable to their husbands by planning their clothes, their conversation, and their meals:

"To be completely a woman, you need a master....Some women, could do with a bit of spanking to answer their complaining" (Dietrich, 1954).

Such anti-feminist authors promoted domesticity and denounced modern women that did not fit in with this norm as neurotic and unfeminine, name-calling them. And thus, most women did their best to fit this ideal, afraid of being isolated from the political and legal sphere more than they already were - until the late 1940s. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer and feminist philosopher, published "The Second Sex." It is known as the

“bible” of Western Feminism, translated from French to English and published in America in 1953. The book begins with facts and myths about women in biology, psychology, history and literature - “facts” that do not arise from the experiences of women, but from conceptions about them from a man’s point of view.

“Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth” (Beauvoir, 2004).

For example, love is not the same for men as it is for a woman, so Beauvoir developed both perspectives. The fact that women are capable of getting pregnant, lactating, and menstruating is not a valid cause or explanation to place them as the “second sex,” Beauvoir argues. A women’s tie to reproduction should not justify her submission to men. Beauvoir’s message to society that there can be no deep satisfaction in dependence or domesticity in a world that calls for activism and self-sufficiency was referenced to and built upon a decade later in Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking work, “The Feminine Mystique.” Friedan identified the discontent that American, suburban women suffered from. She argued that journalists and advertisers created this image that women could not find fulfillment outside of “sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love” (Friedan, 1963). With a woman’s world narrowed down to the home, she stated a truth that thousands of women identified with. Without being allowed growth outside of the domestic sphere, Friedan argued that children would indeed suffer at the hands of so-called “neurotic” mothers that were unhappy. She followed up her claims with evidence from surveys that she conducted, revealing that women who played a role both at home and in the workforce were more satisfied with life compared to women who just stayed home. And last, but not least, Gloria Steinem’s 1978 satirical essay, “If Men Could

Menstruate,” caught everyone’s attention as she imagined a world where men menstruated instead of women. She essentially points out that in this fantasy world, men would depict the act of menstruation as a badge of honor, rather than be ashamed of it. Steinem reaffirms Beauvoir’s statement that men can define a reality that reflects their self-interests:

“The characteristics of the powerful, whatever they may be, are thought to be better than the characteristics of the powerless—and logic has nothing to do with it” (Steinem, 2019).

Therefore, all three authors were highly influential voices in spreading the idea that the prevailing inequality between sexes is a social form, not a natural one.

Post World War 2 movies hinted at the legal struggles that feminists would fight for in the decades to come. For example, *Adam’s Rib* (1949), released the same year as “The Second Sex,” was uniquely progressive for its time. Katharine Hepburn shines as a female lawyer representing the female defendant through her effective, feminist legal arguments for women’s equal rights in court over a domestic violence case. Women, in this film’s fictional world, are fully integrated in the labor force and proudly assert their voice and opinions in an egalitarian society where men and the legal system listen to them (Kamir, 2001). Considered one of the greatest films of all time, *All About Eve* (1950) broke records with its 14 Academy nominations, including four female acting nominations. The story of what the lead heroine has sacrificed to be a successful woman in a world where theater’s only female roles were for twenty-year olds playing the dutiful wife, the film explored the theme of women being silenced and forced to learn from men despite their own talents (Shaw, 2008). One of Marilyn Monroe’s most famous films, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), satirizes male objectification of women, causing them

to stutter in dismay, drop objects, and give out expensive gifts. Monroe is famously known for her “pink dress” musical sequence, “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend.” She convinces ladies that they need to pursue men with money to make it, calling out how lack of opportunities for women in the workforce required them to be financially dependent on a man (Arbuthnot, 1990).

In the early 1960’s, people started voicing a concern that educated and talented women were denied their talents to their country. Teachers and nurses were lacking in schools and hospitals. Anxiety over the perceived Soviet threat led many to believe that America needed to harness all of its scientific talents, including those of women. Thus, more and more married women were entering the labor force (Harrison, 1980).

However, within this period of increasing participation in the workforce brought about divided women’s advocate groups. All groups were championing the right of women to work on an equal basis with men, demanding equal pay. But the Women’s Bureau in the Department of Labor wanted to advocate for these equal rights without disrupting protective labor laws - placing it in conflict with other groups that supported the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which would be a threat to these hard-won protective labor laws. Professional women, those in better-paying jobs, supported the ERA because they viewed the protective laws as ones that would impede their advancement. But women in the lowest-paid part of the workforce agreed with the Bureau that the protective labor legislation was inherently necessary. They specifically acknowledged that women’s biological differences should be recognized by the law and provide protections for them (i.e. pregnancy, post child-birth, fair and just wages in separate jobs, etc). They wanted a deep cultural shift that recognized women’s diverse

needs and realities. As a result, the Bureau offered an alternative to the ERA, a national commission to study the status of women (Harrison, 1980).

Much like first-wave feminism, it took the backing of a male political figure to make legal progress in the women's right's movement. President Kennedy's "New Frontier" administration made women's rights a priority. The 1962 Presidential Commission on the Status of Women was a case-by-case review of laws affecting women. It was pushed for most audibly by Esther Peterson, the new director of the Women's Bureau and Kitty Ellickson, the executive secretary for the Commission. The commission consisted of fifteen women and eleven men. Eleanor Roosevelt was the chairman before her untimely death in 1962, when Peterson took over as chairman. The Commission included both politically involved members as well as those engaged in other professional spheres, ranging from senators, representatives and businesspeople to psychologists, sociologists, professors and activists. In 1963, the finished report demonstrated that the goal was not only to move women into a sphere designed for men, but to transform the masculine pattern as well. The 60-page report endorsed improving women's access to education, increasing child care services to working mothers, and increasing the participation of women in the government. It also resulted in the push to negotiate improved pregnancy and maternity leave, better health coverage for childbirth and infant care, reasonable work hours, and equal pay - the latter two being the main focuses (Cobble, 2005).

Women consistently made the case that they should have the time to both contribute to the labor force and have the time to care for one's family and community, arguing for more control over their work time. In terms of equal pay, the obvious

argument was that women should receive equal wages when they held the same job as men. In addition, women acknowledged the existence of traditionally female jobs, but that they should receive a fair and just wage when they do different jobs that require an equal level of skill, productivity, and responsibility (Cobble, 2005).

The 1960's were known for the string of legal victories starting with approval of a contraceptive pill by the Food and Drug Administration in 1960. Not only did it bring about a reduction in family size in the midst of the baby boom via birth control, but it partially freed women from their bondage to maternity by making it easier to have careers without having to leave due to unexpectedly becoming pregnant. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 was a labor law that aimed at abolishing wage disparity based on sex. The Equal Pay bill was actually campaigned for in 1945, and introduced every year until it passed in 1963. That same year, the government appropriated \$800,000 to the sole purpose of setting up day-care facilities. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a landmark civil rights and labor law in the U.S. that worked in favor of many minority groups, not just women. It outlawed discrimination based on age, color, religion, sex, and natural origin. Part of the 1972 Education Amendments included the push for coeducation, often accomplished by merging initially separate male and female colleges. Abortion rights were won in 1973's landmark *Roe v. Wade's* Supreme Court Case. The 1970's continued with laws that required U.S. Military Academies to admit women, legalizing no-fault divorce, and outlawing marital rape. By 1982, more than 300 state coalitions were established to provide protection and services to women that had been abused by male figures (Ginsburg and Flagg, 1989).

Meanwhile, the film industry continued to bring to the spotlight additional female filmmakers. Ida Lupino, one of the sole working female filmmakers of the 1950's and director of her early successful films, *The Bigamist* (1953) and *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953), came out with *The Trouble with Angels* (1966) during the latter part of her career. Following the adventures of two girls in an all-girls Catholic school run by nuns, the film centers on the female friendships and sisterhood of support that allows the girls to create their own identities and paths (Wheeler, 1999). Many of her other films focused on how women were young women felt trapped physically and psychologically, especially via sexual violence. Barbara Loden wrote, directed and starred in, *Wanda*, a 1970 groundbreaking film that told the story of an working-class, divorced woman who goes on a run with a bank robber, eventually facing various forms of emotional and physical abuse as she struggles to answer the "Who am I?" question on her journey of self-discovery (Lopez, 2015).

The plight of the single mother continued to be a very prominent theme across cinema in the 1970's. Critically and commercially successful *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) stood out due to its sensitive portrait of a strong, independent widow who road-trips with her son after escaping her abusive, controlling husband. Given the choice to live a wealthy life with an ideal man she meets along the way, she instead chooses to pursue her dream of becoming a singer (Davis, 1975). Award-winning *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) depicted a devoted and subservient wife, mother and homemaker who suffers mental health problems as a result of her domestic life. Returning home after six months at a mental institution after being put there by her very own husband, she does not find returning to domestic life after her time away rewarding

in any sense (Berliner, 2013). The New York Times called *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* a “masterpiece of the feminine in the history of the cinema” when it was released in 1975. The movie shows a single mom’s unraveling, repetitive schedule of cooking, cleaning, and motherhood over three days, leading her to murder one of her male sex clients due to her domestic anxiety and alienation from society (Margulies, 2016).

Horror films found a new audience in female consumers in the second half of the 1970s. In *The Stepford Wives* (1975), the leading female characters are concerned with how submissive and bland the behavior of the other wives is, only to discover that all the real women have been replaced by compliant, domestic, sex robots (Silver, 2002). The 1976 release of the horror film *Carrie*, based on Stephen King’s novel a couple years earlier, went on to become a huge influence on popular culture, particularly its prom scene. During this scene, the bullied 16-year-old Carrie shares a kiss with the school’s popular boy and is crowned Prom Queen, only to have pig’s blood dumped on her shortly after. This causes her to unleash her telekinetic powers onto the crowd, causing a prom massacre (Ehlers, 1981). *Carrie* changed the supernatural/horror film scene. It created a genre where a woman could have an unprecedented amount of power as a result of the injustice of society’s actions towards her. Neither privilege, money, nor physical strength could save any person from the fury of a woman. Likewise, *Alien* (1979) is another example of the “monstrous feminine,” where Ellen Ripley is the only survivor to defeat the monster that killed every other member of her crew in this science-fiction horror film (Barker, 2016).



The successful legal victories for women in education and in the workforce inspired many feminist movies in the late 70s and early 80s. The 1979 Academy Award-winning *Norma Rae* follows a widow with two kids who, frustrated by the mistreatment of her fellow workers at the North Carolina textile mill and struggling to provide for her family, unionizes the workers to stand up to the unfair system (Taylor, 2011). Jane Fonda and Dolly Parton's *Nine to Five* (1980) gave a message about flexible work hours, equal pay, and an on-site daycare center for employees with children, which was quite reflective of the goals feminist groups in the time period worked towards.

Barbra Streisand became the first woman ever to have won Best Director at the Golden Globes for her 1983 film, *Yentl*, in which a Jewish girl in Poland disguises as a man to receive an education in Jewish Law. The movie called attention to the lack of knowledge on the female body by terming the Yentl Syndrome, where many women have died from misdiagnosis because their symptoms of heart attacks present differently than the widely male-based medical research (Stewart, 1985).

Second-wave feminism came to a gradual end in the 1980s with the "feminist sex wars." The two opposing sides of this era were sex-positive feminists and anti-pornography feminists, or pro-sex and anti-sex forces. Radical feminists argued that the source of women's oppression was male sexual domination. They viewed sex as a social construction, rooted in the male desire to dominate a women physically. Pornography had recently become more readily accessible, and the overtly sexual portrayal of women promoted sexual violence in their opinion, thus forming the anti-sex group. The only solution was to alter heterosexual intercourse in a way that wasn't harmful to women (Chenier, 2004). While the lesbian movement had already taken flight well before the

feminist wars, the above argument was used to promote the solution that lesbian identity was the best way to confront male domination. The idea of a “woman-identified-woman” created a new sense of “real” self, claiming that inauthenticity was a direct result of male identifications. Unfortunately, lesbian activism was met with much criticism, from both those outside and part of the feminist movement. Lesbians were labeled as “man-haters” and “disrupters” of the movement (Poirot, 2014).

On the other hand, pro-sex feminists argued that a woman’s total liberation included sexual freedom. They believed that women could indeed be in an intimate relationship with a man based on equality and mutually enjoy sexual exploration. 1982’s “The Feminist and the Scholar IX” conference in New York City brought together a group of feminist activists to discuss the complex relationship between pleasure and danger, but there was much controversy surrounding this conference because no agreements could be made on the discussed issues (Chenier, 2004). The stark divisiveness of this conference led to the decline of the era of second-wave feminism.

### *Third-Wave Feminism*

The early 1990s marked the beginning of a different era of feminism, with its origins undeniably in the music industry. The first high-profile case of sexual assault against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas and the subsequent record-breaking elections of women to public office were at the heart of this movement before third-wave feminism closed this two-decade chapter after Hillary Clinton’s loss to the then Democratic nominee for President, Barack Obama, in 2008.

In the film industry, female director Jane Campion led the way with female representation both in front of and behind the scenes during this era with her ground-

breaking film, *An Angel at My Table* (1990). A movie recounting the life of the author Janet Frame, Campion's film focused on the various tragedies of Frame's childhood, which included how men controlled, betrayed, and condemned Frame. She was misdiagnosed as a schizophrenic, admitted to a mental institution for eight years where she received hundreds of electroshock treatments, and almost lobotomized until a doctor discovered her inner genius in writing poetry (Frame, 1984). Campion changed the future of female filmmakers with this film, and she continued to make films that had at its center female protagonists who fought for her autonomy, such as her Oscar-winning film *The Piano*, with which she became the first woman to win the *Palme d'Or* at the Cannes Film Festival (Campion, 1994). Telling the story of a mute pianist and her daughter's resistance to the concept of subordination, the women who played each of those roles also won Oscars for Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress. Her 1996 *The Portrait of a Lady* was also a success, in which Campion explored Isabel Archer's entrapment in a marriage to a manipulative man who keeps her locked up in a house, abuses her and steals her money (Bauer, 1997).

This decade marked the recent explosion of the underground rock scene of all-women bands or individual women artists who made loud, confrontational, punk music. The "riot grrrls," were not just girls, but defiant "grrrls" that roared back at the dominant culture. Women's public self-expression was suddenly expanded as women gained greater access to male-dominated realms of expression. Punk rock specifically provided a language of rebellion. Sexuality and rebellion against parental control were themes that predominated in western teenage identity in general, so this movement aimed to break out of the patriarchal limitations on women's behavior in addition to having access to the

street. As a girl in society, one had a larger responsibility for domestic work, and leisure time revolved around courtship in preparation for marriage. Additionally, “the street” traditionally represented a dangerous space where women were subject to sexual harassment or participated as prostitutes - reducing women to binary labels of either “virgin” or “whore.” (Wald, 1993).

The “scream” became an identifiable part of the punk rock scene. A form of expression that used to be labeled as unlady-like, it changed to represent a nonverbal articulation that evoked a range of emotions, from rage and terror to pleasure and self-assertion. Many feminist rockers strategically used the scream to express their rage against sexual abuses of women, replacing the traditional melodious and tame emotionalism associated with a female artist. Women no longer submitted to the norm of remaining patient, uncomplaining, and quiet (Wald, 1993). Self-naming their band group, girls reclaimed masculinist terms in addition to enabling women to expand their vocabulary to include words traditionally forbidden to “good girls,” such as explicitly referring to their genitals. Such names of bands included Ovarian Trolley, Dickless, and Queen Meanie Puss (Wald, 1993).

Olympia, Washington is where it all began in the summer of 1991. K records organized a week-long international festival of more than 50 bands, during which the band Bikini Kill gained a large following. Their song “Rebel Girl” asserted the importance of girl solidarity as a response to the sexual commodification and categorization of women:

“They say she’s a slut, but I know she’s my best friend.”

Prominent themes among their songs included mentioning the importance of female friendships, the centrality of menstruation in their lives, and the culture of secret-telling as a form of rebellion against parental control. They termed “Revolution Girl Style,” which encouraged girls to escape from the family pressures to act like a “nice girl.” They called girls to the front at gigs and gave women a platform to speak out against abusers through the lyrical contents of their songs. In “Double Dare Ya,” singer Hanna screams:

“You’re a big girl now//you've got no reason/not to fight/You've got to know/what they are/For you can stand up/for your rights/Rights rights Rights?/you have them, you know.”

Bikini Kill essentially made their audience aware of the unspoken struggle of the subordination of girls and women to male power and authority. The band was the unified voice of the general masses, and the three females in the band, Kathi Wilcox on bass, Tobi Vail on drums, and Kathleen Hanna on vocals, were nothing less than the powerful furies of classical mythology (Wald, 1993).

The advent of the music video via MTV provided a space for women artists to convey the visual and emotive connotations of the female vocalist. Madonna led the way as an icon that had complete control over not only her music, but her image as well. Her lyrical style and fashion choices as seen in her music videos on MTV fundamentally changed the way record companies treat artists, granting them more autonomy (Wald, 1993). Madonna’s “Material Girl” video mimicked scenes from Marilyn Monroe’s iconic “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend” song from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. And Madonna’s role in *A League of Their Own* further promoted her feminist agenda of freedom of choice.

All of the topics raised by the riot grrrls in this time period were also translated onto the big screen, including the targeting of teenage audiences, more lesbian representation, rebellion against the good housewife, intolerance of sexual abuse, and the importance of female friendships.

The plight of the teenage years for a girl was well represented in *Mermaids* (1990), which featured Cher as a sassy, strong, single mom - a role that was rarely represented at that time - and Winona Ryder and Christina Ricci as her two teenage daughters, who discover how difficult the transition from girl to woman can be (Boyarin, 1999). *The Craft* (1996) also appealed to the female teenage audience as it encouraged teens to rise above the crippling fear of not fitting into society, by following four girls that bond over witchcraft (Stephen, 2003). The five high school girls of *Foxfire* (1996) similarly bond and engage in rebellious activity in retaliation to a teacher's sexual harassment (Bain, 2003).

The exploration of sexuality among the lead female characters of movies was increasingly explored after the feminist sex wars of second-wave feminism. Active in the filmmaking scene since the 1970s and 1980s with her feminist movies *Thriller* (1979) and *The God Diggers* (1983), Sally Potter came into the international spotlight with her 1992 film, *Orlando*, which played with the ideas of gender fluidity and sexuality from the eyes of a sex-switching character. Based on the 1928 novel by Virginia Woolf, the movie explores four centuries of experiences, first through the viewpoint of a male who does not understand women and their feelings, and then through the viewpoint of a woman who does not understand men and their politics (Carvalho, 2019). The 2002 biopic *Frida*, played by Salma Hayek, painted Frida Kahlo as a bisexual revolutionary who engaged in

romantic entanglements with men and women (Molina, 2006). The same year, *The Hours*, based on critically acclaimed author Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway," followed the misery and unhappiness that three women of different generations face due to societal oppression of woman in their inability to engage in openly romantic relationships with another woman, leading all of them to be tempted by suicide (Sim, 2005). The film won the Academy award for Best Picture, and Nicole Kidman won Best Actress for her portrayal of Woolf.

Echoing and continuing the second-wave rebellion against the domestic woman, *Mulan* (1998) attacked the notion that a woman's role in society is to pour tea, look beautiful and be gracious. Pressured by family and society to find a husband, marry, and partake in domestic activities, Mulan does the exact opposite, disguising as a man to take her father's place in the army (Kurtti, 1998). Similarly, Viola experiences endless gender discrimination in *She's the Man* as her mother criticizes her for not having a feminine image, eating with her mouth open and engaging in manly activities such as soccer. Like Mulan, Viola is also forced to disguise herself as a man to continue to play soccer after her team gets cut at her school (Pittman, 2008).

Numerous films explored the world of sexual exploitation in this time period as well. *The Handmaid's Tale*, the 1990 film adaptation of Margaret Atwood's dystopian, feminist novel where women are trained as "handmaids" and sent to live with wealthy men to bear them and their wives' children, brought further attention to a patriarchal society that deemed women's only role as breeders of the next generation (Atwood, 2006). While *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) made FBI agent Clarice Starling a feminist heroine for her determination and intelligence during her struggle for professional

success, the movie was really about what it was like for women to be stared at by men as Starling cracks the case of the serial killer Buffalo Bill all by herself (Jancovich, 2001).

Many movies often portrayed the value of female friendships in such a male-dominated society. *Thelma And Louise* (1991) was a hugely successful movie that celebrated the strength that female friendship can offer. Having escaped from domestic abuse, the pair of outlaws are anything but passive on this bad girl, road trip flick (Willis, 2012). Likewise, *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991) centered on Southern female friendship and the murder of a woman's abusive husband (Church, 1996). Director Penny Marshall's 1992 *A League of Their Own* broke the \$100 million line at the box office, proving that films centered on female camaraderie in traditionally masculine fields (baseball) could be successful. Venturing outside the domestic sphere, the girls understood each other's strengths and weaknesses, and could count on each other to have their backs. *Heavenly Creatures* was a 1994 thriller that focused on the friendship between two teenage girls, Pauline and Juliet, who bond over shared childhood disease and eventually end up murdering Pauline's mother (Bennet, 2006). *Clueless* (1995), based on Jane Austin's novel *Emma* and directed by Amy Heckerling, became another huge hit of Cher's as it also celebrated teenage, female friendships and a women's right to govern her own sexuality (Ferriss, 1998). *The First Wives Club* (1996) was another successful box-office release in emphasizing female solidarity as this comedy followed a group of wives taking revenge on their ex-husbands for leaving them for younger women (Wilson, 1996). The relationship formed between the two very different, but identical twins in Nancy Meyers' *The Parent Trap* (1998) was very well received as many young girls found the sisterhood between Annie and Hallie empowering. Gurinder Chadha's



*Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) reminded audiences of Marshall's *A League of Their Own* through its female teamwork with the girls on and off the soccer field. The girls push each other on the field and strip down freely in the locker room, fully comfortable in their bodies and friendship. The particular friendship between Jess and Jules and the movie's soundtrack featuring the Spice Girls contributed to its commercial success, becoming the highest-grossing sports film to focus on soccer (Dix, 2010).

For those who were not following the riot grrrl scene, the Spice Girls brought this energy and spirit into mainstream culture and made it accessible to thousands and thousands of more girls. Their first single "Wannabe" released in 1996 and their debut album became the best-selling album by a female group in history. Their "Girl Power" mantra was summed up in this iconic line that many are able to recite by heart:

"If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends/make it last forever, friendship never ends" (Reay, 2005).

Through their music and countless interviews, the Spice Girls pushed their girl power agenda to be multifaceted. It was about finding strength and support in friends, but also finding one's individual identity through various forms of expression. Young girls embraced the idea that it was possible to wear red lip-stick, put on high-heels, have cleavage proudly exposed by low cut necklines and have a brain at the same time. Movies followed this theme as well. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992) redefined how horror movies depicted the victims of the movie, which is usually the archetypal "dumb blonde" girl getting killed first. Instead, Buffy is an unapologetic, fashion-loving cheerleader who saves the day by slaying vampires. Reese Witherspoon's character, Elle Wood, became the epitome of a feminist for young girls in the early 2000s with the release of *Legally Blonde* (2001). The movie taught girls and women that just because a person liked getting

her nails done and is obsessed with pink clothes and high heels doesn't mean she is incapable of comprehending the nuances of law. Once again breaking the "dumb blonde" stereotype, Elle becomes a top law student, winning a murder case based on her own intelligence and perception - all while she sported the latest fashion trends (Dole, 2008).

While the riot grrrl movement of summer 1991 created many feminists out of young teenage girls and unofficially began third-wave feminism, the Hill-Thomas hearings a couple months later incentivized angry, older women to take action politically. In October 1991, the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas were televised. Professor Anita Hill, a black, female professor, was grilled by an all-white, all-male panel about the charges of sexual harassment she brought forward on Clarence Thomas. Public opinion polls later showed that professional women were more likely to believe Hill because they understood the struggle to advance in professional settings. They claimed that it was logical that Hill remained in contact with someone who was an important professional member in work, despite the harassment. Thomas's claim that the allegations were fabricated to prevent a black conservative from getting a seat on the Court was enough for the U.S. Senate to eventually confirm Thomas by a 52-48 vote (Cook, Thomas, & Wilcox, 2019).

Voting was only half the battle for women, and equally important became the direct involvement of making public policy. The televised image of the all-male Senate Judiciary raised public awareness about the stark gender imbalance in Congress. Many women voiced their anger and called for women to seek election to the Senate, promising to gather the support and financial means for the campaigns. A number of grassroots organizations doubled their efforts to find and fund women candidates. The record

number of women running for local, state, and national office was a direct result of the Hill-Thomas hearings (Caprini, 1993). Rebecca Walker's "Becoming the Third Wave" article criticizes the hearings, addresses the oppression of female voice, and officially marks the beginning of third-wave feminism:

"So I write this as a plea to all women, especially women of my generation: Let Thomas' confirmation serve to remind you, as it did me, that the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don't prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave" (Walker, 2001).

Women at that time in history were also well-positioned to be elected considering the social and political circumstances. The lingering recession, gaps in health care for the uninsured, and worries about America's education system were prominent topics during the elections of 1992. Male candidates' advantage of will to defend the country against foreign threats during the Cold War was eliminated with the collapse of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, women were assumed to have greater sensitivity, a quality that led many citizens to believe that they had the skills best suited to deal with the domestic political and social welfare issues of childcare, healthcare, education, and humanitarian foreign aid. In addition, the unprecedented wave of retirements (66) among members of congress in 1992 and the redrawing of district lines after the national census put many women candidates in a unique position where they were running for open seats in which there was no incumbent. Their chances of winning were automatically dramatically improved (Caprini, 1993).

Election day in 1992 was a huge victory for feminist groups. While none of the three women running for governor won, twenty-one of the thirty-four female candidates

for other public offices did. This included women running for state attorney general, lieutenant governor, state treasurer, and secretary of state. Prior to 1992, only two women held seats in the Senate. The election gave rise to four more women, giving a record six women in the Senate. Both of California's seats were held by women. Of the 106 women running for House, 47 won, leading to a record of 11% women in the House of Representatives. Most of the women elected campaigned via the Democratic Party and every single one of them supported abortion rights. 1992 was dubbed "The Year of the Woman." (Caprini, 1993).

History repeated itself in terms of needing a president that supported legal advancements for women. The election of Bill Clinton as president in 1992 was an important victory for women because they were attracted to his policies designed to address the lack of attention towards education and healthcare. During his term, he signed the Family and Medical Leave Act that Bush had vetoed previously, and then he signed executive orders that reversed twelve years of pro-life policies from the Reagan and Bush administrations. He also appointed women to high-ranking positions in his cabinet, the U.S. Supreme Court, including Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and other advisory positions (Cook, Thomas, & Wilcox, 2019). His policies were influential for the decades to come.

While the influx of women into the political sphere encouraged more women to enter the workforce, skilled women who had held their jobs for years and years were still not being given the opportunity to advance in position. In 1993, the Merriam Webster added a term to its dictionary called the "glass ceiling:"

"An intangible barrier within a hierarchy that prevents women or minorities from obtaining upper-level positions" (Merriam-Webster, 1993).

Termed by Marilyn Loden when she spoke on a panel at the 1978 Women's Exposition in New York, Loden used this term when she explained why more women were not entering management positions. This invisible hurdle essentially prevents women from occupying leadership positions in organizations. Often, assumptions are made that women prioritize family responsibilities, and thus companies believe women cannot contribute the time commitment needed for a higher position. There is also a double standard for women in positions of authority. When a woman behaves kindly and gently, she is considered a poor leader. But if she is assertive and takes charge, people react negatively and label her as emotionless. Thus, the glass ceiling has continuously been used by women's advocate groups to describe how women receive less appreciation from their male bosses and are slower to be promoted (Rai, U.K., and Srivastava, 2010). The term gained considerable popularity when Hillary Clinton used it in a speech to mark the suspension of her campaign in 2008 against Democratic nominee Barack Obama:

“Although we weren't able to shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it's got about 18 million cracks in it and the light is shining through like never before, filling us all with the hope and the sure knowledge that the path will be a little easier next time” (Carrol, S.J., & Dittmar, 2013).

The struggles experienced by women to advance into higher positions of power were also reflected in film. *The Associate*, a 1996 comedy, follows the story of an intelligent woman trying to make it on Wall Street. She is passed over for a promotion for being female and resorts to creating a fictional, white man to make others treat her seriously (Lee & Raesch, 2015). *Elizabeth* (1998) saw Cate Blanchett in the leading role as Queen Elizabeth of England, in which she constantly faces plots and threats to take her down, some of them brought about simply because she is a woman in power with no

husband. She proclaims herself as married to England, and becomes known as the “Virgin Queen” (Earenfight, 2006). *Whale Rider* (2002) received critical acclaim for its plot surrounding a 12-year-old girl fighting gender discrimination to become the chief of her tribe, a role reserved for males only (Gonick, 2010). Anne Hathaway’s iconic role as Princess Mia in *The Princess Diaries* (2001) and the sequel (2004) focused on the struggle for a female to obey the rules and restrictions society has in place for a female in a powerful position, whether it be as a princess in the original or as a queen in the sequel. She is first expected to look and act feminine in front of the media as a princess, and then told that she cannot rule as Queen without a husband by her side (Hylmo, 2006). *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), featuring Meryl Streep and Anne Hathaway in the lead roles, further commented on the stereotypes that women in professionally powerful positions must adhere to to be socially acceptable. While Hathaway’s character, Andy, enjoys wearing sweaters and sporting her natural hair, her new job in the fashion industry forces her to replace her dorky appearance with designer clothes, makeup and fancy hair in order to be accepted. Streep’s character, Miranda, is applauded for her ability to run the magazine in her power position as the boss, but she is unfairly judged about her work/life imbalance (Weisberger, 2006). Countless other movies about the discrimination against women continued the conversation, but Hillary Clinton’s Democratic nominee run and Nancy Pelosi’s position as the first woman Speaker of the House in U.S. Congress in 2007 and 2008 marked the last big victories of third-wave feminism as the era’s end slowly fused into the beginning of the most modern, fourth-wave of feminism.

### *Fourth-Wave Feminism*

Fourth-wave feminism is so recent that most people did not acknowledge its existence until 2017, once the #MeToo movement took off. An era that has just begun, it is characterized by numerous women coming forward to accuse men in prominent positions of sexual assault. It is notable to include that the aid newspaper companies, particularly *The New York Times*, social media, specifically Twitter, and celebrity involvement are significant contributors to garnering attention to prominent female activists and breaking the stories to the public to amass their support or criticism in a quick and efficient manner. Intersectionality is also a concept that is introduced in the midst of the #MeToo movement.

There is no doubt that a large portion of the fourth wave is attributed to the rising popularity of social media. While the social media app Twitter had been around for almost a decade, the accumulation of new users in the younger age group was largely responsible for its resurgence in popularity. Twitter opened access to a new area to engage in debate regarding social and political topics, including feminism. Users described how it was easier to use Twitter to communicate their feminist views with a wider audience than it was with their immediate social circles:

“The first place I heard about feminism was on the internet. Feminism saved my life. The internet has the ability to reach so many people, and if it can change my life, it can change theirs” (Mendes, Ringrose, Keller, 2018).

Twitter provides a platform to address important feminist issues and also call people out when they make misogynistic comments, exposing them on a public forum to encourage them to change their views. It has continued to be described as a space for learning and

creating greater awareness. The “hashtag” brought together strangers from all over the world into one, supportive online community.

On June 26th, 2014, the *Always #LikeAGirl* video commercial was released, aimed at redefining the phrase “like a girl” as something strong and powerful. Their mission was to change the culture of deprecation of young girls through the adolescent age of puberty and beyond. The video begins with girls and boys in the puberty age producing exaggerated responses to questions that ask them to act “like a girl.” When asked to run, fight, and throw like a girl, they skip in small steps with their arms flailing around, show a stereotypical catfight, and floppy swinging of arms. Then the video shows participants all in the pre-puberty age to perform the same actions, and they respond by running as fast as they can, throwing punches into the air forcefully, and pitching imaginary balls as hard as they can. The intent was to show that young girls have not yet been conditioned to believe the negative connotations that many adolescents feel of doing something “like a girl.” The #LikeAGirl hashtag sparked conversations on Twitter about the misconceptions, prejudice and societal expectations that “being a girl” held before shattering those stereotypes. Thousands of people took to Twitter to share the message, stand up for young girls, and redefine #LikeAGirl in the context of their actions (Marcus, 2016).

In September 2014, actress Emma Watson, known for her role as Hermione Granger in the Harry Potter film series, gave a speech as UN Goodwill Ambassador in front of the UN General Assembly. Due to Twitter, her speech went viral within hours. She invited people to step forward and speak up against gender inequality:

“Because the reality is that if we do nothing it will take 75 years, or for me to be nearly a hundred before women can expect to be paid the same as



men for the same work. 15.5 million girls will be married in the next 16 years as children. And at current rates it won't be until 2086 before all rural African girls will be able to receive a secondary education. If you believe in equality, you might be one of those inadvertent feminists I spoke of earlier" (Watson, 2014).

Her "HeForShe" campaign was largely successful in attracting hundreds of thousands of men to pledge to take action against gender bias, discrimination, and violence against women. In fact, her speech and campaign garnered so much attention that Twitter painted the hashtag #HeForShe on a wall at its headquarters (Watts & Chadwick, 2019).

The award of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize to Pakistani education activist Malala Yousafzai gave the world another fierce feminist leader. Even after having suffered a gunshot wound to the head by the Taliban in 2012, she continued her fight for girls' rights to education. She published her memoir *I am Malala* and toured the world. Her interview with Jon Stewart on The Daily Show quickly circulated on social media. She refused to fight the Taliban with violence. Instead, she would:

"fight others... through peace, and through dialogue, and through education" (Ryder, 2015).

Thus, the combination of social media and admirable female activists set the foundation for the beginnings of fourth-wave feminism in 2014.

The gravity of sexual assault became the hot topic of debate after a White Stanford University student was sentenced to just six short months in jail after being convicted for the sexual assault of Emily Doe in June 2016. Brock Turner had raped a woman while she lay unconscious near a dumpster on the Stanford campus. The maximum sentence for such a case was 14 years in jail, and the prosecution fought for six years, but Judge Aaron Persky sentenced Turner to a mere six months and the state ended

up releasing Turner three months early for good behavior. The victim read a powerful impact statement at Turner's sentencing stating that:

“The probation officer's recommendation of a year or less in county jail is a soft time-out, a mockery of the seriousness of his assaults and of the consequences of the pain I have been forced to endure” (Kebodeaux, 2017).

The Stanford Rape Case sparked outrage nationwide and began the discussion of the notoriously high rate of sexual assault on college campuses in addition to the acknowledgement of race and class into criminal sentencing. The continuous discussion eventually resulted in the successful unseating of Judge Aaron Persky as a result of his light sentencing decision of Brock Turner (Mack & McCann, 2019). California also passed a bill that imposed a mandatory minimum sentence for offenders who sexually assault an unconscious person (Kebodeaux, 2017).

The deep discussions of the prevalence of sexual assault continued when the Fox News scandal broke just a short month later. On July 6, 2016, former Fox News anchor Gretchen Carlson filed the “2016 Complaint” to the New Jersey Superior Court. She alleged that Roger Ailes, Fox News' co-Founder and president, had sexually harassed her. She accused Ailes of demanding “sexual favors” of her and then retaliating against her for refusing and objecting to them. She was removed from “Fox and Friends” and put on a show with a smaller profile and was not allowed to return as a guest commentator on Fox News (Kauffman & O'Connor, 2018). While Ailes denied the harassment allegations, Fox News was pressured to conduct an internal review by hiring an outside law firm to investigate. During the investigation, nearly 20 more women confirmed experiencing the same inappropriate behavior by Ailes (Webber, 2017). The publication New York Magazine's report that Fox News star anchor Megyn Kelly told investigators

that Ailes made unwanted sexual advances towards her at the beginning of her career carried significant weight, for Ailes resigned from Fox News only two days later. Fox News settled with Carlson and gave her \$20 million plus a formal apology (Kauffman & O'Connor, 2018). However, this was not the end of the Fox News story.

The cultural harassment at Fox News became the topic of media coverage again in April 2017 when The New York Times revealed that Fox News had been spending millions of dollars settling sexual harassment claims against Fox News anchor Bill O'Reilly. Public outcry led to another internal inquiry and the subsequent result of the termination of O'Reilly's relationship with the network (Webber, 2017). Not only were the overwhelming press coverage and newspaper articles tantamount in the firing of the respective perpetrators of harassment at Fox News, but they set the stage for the high-profile sexual harassment cases to come.

Also at the center of the conversation during the Fox News scandal was the result of the 2016 presidential election, in which the first female presidential nominee Hillary Clinton lost to the then President-elect Donald Trump. Clinton's concession speech mirrored her 2008 withdrawal speech against Barack Obama:

“Now, I know, I know we have still not shattered that highest and hardest glass ceiling, but someday, someone will” (Ruhfass, 2020).

Throughout his campaign, Trump called women debasing names, including “dogs,” “fat pigs,” and “disgusting animals.” The Washington Post published the now-famous Access Hollywood tape in October 2016 of Trump making lewd remarks about women:

“When you're a star they, let you do it. You can do anything . . . Grab them by the p\*\*\*y” (Weber, Dejmanee, & Rhode, 2018).

Soon after, several women came forward to tell their stories about Trump (Farkas, 2018). Authors and critics repeatedly wrote that since the election, many women were simmering in isolation with silent anguish and anger that a man such as Trump, known for making fun of sexually harassing women, had been elected to the highest office in the nation (Gibson, 2019). The most visible form of feminist protest against the Trump election were the Women's Marches on January 21, 2017 - the day after Donald Trump was inaugurated. An estimated five million people worldwide took part in the the marches, with roughly 500,000 in Washington D.C. and sister marches in approximately 400 cities in the United States and 80 countries around the world on all seven continents - making it the largest single-day demonstration in U.S. history (Weber, DeJmanee, & Rhode, 2018).

The media frequently focused on specific signs from various women's marches around the world. While many signs stated their opposition to recently inaugurated President Donald Trump by including messages such as "stronger together," the official campaign slogan of Hillary Clinton's campaign, the underlying principle of the movement disseminated the message "that women's rights are human rights," also a famous Clinton phrase from her landmark women's rights speech at the 1995 United National Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Many signs defined and critiqued feminism, reappropriated "pussy" and words for the vagina, named women as powerful agents of resistance, and called for unity. Popular culture campaigns such as "#LikeAGirl," phrases like "The Future is Female," and iconic quotes like Susan B. Anthony's "Women, their rights, and nothing less" were just a few of the hundreds of thousands of signs. Following the nonviolent ideology of the Civil Rights Movement, the

Women's Marches of 2017 set a ground-breaking precedent for the marches every year to come (Weber, Dejmanee, & Rhode, 2018).

The Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse allegations represented the turning point for fourth-wave feminism. On October 5, 2017, The New York Times published an article that the well-known Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein had been accused of rape, sexual assault, and sexual abuse by dozens of women over the last 30 years. The overall lack of confrontations for such a large period of time had to do with Weinstein's strict code of silence at the workplace and the use of non-disclosure agreements (NDA's) in the settlements. Some women accepted the payouts in exchange for signing a confidentiality clause that prohibited them from speaking about the deal and any events leading up to it (Prasad, 2018). Yet, some brave women stepped out and broke the terms of their agreements to speak out about their sexual assault decades later. At the time, Weinstein continuously denied any non-consensual sex. The weeks and months following this bombshell story led to more accusations against Weinstein. The Times and New Yorker magazines were even offered the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for their coverage of Weinstein. To this day, over 80 women have accused Weinstein of sexual harassment (BBC, 2019).

The New York Times article seemed to be the last straw for much of the public. On October 24, 2017, the hashtag #MeToo began trending on Twitter after actress Alyssa Milano tweeted in response to sexual assault allegations by Weinstein. She encouraged the public to join in to showcase the magnitude of the problem that sexual violence actually was (Meenan, 2019):

“If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet” (@Alyssa-Milano).

While the phrase originated in 2006 on My Space by an African American woman named Tarana Burke, both the timing of the hashtag after the recent Weinstein accusations and the development of social media to be even more far-reaching took this movement to the next level. Within 24 hours, the hashtag was used a record 12 million times (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). Survivors took to social media in an unprecedented way to engage in this “call-out culture,” making #MeToo one of the most high-profile examples of digital feminist activism. Prior to 2017, for the most part, sexual harassment was largely endured in silence. Many survivors on social media reported that the hashtag made them feel heard as overwhelming support poured in from favorites, retweets or direct messages from absolute strangers. They felt that sexual violence was finally being understood as a structural, rather than a personal problem.

December of 2017 brought about Time Magazine’s annual Person of Year cover. This time, it featured more than one person. Called “The Silence Breakers,” survivors of sexual abuse that spoke up and confronted their abusers were honored for risking their careers and reputations to stand up for what was right and speak against their harassers (Prasad, 2018). The women featured on the cover included Actress Ashley Judd and singer Taylor Swift, among others. Judd was one of the very first women to come forward with the Weinstein allegations in early October, and Swift made headlines when she won her lawsuit against a former radio DJ for groping her - for a symbolic \$1 to demonstrate that she was not going through that ordeal just for the money (Gibson, 2019).

With each passing week, more and more celebrities participated in the #MeToo hashtag on twitter. The beginning of the new year gave rise to the sister hashtag

#TimesUp by Hollywood celebrities. Actresses and activists including Reese Witherspoon, America Ferrera, Tracee Ellis Ross, Shondra Rhimes, Ava DuVernay and Natalie Portman introduced this initiative on social media on January 1, 2018 with a bold statement:

“The clock has run out on sexual assault, harassment and inequality in the workplace. It’s time to do something about it” (Bonner, 2019).

During the 2018 Golden Globes a short week later, actors and actresses invited to the awards ceremony all wore black in solidarity with the movement and posted pictures to social media with the hashtag #TimesUp. Several of the founders even invited prominent activists as their guests. The movement not only exposed sexual predators, but also pointed out the inequality in pay and representation on-screen in Hollywood. Film theory has recognized the effects of the gender imbalance since the 1970s. Drawing upon psychoanalysts Freud and Lacan, Laura Mulvey offered the “male gaze” in her 1989 article to describe how cinema positioned men as viewers and women as those to be viewed. She argued that regardless of their gender, in order to enjoy the film, audience members needed to take on the male perspective of being the dominant subject, the one doing the looking and acting, and the female character as a passive object to be looked at and acted upon. When Natalie Portman presented the Best Director award, she reminded viewers that male directors were most likely to be directing the camera and thus, determining the vision of the audience:

“And here are the all-male nominees” (Wender, 2019).

And therefore, #TimesUp did not represent just a hashtag, but was more importantly a legal defense fund that supported women dealing with sexual harassment. The fund

tacked onto the original #MeToo movement's core idea that women can no longer be silenced with secret settlements in cases of sexual harassment.

It is crucial to note that the women at the forefront of the #TimesUp movement were well known for their feminist agenda both in front of and behind the screen in the cinematic sphere as well. Reese Witherspoon rose to fame for her role in *Legally Blonde*, but continued to make headlines for her work behind the screen in films starring strong female leads. In 2012, she created her own production company, Pacific Standard Films, specifically to address the lack of strong female roles in the industry. She contributed to the production of *Gone Girl* (2014), teamed up with Laura Dern to receive Oscar nominations for their performances in *Wild* (2014), and executive produced and starred alongside Nicole Kidman in HBO's *Big Little Lies* (2017), the award-winning show that centered on female relationships and domestic abuse (*Lies*, 2018). America Ferrera came into the spotlight for her performance of Ana, a first-generation Mexican-American teenager trying to find her place in society, in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002). By the age of 24, Ferrera became the first Latina to win a lead actress Emmy Award for her role in the ABC tv series *Ugly Betty* (Anderson, 2009). Her character, Astrid, in the animated *How to Train Your Dragon* franchise (2010, 2014, and 2019) demonstrated strong leadership roles. Ferrera now stars and co-produces her own NBC show, *Superstore*. Shonda Rhimes is the prolific showrunner for creating, writing and executive producing her hit, female-led ABC drama shows *Grey's Anatomy*, *How to Get Away With Murder*, and *Scandal*, all shows included in her own production company, Shondaland (Erigha, 2015). Filmmaker Ava DuVernay's work on *Selma* (2014) led her to become the first Black woman to be nominated for a Golden Globe Award for Best Director, and her 2018



*A Wrinkle in Time* was celebrated for its message of female empowerment and diversity even though it was a box office flop (Martin, 2014).

Another high-profile case that found justice later that same month was that of the USA Gymnastics team. On January 24, 2018, Dr. Larry Nassar was sentenced to 40-125 years in prison for first-degree criminal sexual conduct. During the televised court proceedings, 156 women spoke about their abuse experiences during their very emotional victim impact statements. Dr. Nassar abused them in his clinic, his home, or at training camps where he treated them in private spaces after sedating them with sleeping pills (Mountjoy, 2019). The victims not only criticized Dr. Nassar, but also called out USA Gymnastics for covering up Nassar's disgusting behavior. One of the most powerful testimonies came from Aly Raisman, the six-time Olympic medalist who echoed the mission of #TimesUp in her statement:

“Let this sentence strike fear in anyone who thinks it is O.K. to hurt another person. Abusers, your time is up. The survivors are here, standing tall, and we are not going anywhere” (Meenan, 2019).

The year of 2018 continued with countless cases of sexual assault falling into the public eye. Many had legal victories, but there were also significant losses as well. Weinstein ended up being arrested in New York in May 2018 on the charges of rape and other offenses (BBC, 2019). Bill Cosby, known for his sit-com *The Cosby Show*, was accused by more than 50 women of drug-facilitated sexual assault. He was finally convicted in September of 2018 after a few years of mounting accusations. Yet, many victims were still not awarded for their bravery, and the consequences of the Kavanaugh case represented why many women feared coming out in the first place. On September 16, 2018, the *Washington Post* published a story about a former professor's sexual assault

claim against President Trump's Supreme Court nominee, Judge Brett Kavanaugh. Dr. Christine Blasey Ford accused Kavanaugh of harassment while the two were in high school, during the 1980s. She also claims that she did not tell anyone else about the incident besides her therapist, nor did she possess any physical evidence (Traynor, 2019). Even though there were two additional women who came forward and confirmed Kavanaugh's indecent behavior while he was a student at Yale, Kavanaugh was eventually confirmed to the Court by the full Senate by a vote of 50 to 48 after a short, one-week FBI investigation.

During the entire confirmation process, many women's advocacy groups were very vocal, often urging their elected representatives not to vote to confirm Justice Kavanaugh. Even though this case of sexual assault was a big loss to feminist groups, women's advocates continued to fight for justice and used the case to raise awareness. The general public was made aware of the steps to take immediately after sexual harassment that Dr. Ford did not carry out, such as telling others what happened, seeking medical attention before changing clothes or showering to document evidence, and contacting local law enforcement to make an official record of the incident as soon as possible (SA, 2019). Social media, college campuses and the entertainment industry have dramatically increased awareness of the conditions leading up to and the after-effects of sexual assault, urging both men and women to become fierce advocates and protectors of their loved ones, community members, and strangers.

Fourth-wave feminism continues to develop and grow as additional factors such as intersectionality are being brought into the conversation. Intersectionality describes how women experience layers of oppression caused by gender, sexuality, race, religion,

and class. A term introduced by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, the word found its origins in third wave feminism, but its emergence into the popular agenda of feminism has only occurred recently. The Women's Marches of 2018 specifically targeted the idea of intersectionality, referencing how feminism has typically tended to White, heterosexual, middle-class women. In fact, many of the signs referenced the voting patterns among Black and White women, drawing from exit polls data that 52% of White women voted for Trump while only 4% of Black women voted for him. #BlackLivesMatter and #LoveIsLove were often seen on the same signs as many of the different feminist hashtags (Weber, DeJmanee, & Rhode).

The Hollywood #TimesUp movement also focused on intersectionality, centering on the difficulty of women of color to both acquire roles and be paid equally to their white, male co-stars. The systems of power that contribute to the stratification of women that are part of more than one traditionally marginalized group are being recognized as more diverse female representation in various professions, particularly in television and movies, becomes the center of media attention. Shonda Rhimes has and continues to break the mold for not only casting female leads, but female leads that feature women of color. Rhimes's *Scandal* features the first black leading lady played by Kerry Washington in a drama in 37 years, and Viola Davis's performance of Annalease Keating in *How to Get Away With Murder* led Davis to become the first woman of color to win the Emmy for Best Actress in a Drama (Dabney, 2017). Lupita Nyong'o, a Kenyan-Mexican actress, came into the spotlight for her Academy Award winning performance in *12 Years A Slave* (2013) and continues to capture audiences in films such as *Black Panther* and the 2019 horror film, *Us*. *Black Panther* (2018) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) shattered

barriers for not only featuring and overwhelming all-minority Black and Asian cast, but for the powerful roles of female characters, from the incredibly intelligent Shuri and female warrior Okoye to economics professor Rachel and the rich, fashion-icon Astrid in each of the respective movies (Lee, 2019). *Ocean's 8* (2018) featured minority female actresses Rihanna, Awkwafina, and Mindy Kaling in three of the eight female leads and the majority of the *Hustlers* (2019) leading ladies were women of color, featuring Jennifer Lopez, Constance Wu, Keke Palmer, Cardi B. and Lizzo. Jennifer Lopez also executive produced *The Fosters* (2013-2018), an ABC Family drama about a same-sex couple raising a family, which has garnered acclaim for its diversity of female representation in race, culture, and sexuality (Roberts, 2016). Indian-American Mindy Kaling wrote and starred in *Late Night* (2019) alongside Emma Thompson, which was praised for its social commentary on the misogynistic, white, male-dominated sphere of talk-shows. Sandra Oh, best known for her role as Dr. Christina Yang in Rhimes' *Grey's Anatomy*, became the first woman of Asian descent in 39 years to win a Golden Globe for Best Actress in a TV drama for *Killing Eve* at the 2019 Golden Globes. Zendaya's portrayal of Rue, a drug-addicted, Black, lesbian girl, has earned her critical acclaim for this lead role in the HBO 2019 drama series *Euphoria* (Kokkinou, 2019). Thus, the biggest shift in Hollywood towards a more diverse, female-led casts has occurred only within the last couple of years.

While fourth-wave feminism dominates much of the conversation today, representation of females in film still lags behind as new male-dominated movies top the box-office every year. The next chapter will identify the top five grossing films of all-

time, identifying both female submission and empowerment in different contexts in some of the most loved movies in the world.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Analyzing Female Representation in the Top 5 Grossing Films with a Female Lead or Co-Lead in the Last Decade (Adjusted for Inflation)

While many of the box-office topping movies of all time were released within the last decade, the popularity of movies is better interpreted when adjusting for inflation. Tickets are typically adjusted for inflation by using the estimated number of tickets sold, converting box office earnings into a standard unit of measurement to better compare the success of a movie to movies released in various decades. Since there is not one standard inflation calculator available, the data used for the purposes of this paper will come from Box Office Mojo's calculator, which takes a movie's box office gross and divides it by the average ticket price at the time it was released. For example, tickets were as cheap as \$0.23 in 1939 when *Gone with the Wind* released to as high as \$4.59 when *Titanic* came out in 1997 (Top Lifetime Adjusted Grosses - Box Office Mojo, 2020). The following chart displays grosses in terms of the average ticket price in 2019, which was approximately \$9.01. The analysis of representation of female characters in the following movies will serve as a basis of comparison for how more modern movies within the last decade have both evolved and kept some traditional elements alive.

TABLE 1  
Top 5 Lifetime Adjusted Grosses, Box Office Mojo.

Rank	Title	Adjusted Lifetime Gross	Lifetime Gross	Est. Number of Tickets	Year
1	Gone with the Wind	\$1,828,330,104	\$200,852,579	202,286,200	1939
2	Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope	\$1,609,903,414	\$460,998,507	178,119,500	1977
3	The Sound of Music	\$1,287,828,733	\$159,287,539	142,485,200	1965
4	E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial	\$1,282,126,448	\$435,110,554	141,854,300	1982
5	Titanic	\$1,225,144,276	\$659,363,944	135,549,800	1997

Not only were these films popular when looking at the number of movie-goers, but their success was validated in their numerous Oscar nominations. *Gone with the Wind* won an unprecedented ten Academy Awards (Cutler, 2013), only to be beaten by *Titanic* with its 17 nominations and 11 wins approximately six decades later (San Diego Union-Tribune, 1998). Every single one of the movies was nominated for Best Picture during their respective Oscar nomination years. *Titanic*, *Gone with the Wind* and *The Sound of Music* - the only movies in the top five list that had stories revolving around undeniably strong female leads with a considerable amount of screen time - won the Academy Award for this category (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2020). The Oscars recognized talent where it was due for the portrayal of these characters as well. Kate Winslet and Gloria Stuart were nominated for Best Leading Actress and Best Supporting Actress for their roles as Rose and elder Rose in *Titanic*. Vivien Leigh won the award for Best Leading Actress for her portrayal of Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*, and Julie Andrews was nominated for Best Leading Actress for playing Maria in *The Sound of Music*. In addition, *Titanic* won Best Original Song for Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On" and *The Sound of Music* won Best Scoring of Music for their intelligible,

empowering lyrics and melodies (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2020). Thus, history has shown that movies with female characters at the heart of their stories are received incredibly well by audiences and are capable of being recognized for their contributions to a great film. The formula for box office success doesn't necessarily consist of strong, male leads only.

### *The Effect of Time Periods on Female Representation in Film*

The role of female characters as depicted on-screen in each of these movies was very much influenced by the feminist agenda and the struggles that women faced in each of the decades. While some of the movies were released during one wave of feminism, they were set in a different wave. For example, *Titanic* (1997) released during the third wave, but it was set in 1912 because it was based on the real-life event of that exact year. In 1912, the Titanic set sail from Southampton, England to New York. On April 14th, 1912, what was deemed as the “unsinkable” Titanic submerged into the Atlantic Ocean after hitting an iceberg. The movie follows the events leading up to this tragedy in addition to adding in the element of a heartbreaking love story. The disaster’s occurrence in 1912 was during the suffrage movement’s highest activity, for women’s suffrage was granted in the U.S. by the 19th amendment just a few years later in 1920. In fact, some of the passengers on board were prominent suffrage activists, including Molly Brown, depicted in the film with historic accuracy as the woman who called for her lifeboat to return to the debris field of the sinking Titanic to look for survivors, but her cry to help was dismissed (Barczewski, 2006). The release of the movie shortly after the peak of third wave feminism’s 1992 “Year of the women” undoubtedly influenced the individualistic, feminist take on the lead female character, Rose.



*Gone with the Wind* was released right before second wave feminism. Although *Gone with the Wind* (1939) was set in the Civil War and Reconstruction era of America (1860s/1870s), when the feminist movement was particularly slow-paced because women put their energies toward the war effort, it was released during the limbo period between first and second wave. Timing-wise in terms of its release, the nation was coming out of the Great Depression era, and thus the characters in the story provided a newfound sense of strength and inspiration. *Gone with the Wind* is the story of a woman who goes through numerous romantic entanglements and uses every means at her disposal to survive in the southern society torn apart by the Civil War. It set the stage for what would become the discussion at the heart of the second wave - the rejection of the limited role of a woman to fulfill the duties of a wife and mother.

A film that released during the second-wave of feminism and fell in line with the post-war depiction of female roles as nothing more than the hard-working household figure was *The Sound of Music* (1965). It was released in the midst of the second wave, but was set in the late 1930s. One of the most popular musicals until this day, the movie follows the life of the Von Trapp family when a new governess, Maria, comes into their lives. Taking place in pre-World War II Austria, the film suggests that national unity is only possible if there is family unity, which is based on a particular ideal of womanhood. While the counter ideology that challenged women's traditional domestic role in society was the prominent idea during the release of this film, the movie itself still embodies that pre-second wave notion that a woman's primary duty is to nurture her family.

Yet, there were some notable deviations from the norm in this era. *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* released in 1977 and *E.T. the Extraterrestrial* in 1982, as

second-wave feminism was wrapping up. For the time period that they were released in, the films were forward for their representation of the female role. Set in space, *Star Wars* follows the efforts of two men to rescue a princess from Imperial forces and restore freedom “in a galaxy far far away.” The princess in *Star Wars* had a considerable leadership role in the sphere of rebellion and battle, one that is usually filled with male commanders and soldiers. As for *E.T.*, after a friendly alien gets stranded on Earth, three kids house him secretly until they can get him back home. *E.T.* 's inclusion of a single, divorced mother so early in the game allowed for more diverse family representations on-screen in subsequent films.

#### *Female Characterization - Feminist, Stereotype-Breaking, and Forward-Thinking*

Among the five movies, some common characteristics were displayed by female characters that played particularity feminist roles - especially Rose in *Titanic*. The upcoming sections break-down the character patterns that contributed to the creation of these well-rounded characters.

#### *Verbal Assertion, Individual Decision-Making and Independent Success*

Perhaps the strongest female roles in the films were represented by women that could speak up for themselves in sexist atmospheres, make their own choices, and were capable of getting by on their own. *Titanic*'s Rose Dewitt Bukater is constantly found stuck listening to sexist comments that promote the idea that women should not engage in certain intellectual topics, limiting them from gaining knowledge. Even her own mom doesn't believe in the value of education, stating that the purpose of university is to find a suitable husband, reducing the woman to the family and household. Rose, however,

demonstrates that she is capable of joining those scholarly conversations. She is familiar with the concepts brought forth by the psychologist Dr. Freud. She demonstrates an educated and refined taste in art as she recognizes talent when she sees one of Pablo Picasso's paintings and Jack's sketchbook drawings. Furthermore, Rose's conversations with Mr. Andrews regarding the lack of enough lifeboats reveals both her interest and ability to do some quick, complicated math calculations in her head (Cameron, 1997). She is so educationally ahead of her male counterparts and cleverly uses that knowledge to assert her ability to navigate a man's world.

*Titanic* quickly establishes Rose's intelligence, and then spends a considerable amount of time focusing on a woman's journey towards independence. Rose breaks away from her uptight, constraining family to become a woman in control of her fate. Her alone time with her lover, Jack, allows her to be free, at one point spitting into the sea and not giving a single care in the world about appearances for a lady until her mother catches them. When Jack later corners Rose in a room trying to get her to evaluate her life, she tells him straight up that it's not up to him to save her - to which he agrees that she must save herself. But Rose's character arc into becoming an unapologetic woman in response to the patriarchal society she's surrounded by is especially seen through her interactions with her fiancé, Cal, as the movie goes on. Her turning point occurs when she leaves Cal the picture that Jack drew of her in his safe with a note that says: "Darling, now you can keep us both locked in your safe," indicating her decision to leave him and giving him the assumption that she slept with Jack (Cameron, 1997). When the ship is sinking, Cal disparages Rose for trying to find Jack:

"Where are you going? To him? To be a whore to a gutter rat?!?"

“I’d rather be this whore than your wife,” Rose exclaims, following the bold statement by spitting on his face (Cameron, 1997).

Not only does she defend herself, but she breaks away from financial security despite knowing that it might lead to an uncertain future. And find Jack she does. She is far from the typical damsel-in-distress, being the one to save her lover from the lower, flooding decks of the Titanic when Jack is arrested by the police. Rose overcomes the common stereotype that women are not as strong willed as men with her persistence to get him to safety by herself when nobody is willing to help her. She does this again for herself at the end of the film, when she chooses to save herself by blowing the whistle that will bring attention to the lifeboat that eventually saves her life. Her ultimate rebirth occurs when she arrives safely in America and the clerk asks for her name. Rose creates a new identity for herself, claiming her last name to be that of Jack’s: Dawson. At the end of the film, we learn that Rose has lived a full life - flying airplanes, riding horses, and fishing. She proves that a woman can be happy and not be crippled by the loss of the love of her life, this message being embodied in the lyrics of Celine Dion’s “My Heart Will Go On.” Instead of being dependent on another man like her mother, she found her own way to be self-sufficient because she never sold the Heart of the Ocean to make money, for she is seen throwing it into the sea in the final scene of the film (Cameron, 1997). Through Rose, females are able to see who they can be when they are freed from expectations and allowed to step into womanhood on their own terms.

*Gone with the Wind*’s Scarlett O’Hara also experiences a journey from dependence to independence. Unlike Rose, Scarlett is driven primarily by money and is more relatable to Rose’s mother. She flirts with Rhett, who eventually becomes her third husband, in jail to try to get money out of him and when that doesn’t work, she marries

her sister's beau to take over his business. She hires criminals to work for her lumber business so that she can pay them dirt cheap, despite being chastised for making that decision. She is able to successfully run the plantation on her own, putting her servants and sisters to work, all while dealing with the death of both her parents. Scarlett's resourceful, figuring out how to deliver Melanie's baby by herself and getting them all the way to Tara. She is even able to defend herself by killing a Yankee who intrudes into her house (Fleming, 1939). While there is no denying she makes significant moral mistakes and is selfish, the truth is that Scarlett is a successful woman. Her turning point came during her period of starvation:

“If I have to steal or kill - as God is my witness, I'll never be hungry again!” (Fleming, 1939).

Considering that poverty had nearly killed her, her obsession with money becomes a little more understandable. And Scarlett does exactly what she preaches. As mentioned in the instances above, she lies, she cheats, she kills and does pretty much whatever it takes to survive and save her land and family.

“Selfish to the end, aren't you? Thinking only of your own precious hide with never a thought for the noble cause” Rhett tells Scarlett (Fleming, 1939).

When she finally ends up becoming rich after marrying Rhett, she flaunts her wealth. Even when Rhett leaves her in the end, she vows to keep cultivating her land and find a way to get him back. Therefore, while Scarlett is inherently deviant, not caring for morality and the etiquettes at that time, she comes out boldly in times of difficulty and proves that women can offer much more to society than just domestic help or be a source of offspring.

*The Sound of Music*, much like the previous two, is also a movie about a woman finding a place in society where she feels accepted. Her inability to be bound by the routines of the convent is the first introduction we are given of her free-spirited nature. “How do you solve a problem like Maria” is a number dedicated specifically to her lack of discipline. At first, she is ashamed of herself, confessing to Reverend Mother:

“I can’t stop wherever I am. Worse, I can’t seem to stop saying things. Everything I think and feel” (Wise, 1965).

This sense of honesty and lack of regard for suffocating rules is actually what contributes to her rewarding journey with the Von Trapps. “I have confidence” is a number that demonstrates Maria’s train of thought, promising that she will take on whatever challenges she is presented with. And she keeps her word. Throughout the movie, Maria breaks the Captain’s rules because she wants to not only be herself, but also teach the children that they can be themselves as well if they didn’t follow their fathers ridiculous rules. And furthermore, she is strong-willed enough to speak back to the Captain when she does not agree with his methods. When the children come downstairs to first meet Maria, their father summons them with his navy whistle, ordering them to stand in line military-style as they step forward to announce their names when he blows their whistle signal. Maria is immediately horrified, refuses to be called by a whistle, and rebukes the captain for treating his kids like animals. Later on, she raises her voice with him and almost commands him to listen to her about the lives of his own kids that he’s been so ignorant to. She is so effective at helping others see the truth that he admits to his faults a short while later (Wise, 1965). Maria is successful in making Captain von Trapp rethink his military-style parenting, bringing the father and children back into a more intimate relationship. At the time of release of this film, 1960s women’s magazines showed

images of this newly involved father, cooing over babies and spending time with their older children as well. The father was expected to offer emotional support in addition to economic security, and Maria is responsible for the transformation of Captain von Trapp from removed disciplinarian to friendly, interactive Dad.

Maria's turning point like Scarlett's also occurs during a time of difficulty, after she leaves the Von Trapp kids because she is in love with the father. When Reverend Mother convinces her to face the truth, Maria returns a little more self-conscious around the Captain, but with the same confidence and determination she had when she first arrived. She eventually marries into the family that she feels like she finally feels a sense of belonging to.

In *Star Wars*, which may not be as female-centric as the three films mentioned above, Princess Leia's character is known for her verbal commands to her male adventurers and quick decision-making skills. Even though Leia is the one who ensures her droids escape with critical data, she is initially portrayed as a damsel in distress after her capture by Darth Vader. However, the illusion of the beautiful, helpless and passive princess in need of saving is shattered as she rushes past Luke and out of the cell to save herself, carrying out heroic deeds of her own. From this point on, Leia is presented as outspoken, sarcastic, and every bossy. She criticizes Luke and Han's lack of planning the escape, and takes charge of the situation:

“Somebody has to save our skins” (Lucas, 1977).

She has no trouble shouting more orders and commands Han to do as she tells when he is too eager to shoot at everything. Her condescending tone implies her call for the men to respect her authority, which Han has a difficult time accepting:

“If we can just avoid any more female advice, we ought to be able to get out of here” (Lucas, 1977).

But Leia’s valuable role in the Rebellion is confirmed with the warm welcome of her arrival back to the Rebellion base and at the end of the film during the award ceremony, when she is the representative chosen to give medals to Luke and Han. Her strength, intelligence, loyalty, and ability to make smart decisions on the spot in this first film set her up for her portrayed leadership in the rest of the Star Wars saga.

And last but not least, *E.T.*’s five-year-old Gertie is another character that is always having to prove her intelligence. Her sarcastic personality, honesty, curiosity, and a sense of innocence emblematic of youth may directly contribute to why everyone underestimates her capabilities . She has to constantly remind her older brothers Elliot and Michael that she’s no fool. When Elliot is trying to convince her not to tell their mom about E.T., he makes up the fact that adults can’t see him, which Gertie calls him out for. When Elliot repeatedly goes over their plan on Halloween night, she responds with attitude:

“I’m not stupid, you know” (Spielberg, 1982).

And she proves to be capable of more than just playing her part in a plan. She literally teaches E.T. to talk, figuring out E.T.’s objective to call home. Ultimately, her role in helping get E.T. back home is instrumental, so her actions are not gone unnoticed. For the most part, Rose, Scarlett, Maria, Leia, and even Gertie were female characters that departed from the typical, passive female love interest that movies have traditionally depicted women as.



### *Stepping Into a Male-Dominated Sphere*

It was uncommon for women in society to take actions that were more characteristic of men, and even more uncommon for those roles to be represented on the big screen. *Titanic* shows Rose as not only being good at, but enjoying her more “masculine” actions. When Rose is around Jack, she becomes incredibly more comfortable with behaving in a manner quite opposite to what’s expected of an upper-class lady. She asks Jack to teach her the ways of men in society:

“Teach me to ride like a man. And chew tobacco like a man. And spit like a man” (Cameron, 1997).

The entire process of masculinizing Rose makes her character change even more obvious. While her verbal remarks and witty comments towards her mom and Cal are one thing, her actions, like dancing with the third class party while drinking an entire glass of beer in one swallow, completes the transformation.

*Gone with the Wind* is excellent at displaying a woman’s success in activities outside of the household. A task typically taken upon by servants and men, Scarlett teaches herself how to run the farm well enough to ensure a good harvest of cotton, even putting in the physical effort by working in the fields of Tara until her hands are calloused and her feet are bruised. She also buys and runs two sawmills to contribute to her financial security despite the negative public opinion, for it was frowned upon for women to own property and enter the sphere of business. While she is not depicted as particularly enjoying these activities, she proves to be more than successful in carrying them out. Her third husband helps their daughter break gender barriers as well. He teaches their daughter to ride a pony even though Mammy, their servant, chastises him for teaching her things that in her opinion, aren’t fit for a lady (Fleming, 1939).

Some of these top grossing movies also represent women as capable of exhibiting violent actions and reactions, as male characters are often depicted doing as a manifestation of their anger or in the field of battle. Rose and Scarlett specifically display violent reactions towards men when they are frustrated in *Titanic* and *Gone with the Wind* respectively. Rose punches a guy in the face after he refuses to help her free Jack from the cuffs while the ship is sinking (Cameron, 1997). And Scarlett slaps Ashley across his face and hurls a statue viciously across the room after he turns down her declaration of love. Rhett is in the room when she does this, and tells Scarlett that her actions are very uncharacteristic of that of a lady (Fleming, 1939). Some of the women are characterized as not afraid to kill to ensure their safety or the safety of their loved ones. Scarlett shoots to death an intruder in her house and Leia casually takes down her enemy by shooting at Stormtroopers while trying to escape the Death Star (Lucas, 1977). Therefore, the line between female and male roles is blurred in several dimensions, particularly in action-oriented spheres.

#### *Appearances - Women's Clothing: Symbols of Liberation*

Physical beauty and appearances were presented as important to an upper-class woman. Women are often judged simply based on their beauty. At one point in *Titanic*, Cal's friend congratulates him on his engagement to Rose simply based on his judgement of her "splendid" beauty. And equally as important was the requirement of being a virgin that wore modest, tight-fitting clothing. The image of Scarlett's mother and Mammy lacing the strings so tightly on the corsets for Rose and Scarlett respectively can be interpreted as metaphors for the imprisoning societal expectations of women in that age, to a point where they literally cannot breathe:

“Oh, oh dear, my stays are so tight, I know I shall never get through the day without belching,” says Scarlett (Fleming, 1939).

It is interesting to note that the emancipation of women from societal expectations is symbolized by wearing looser-fit clothing. After Rose decides to leave her fiancé, her dresses are dull in color and fall loosely over her body for the rest of the film in *Titanic*. During the party held at Von Trapp’s villa in *The Sound of Music*, most of the attendees are wearing extravagant outfits. The baroness represents this upper-class, seen in her tight and slinky evening dress made out of glittering gold lamé, in contrast to Maria’s simple, peasant-like costume made out of plain fabric. Thus, Maria’s comfortable, loose-fitting dresses that she knits together herself in *The Sound of Music* and her free-spirited nature are contrasted with the uptight, baroness’s skin-tight outfits.

The idea of a woman being comfortable with her sexuality was especially forward-thinking in *Titanic*, a film set during first wave-feminism but influenced by the feminist agenda of the third-wave politics. At one point in the film, Rose is with Jack and has her portrait drawn - not just without her corset, but without any clothes at all. Jack gifts Rose the nude drawing of herself, portraying her as sexy and comfortable with her body. In addition, her positive body image and confidence to initiate sexual intercourse with Jack without being married was a bold move on her part in that time period when women would be shamed for such actions, being labeled as “whores” and “sluts.” In fact, those are terms that Cal verbally uses towards her later on when he realizes Rose has slept with Jack.

In an era when a woman was judged based on the fit of their clothing and could easily have a tainted reputation for displaying more skin than that which is approved by

society, both Rose and Maria are depicted as comfortably dressing in their choice of clothing without a care for what others perceive of their appearances.

### *Female Characterization - Falling in Line with Typical Archetypes*

While the patterns analyzed above were more at par with the feminist agenda that aimed to change the typical perception of women in society, many of the traditional depictions of women on-screen did not change from decade to decade, falling in line with typical archetypes. The term “archetype” originated from Carl Gustav Jung’s theory of the human psyche. He believed that archetypes represent fundamental human motifs of our shared experiences and collective unconscious that symbolize basic human motivations (Jung, 2014). For example, the archetype of the woman in the household as the proper mother and wife or as scared damsels in distress remain the same among the movies.

### *The Warm, Motherly Figure*

The role of the woman who takes care of everyone, whether it’s her own kids or others is a character that is all too common. Every single movie in the top five list includes the motherly figure archetype in some form. When Rose and Jack run into a small kid that’s alone in the lower decks while the Titanic is sinking, Rose’s motherly instinct kicks in, telling Jack that they cannot leave him under any circumstances. In addition, many of the third-class mothers who realize that they will not get onto the boat are found protecting and comforting their kids, with one woman even reading a bedtime story to her kids during the middle of the chaos and moments before their tragic deaths (Cameron, 1997).

Melanie, Scarlett's friend and the wife of the man that Scarlett is in love with for most of the film, is the paragon of maternalism in *Gone with the Wind*, always putting others before herself with her almost extreme sense of kindness and understanding typically associated with a mother. On the other hand, when Scarlett becomes a mother, she does not conform to this caring mom archetype. She is always found complaining that there are servants that can do the duties that Rhett is forcing her to do, such as taking their daughter for a walk in the neighborhood. In fact, she refuses to have more children because she doesn't want to gain weight. The idea of Scarlett as a mother is really only emphasized when Rhett takes away their daughter from Scarlett and returns only because Bonnie misses her mom:

“Apparently any mother, even a bad one, is better for a child than none” Rhett concludes (Fleming, 1939).

Similarly, *The Sound of Music* promotes the idea that children need a mother figure in their life and that a single father figure isn't enough after the death of their mother. Maria fills that role perfectly, and when she leaves back for the convent, the kids cannot stand her absence and make a trip all the way to the abbey to plead for her to come back (Wise, 1965). Having only a couple minutes of screen time in *Star Wars*, Luke's Aunt Beru fills in this role as a warm, motherly woman since his real mother is also dead (Lucas, 1977).

Mary, the kids' mother in *E.T.*, is initially depicted as an emotional mess due to her husband's departure to Mexico for another woman, leaving her to raise the kids alone. While the role of the mother is not missing in this film, she is so caught up with all her responsibilities as a working mother and running the household that she is oblivious to her kids' actions of hiding an alien in the house. She doesn't notice E.T. when he's openly walking around the living room. Nor can she tell the difference between her own

daughter and an alien when the kids sneak E.T. right past her at Halloween by pretending he's Gertie dressed as a ghost - even though E.T. and Gertie have completely different body types and don't walk the same way. There are times, however, when Mary instinctively worries, protects, and comforts for her children. When Elliot doesn't return from trick-or-treating the night before, Mary is seen to be very preoccupied while she is talking to the police about her missing child. Upon first meeting E.T. in the bathroom, she naturally views him as a threat, removing all her kids from there immediately. She is also seen reading a bedtime story to comfort Gertie because she's worried that E.T. is going to die (Spielberg, 1982). So while Mary might be busy, distracted, and emotionally delicate, she is loving, nurturing, and protective when it's most necessary. The protective nature that women display towards younger individuals is likely one that will not disappear over the course of film history - although this particular archetype is less present in the top grossing female-led films of the most recent decade.

### *The Damsel in Distress*

While some characters are presented as experiencing a feminist-oriented change over time, others are characterized as only being women in trouble and in need of saving. Despite Rose's eventual character transformation, she is initially presented as a woman who needs saving in *Titanic*. Cal and Ruth's unrelenting focus on transforming her into a woman who pleases them takes such an emotional mental toll on her that nobody notices her mental distress. One of the first scenes introducing Rose in the movie presents her as self-pitying and in need of a savior. As she is boarding the Titanic, we hear her inner thoughts about the ship:

“It was the ship of dreams to everyone else. To me, it was a slave ship, taking me back to America in chains. Outwardly, I was everything a well brought up girl should be. Inside, I was screaming” (Cameron, 1997).

Soon after, she is seen on the opposite side of the railing at the edge of the ship, about to commit suicide by plunging herself into the ocean because she sees the only escape from the wedding with her fiancé as death. And it is the male hero, Jack, that comes to her rescue (Cameron, 1997).

Similarly, Leia’s initial perception is different from the capable fighter she proves to be later. In one of the very first scenes, Leia is captured by the stormtroopers after hiding the Death Star plans inside the droid, R2D2. She is first portrayed as a damsel in distress when Luke sees her in a holographic message, asking for help:

“Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You’re my only hope” (Lucas, 1977).

Luke becomes concerned that she is in trouble, and when he is on the battle station where she is being held prisoner, he’s adamant on helping her escape. There is never a time that the damsel is not rescued in time, but in *Titanic* and *Star Wars*, one can assume that Rose and Leia would be dead if Jack and Luke didn’t arrive in time. Thus, these movies advance the idea that women are often damsels in distress that would die without the male savior.

### *Female Relationships*

The comparison of two female characters was common in the films that had multiple significant female characters, especially when they were vying for the same man’s love. Usually, the characters are so sharply contrasted that the audience is meant to like one more than the other, pitting the characters against each other and leading the audience to root for the one that wins the lead male character’s affection. And while not

as popular among these movies in the top five list as in the movies released between 2010 and 2019, the occasional female friendship or mentorship was an incredibly touching and well-received element.

### *Women in Competition*

In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett is juxtaposed with the ideal feminine figure of Melanie - the forgiving and caring character that is loved by everyone due to her warm hospitality. While Melanie speaks kind and flattering words from an innate desire to make others happy, the only time Scarlett speaks kindly of others is when she needs to further her own agenda. For example, Scarlett flirts her way into marrying her second husband for money. Melanie's greatest characteristic is her unfaltering selfless nature. Not even physical pain and illness get in her way. When Melanie is in labor, she is concerned about Scarlett's desire to go home to her mom instead of her survival. Right before she is about to give birth for a second time, Melanie goes through the trouble of comforting Rhett after he lost his daughter from a riding accident. Melanie continuously tends to the wounded's needs during and after the war, while Scarlett runs away from the victims because she's bored and doesn't want to care for others (Fleming, 1939). And Scarlett's lack of fidelity to any one of her three husbands is astounding. Even when Melanie discovers that Scarlett was having an affair with her husband during all three marriages of hers, she still welcomes her with open arms. Rhett, Scarlett's husband at the time of the affair, specifically points out Melanie's big heart:

“So she stood by you, did she? How does it feel to have the woman you've wronged cloak your sins for you?” (Fleming, 1939).



In addition, Melanie is well-respected in society for sticking to the ideal feminine role of the mother and devoted wife. People are constantly gossiping about Scarlett behind her back for breaking those barriers and being a public disgrace by flirting with every man in her path, especially during what are supposed to be her mourning periods as a widow. And lastly, Melanie's calm presence of mind and her ability to make quick, calculated actions is also presented in stark contrast to the hotheaded, impulsive mind of Scarlett's. She quickly covers for Scarlett when she shoots the union soldier by coming up with the lie that the revolver accidentally went off. Later, she puts on an act in front of the Union army in order to cover for Ashley and Rhett's raid on the Shantytown. The men acted drunk and Melanie played her role perfectly, acting upset at her husband and Rhett. In both of these situations, Scarlett's frantic emotion is obvious upon her face, and in other instances she manifests her rage by complaining loudly, screaming, and throwing objects (Fleming, 1939).

There is a different kind of juxtaposition in *The Sound of Music*. Because the Von Trapp kids' real mother is dead, the contrast between Maria and Captain von Trapp's fiancée, Baroness Schraeder, demonstrates ideal mothering and at the same time, castigates women as "bad" mothers. Maria fits the requirements for the perfect wife and mother that society called for. She is attractive but not too glamorous, resourceful but not completely independent, and nurturing but not afraid to get her hands dirty. The kids identify with Maria easier than they do with the baroness because Maria finds enjoyment in their activities, from running, singing, and dancing to climbing trees, cycling, and falling into a lake. She is honest and kind, wishing the best for everyone. And her love for the wilderness is so infectious that the Von Trapp family escapes there at the end of the

film. On the other hand, the baroness is overly sexualized, has her own source of income, and despises the children, finding difficulty fitting in when they play games with her. She manipulates Maria into leaving the Von Trapp family with a string of lies, simply to further her own efforts to marry the Captain and inherit another fortune. She is materialistic, and it is during her one-sided conversation with the Captain about her ideas of expensive honeymoon destinations that he breaks off their engagement (Wise, 1965). Yet, the audience is left respecting the baroness. She thanks him for the wonderful time they've spent together and gives him her stamp of approval to marry Maria, making a graceful exit from the movie:

“And somewhere out there...is a young lady who, I think...will never be a nun” (Wise, 1965).

While not a romantic juxtaposition, *Titanic* also contrasts two women. This comparison is one between two motherly figures instead, Molly Brown and Ruth, Rose's mom. While both are part of the rich, upper-class, Molly does not embody the typical characteristics within that social group. She easily interacts with people from different classes without prejudice or contempt. She treats Jack like her own son, guiding him through what could be perceived as a hostile and exclusive atmosphere at the fancy dinner party he attends on the upper-class side of the ship (Cameron, 1997). On the other hand, Rose's snobbish mother Ruth represents the archetypal upper-class woman desperately trying to hold onto the life of luxury. Ruth tries to guilt Rose into marrying the rich, but potentially abusive Cal because she is out of money and can't imagine life any other way:

“We're women. Our choices are never easy” (Cameron, 1997).

Here, she perpetuates the idea that women cannot stand on their own two feet and must make choices based on what ensures them the best quality of life. And unlike Molly, she

despises Jack from the very beginning because of the fact that he is someone from the lower class. The latter half of the movie, a time of chaos and fear for all the characters, further confirms and brings to light the true nature of these two characters. While Ruth is seen selfishly asking whether the lifeboats will be seated according to class, Molly is helping get other women and children into the boats. She even tries to get her lifeboat to turn back towards the ship to look for survivors, but her voice is drowned out by the male captain in charge of the lifeboat (Cameron, 1997).

### *Women Supporting One Another*

The one exception to the contrasting of female characters to create “good” versus “bad” figures in these movies is found in *The Sound of Music*. Leisl wants a mentor to tell her how the world is, and so she especially views Maria as an older sister figure. In the reprise of “Sixteen Going on Seventeen,” Maria tells Leisl that she can’t hurry love, advising her not to fall for someone just because she’s young and impressionable (Wise, 1965). That same kind of mentorship is found between Reverend Mother and Maria. Reverend Mother is Maria’s greatest supporter. She constantly advises her to face her problems and live the life she was born to live:

“Climb every mountain, ford every stream, follow every rainbow, ‘till you find your dream” (Wise, 1965).

Warm, tender scenes like these between two female characters were disappointingly rare in these films. The next chapter explores how, over time, it is the support of female characters for one another that becomes the basis for movies with particularly strong feminist leads.

### *The Male Perception and Treatment of Females*

Equally as important as the dialogue and actions of female characters were those of male characters in films towards women. While there was sometimes a male character who supported and advanced the leading female character's journey towards independence, there were often more male characters that imprisoned and attempted to control the actions of women. The sexualized male gaze is also always present.

### *Supporting the Feminist Cause*

Jack's purpose in *Titanic* is that of a guide to Rose. Instead of dominating her, he views her as his equal, encouraging her to be true to herself by overcoming the boundaries of class division and breaking the rules of etiquette she feels so entrapped by. From spitting and wild dancing to drinking and smoking, Rose becomes a free woman when the bonds of conventional femininity begin to weaken (Cameron, 1997). Similar to Jack, Rhett is the only one of Scarlett's three husbands that encourages her to be independent and different from the southern ladies. At one point, Scarlett is a widow because her first husband passed away in the war. She is required to wear all black and not participate in any festivities. When she mentions her great desire to dance, Rhett responds that:

“With enough courage, you can do without a reputation” (Fleming, 1939). The two of them dance the rest of the night away. Like Rose, Scarlett's attitude of not caring what others think of her is in part thanks to Rhett and continues throughout the rest of the film.

The famous “women and children first” doctrine from *Titanic* resulted in a higher proportion of women being saved after many male crew members put women and children on lifeboats rather than entering one for themselves, a controversial action that

could either be depicted as feminist or anti-feminist. Even Jack chivalrously lets Rose float on the wooden piece of door while sacrificing himself and hanging on its side. That sort of behavior depicted in the movie was historically accurate with what happened on the Titanic, and had lasting marks on feminism despite the fierce debate it faced in the press regarding which gender was more valuable to society (Delap, 2006). Many anti-suffragists claimed that the situation on Titanic was proof that gender roles were innate and that women could not be relied upon to make sacrifices. Others called the actions of these men brave and selfless, thanking them for valuing women's lives in an overwhelmingly male-driven society. And some pointed out that the women who were saved were overwhelmingly privileged and white, adding the effects of intersectional women to the conversation (Biel, 2012). There continues to be an ongoing debate about whether women and men should be treated the same during life-threatening situations.

#### *Preventing Female Independence and Promoting Female Inferiority*

Some male characters accurately depicted the struggles that females faced based on treatment by their male love interests. Throughout *Titanic*, Cal constantly makes actions on behalf of Rose without even consulting her. For instance, while having lunch with some first-class passengers, Rose lights a cigarette. When her mom chastises her for it, Cal removes the cigarette from her hand and puts it out. He subsequently orders meals for both of them, not even taking into consideration Rose's desires. When Rose makes a joke at dinner about Sigmund Freud, Molly refers to her as a "pistol." In response, Cal says he needs to monitor what she reads (Cameron, 1997). Thus, Cal doesn't see Rose as a separate individual capable of expressing her own thoughts, but as an extension of

himself that he can make decisions for. In a way, he claims ownership of her and is molding her into a modest, virtuous woman that is worthy of marriage in his opinion.

The most antifeminist part of *The Sound of Music* is undoubtedly the “Sixteen Going on Seventeen” number following the storyline of the love story between one of the von Trapp daughters, Leisl, and her boyfriend, Rolf. The duo are perhaps a year apart, and yet Rolf acts as if he can tell Leisl exactly what to do with her life because he believes he’s so much more emotionally mature and experienced:

“Totally unprepared are you to face a world of men...You need someone older and wiser telling you what to do” (Wise, 1965).

And Leisl, being the young, impressionable lady she is, happily agrees to accept the wisdom he has just offered. Thus, these female characters were constantly told what they could and couldn’t do, treated like objects in a male character’s possession.

#### *The Use of Physical Force*

Physical force or rape was seen as the consequence of females stepping outside of their roles as perfect and dependent wives. There is more than one moment in *Titanic* where Cal uses physical force on Rose to get her to conform or to chastise her for her actions, mostly out of his insecurity due to Rose and Jack’s relationship. He often grabs her painfully by the shoulders or wrist, which is a sharp contrast to Jack’s consistent “take my hand” request with Rose. Cal slaps her when she is defending Jack after he is arrested. Another time, he aggressively shoves a table away and leans over her as he screams at her for spending the evening partying with Jack and the third-class deck:

“You will honor me the way a wife is required to honor a husband” (Cameron, 1997).

In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett can't even drive her own buggy through a town by herself without being attacked and molested by a man, after which she is visibly very upset and traumatized. There is even a scene of marital rape when Rhett forces her into bed after he finds out she's been having an affair with Ashley. But Scarlett singing and giggling in bed the next morning is depicted as having enjoyed it, presenting a troubling element to her character (Fleming, 1939).

### *The Sexualized Male Gaze*

Almost every one of these movies has some instance of the sexualized male gaze, especially when the lead male character first sees the lead female character. This happens when Jack first sees Rose in a long yellow dress on the higher deck, when Rhett first sees Scarlett, and when Luke first sees Leia's holographic message asking for help. During each instance, the male character becomes intrigued by the female character's beauty and there are a few seconds spent just gazing at her. Often the female character is sexualized by her position of body. Leia is seen lying on the side in the jail cell that Luke rescues her from. In other instances, the female is sexualized based on her clothing. In *E.T.*, when the kids' mother is dressed in a skin-tight halloween costume, the camera movement is from the alien's point of view, checking her out from bottom to top. And lastly, the act of stripping can also be grouped into the concept of the sexualized male gaze. Rose strips in front of Jack so he can draw her portrait in *Titanic*.

This is an element that has received more attention and criticism recently, bringing about significant changes in female characters' clothing and in the movement of the camera's position on them. In addition to the desexualization of women on-screen, the depiction of women as independent, strong, and with significantly more non-male

interactions are all shifts in Hollywood that play a role in combating the sexualized male gaze.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Analyzing Female Representation in the Top 15 Grossing Films with a Female Lead or Co-lead in the Last Decade (Adjusted for Inflation)

The last decade (2010-2019) has given rise to some of the most ground-breaking changes in cinema for female characters. When it comes to the top grossing films with a female protagonist, there's only a select number of films that even meet this simple requirement. The following list gives details about the successes of the top 15 grossing films in the last decade with a female lead or co-lead, adjusted for inflation.

TABLE 2  
Top 15 Lifetime Adjusted Grosses, Box Office Mojo.

Rank	Title	Adjusted Lifetime Gross	Lifetime Gross	Est. Number of Tickets	Year
1	Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens	\$977,180,312	\$936,662,225	108,115,100	2015
2	Jurassic World	\$694,050,001	\$652,270,625	76,789,600	2015
3	Star Wars: Episode VIII- The Last Jedi	\$610,941,622	\$620,181,382	67,594,500	2017
4	Incredibles 2	\$599,234,269	\$608,581,744	66,299,200	2018
5	Rogue One: A Star Wars Story	\$546,291,328	\$532,177,324	60,441,600	2016
6	Beauty and the Beast	\$513,361,064	\$504,014,165	56,798,200	2017
7	Finding Dory	\$507,575,627	\$486,295,561	56,158,100	2016
8	Star Wars: Episode IX - The Rise of Skywalker	\$503,0143,704	\$515,202,542	54,984,300	2019
9	Frozen 2	\$466,080,138	\$477,373,578	50,947,000	2019
10	The Hunger Games: Catching Fire	\$461,990,793	\$424,668,047	51,114,600	2013
11	The Hunger Games	\$459,719,460	\$408,010,692	50,863,300	2012
12	Frozen	\$443,248,905	\$400,738,009	49,041,000	2013
13	Captain Marvel	\$428,172,061	\$426,829,839	47,372,900	2019
14	Wonder Woman	\$416,807,261	\$412,563,408	46,115,500	2017
15	Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom	\$415,258,994	\$417,719,760	45,944,200	2018

Among these successful movies, more than half included sequels to the first installment. *The Hunger Games* follows Katniss Everdeen, a young female from one of the 12 districts in the nation of Panem as she fights for survival in the annual televised event in which 24 tributes are required to fight to the death until one victor remains. Due to her acts of defiance in how she won the games, she finds herself having to fight all over again for survival in the second installment, *Catching Fire*, in a sadistic all-star tribute rematch. *Frozen* finds optimistic and adventurous Princess Anna teaming up with a rugged mountain man, his reindeer and a snowman on a journey to find her sister, Queen Elsa, after she accidentally traps her kingdom in an eternal winter when she loses control of her ice powers. The sisters have to save their kingdom again in *Frozen II* when Elsa follows a strange voice that leads her to an Enchanted Forest with the answers to a lot of their questions about her family, kingdom and the origins of her powers. *Jurassic World* sees the fallout of a genetically engineered dinosaur escaping its area of confinement at the dinosaur theme park. It's up to operations manager Claire Dearing and Velociraptor trainer Owen Grady to rescue Claire's nieces and the rest of the tourists from being hunted down. The pair teams up again in the sequel to rescue remaining dinosaurs from the island's erupting volcano, only to discover that they have been tricked into advancing a bigger, sinister operation of exploiting the dinosaurs. And the newest *Star Wars* trilogy follows Rey, a scavenger that gets caught up in the Resistance's efforts against the new First Order, as she embarks on multiple missions to return a droid to the Resistance, find the long-lost Luke Skywalker, and defeat the First Order in each of the respective three installments.

Like *Jurassic World* and the latest *Star Wars* trilogy, many other movies continued, remade, or gave backstories to movies that were released decades ago. While not part of the Skywalker saga, *Rogue One* tells an earlier-set Star Wars story via Jyn, the daughter of an Imperial Scientist who joins the Rebel Alliance to steal the Death Star plans. We meet the Incredibles family again as they set out on a new mission in *Incredibles 2* to neutralize a threat in which Elastigirl goes out to save the day while her husband takes up domestic responsibilities. *Finding Dory* is the follow-up to *Finding Nemo*, where the blue tang fish audiences have known as Dory journeys across the ocean in search of her long-lost parents. And *Beauty and the Beast* brings to life a beautiful live-action version of the classic story of Princess Belle, a young woman that frees the imprisoned Beast with the power of true love.

Individual films also set precedents, which showed so much success that their sequels are in the works. *Wonder Woman* follows Diana Prince when she leaves the Amazons and her sheltered island paradise to embark on a journey of self-discovery as she stops a threat outside of the human scope during World War I. Similarly, Carol Danvers steps into her own power in *Captain Marvel* when she discovers there's more to her past than she ever thought, all while trying to decide which side of an intergalactic war she should give her allegiance to.

Positive public reception of these films is partly due to the character development of the strong female characters in films mentioned above. The following sections will break down the formula for box-office success in relation to how these characters are presented.

*Female Characterization - Feminist, Stereotype-Breaking, and Forward-Thinking*

The same patterns of feminist characterizations of female characters that were seen in the top grossing movies of all time are also seen in this more recent set of movies. The biggest difference comes with the kind of support system that the lead protagonists have. Instead of relying solely on the romantic partner-in-crime, some of the character's most empowering moments are a result of the relationships with their fellow female sisters, friends, or mentors. These relationships in addition to the overwhelming action-based plots that they drive have significantly contributed to creating such well-rounded female characters.

*Verbal Assertion, Individual Decision-Making and Independent Success*

The most popular female-led movies of this decade did not shy away from highlighting the female characters' empowering decisions, delivery of iconic, echoing words of power, and their inspirational effect on the surrounding companions. *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*'s emphasis on Katniss Everdeen's journey from lone wolf to becoming the symbol of rebellion was a crucial component to the well-received movie. Her skill, intelligence, and relentlessness were evident in every action made. Her bravery consistently outweighs her fears of repercussions. Katniss routinely, illegally sneaks through the district's boundary fence to hunt for food to provide for her family, knowing well that the government would punish her if she ever got caught. She volunteers as tribute for the Games so that her younger sister will be spared, putting her own life at risk. She continues to defiantly assert her presence during the skill tests during both installments. Before the Games, tributes must demonstrate their survival skills in front of game officials. The better they do, the more likely they are to receive sponsors

that help deliver items helpful for survival during the Games. In the first games, she initially misses the bull's eye when demonstrating her archery skills. She tries again successfully, only to find that the Gamemakers aren't even paying attention to her. Recognizing her own value, she fires an arrow perfectly into an apple at their buffet table to capture their attention (Ross, 2012). She is unwilling to be overlooked, despite the potential damage to her chances of gaining sponsors. She once again tests the limits during the next games, hanging a mannequin representing the previously dead Gamemaker by the neck and walking off with the same, mocking bow that she does in her first skills test (Lawrence, 2013). And her message goes across, that both she and her values are worth recognition, since both sets of Gamemakers award her with the highest scores among all the tributes. Perhaps her ultimate acts of disobedience and impressive ability to find a third option during seemingly black-and-white situations come during the end of each of the Games. When the modified rule that two victors may come from the same district is revoked, Katniss threatens to die from suicide with her male District partner, Peeta, from poisonous berries - which would have given the Games no victor for the first time in history. Just before they consume the berries, the Capitol announces that both have won the Hunger Games, bending to her will (Ross, 2012). Similarly, she outsmarts the Capitol again in *Catching Fire*, dismantling the entire arena with an electrified arrow instead of falling into the trap of turning on her own allies (Lawrence, 2013). There is not a single moment where Katniss Everdeen allows others to underestimate, ignore, or deny her as a worthy adversary - coming out on top in every instance meant to scare her into subversion and ultimately taking down a cruel, broken system by inspiring a rebellion.

*Frozen* and *Frozen II* both artistically presents the story of a scared, powerful ice queen on her journey to self-acceptance. Her inspiring decisions and words of self-encouragement primarily manifest during her solo songs, conversations with herself, in both installments. In “Let it Go,” Elsa releases herself from the pressure and fear of being the perfect queen and sister, allowing herself to make mistakes and live how she pleases:

“The fears that once controlled me can't get to me at all. It's time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through. No right, no wrong, no rules for me. I'm free...” (Buck & Lee, 2013).

During this liberating experience, Elsa celebrates her true nature instead of concealing her powers. And she is not apologetic about this stage of life that she is about to embark on - by herself. At the end of the song, she slams her self-built ice palace's door close in the audience's faces, essentially stating that she will have her privacy to discover herself on her own terms (Buck & Lee, 2013). Likewise, “Into the Unknown” in *Frozen II* is a continuation of her desire to step out of her comfort zone and finally find her place of belonging. Throughout the course of the song, she finds the confidence and guts to overcome her fear of the unknown. And the pivotal, plot-changing moment isn't even during this song, but during the latter half of Elsa's second solo song in the film, “Show Yourself:”

“I am found. Show yourself. Step into your power. Throw yourself into something new” (Buck & Lee, 2019)

It's here that we realize that while *Frozen* was about Elsa overcoming her fears about her powers, *Frozen II* is about her owning them and using them for good. At the end of the film, Elsa decides to give up her throne to Anna because she knows that her best chance of personal success lies in the wilderness with the Northuldra people. It's clear that she made the right decision in the very last scene of the film, where we see the happiness on

her face due to her new-found freedom (Buck & Lee, 2019). The quiet and introverted, but strong and powerful Elsa comes into her own by simply loving others and herself. After all, it is Elsa's love that ultimately saves Arendelle in both installments.

*Wonder Woman* gave audiences a feminist superhero placed in the World War I era through Diana Prince. She embodies that classic superhero charisma of having witty, verbal comebacks in combination with a feminine sense of justice and emotional awareness. Despite being naive to the every-day customs of the real world, Diana is well-versed in educational concepts published by intellectuals world-wide. She draws on them repeatedly to validate a woman's self-efficacy in her discussions with Steve, the new comrade she's just met and set on journeying to London with. For example, when the topic of marriage comes up, she casually states that men are essential for procreation, but not necessary for pleasure. Later, Steve tells her that they as individuals can't do much about the war, instead advising her to place her bets on finding the men who can actually fight to bring about change. To this, Diana firmly responds with the biggest smile on her face:

“I am the man who can” (Jenkins, 2017)

And never mind that she speaks multiple languages and decodes an old Sumerian document in front of a room full of men that are puzzled by her confident stride into a social sphere where women are not welcome. She berates men for knowingly sacrificing soldiers and shames them for hiding in their offices like cowards instead of fighting alongside their soldiers and risking dying with them on the battlefield. Not only a quiet genius and a gifted speaker, but an engaged listener, Diana listens to the heartbreaking stories of racism and oppression from Steve's soldier friends, two men of color. It earns

her their respect, and in turn, their drive to unanimously support her as well (Jenkins, 2017).

As good of a listener she is, Diana's best moments in the film come when she doesn't listen to the demands of her superiors or male partners in crime. Diana displays this strong sense of will from childhood, never taking no for an answer. When her mother forbids her from training as a warrior with the other Amazons on the all-women, paradise-like island as a child, she doesn't abandon her true passion. Instead, she turns to her aunt, the general of the army, to help teach her to fight in secret. And when she's leaving the island to go fight the war, she explains her decision to her mother quite selflessly:

“I'm willing to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves” (Jenkins, 2017).

And fight she does. Like Katniss, her courage is even more stunning than her physical abilities. In one of the most empowering moments in the film comes as a result of Diana's encounter with cries for help on the battlefield, ones that she cannot ignore. When Steve tries to deter her from going further into German territory by explaining that she can't save everyone in the war, she tells him that's exactly what she's there to do. Out of compassion and moral obligation, she dives into the battle in a gorgeously shot sequence where she charges straight towards the enemy despite an onslaught of bullets. For a moment, it is a woman standing alone in a field taking fire as a battalion of men try to push her back before they pluck up the courage to stand behind her. Tired of the mansplaining and realizing that she doesn't need anybody but herself to fight this war, she eventually leaves Steve and the men to take matters into her own hands.

“What I do is not up to you” (Jenkins, 2017).



Thus, while Diana is physically powerful enough to kill a god, it is her emotional strength, self-reliance and conviction to do what is right regardless of standard, patriarchal social norms that makes her the paragon of moral virtue and courage.

*Jurassic World's* Claire Dearing asserts herself as a leader from the very beginning of both films. In the beginning of the first one, she is introduced showing around some important people, trying to close a deal as the park's operations manager. Her position in the hierarchy of positions at the park indicates her individual success. She has the ability to remain calm and continue to direct orders in the control room when the Indominus Rex is out of containment. When Owen walks into the room demanding her to follow his orders, she firmly dismisses him:

“You are not in control here” (Trevorrow, 2015).

She's also the founding member of the Dinosaurs Protection Group in the second film, making her voice heard by successfully convincing people to support and fund the Group's visions. Ultimately, it's her intelligent, spur-of-the-moment actions that save both herself and her partners in crime. At the end of the first film, her decision to release the T-rex from its cage saves the day, as the T-Rex is the only other dinosaur that's big enough to defeat the rampaging Indominus Rex. In the second film, she cleverly distracts the Indoraptor that's about to attack Owen and Maisie to make a leap on top of a glass roof that causes it to almost fall through due to its weight (Bayona, 2018). While she is with Owen for the majority of both installments, it's Claire's individual actions when she is separated from him that saves countless lives.

Rey's character in *Star Wars* is quickly established as independent and self-reliant. Like Katniss and Elsa, hers is also a journey from lonely orphan to becoming a

fighter at the forefront of the Rebellion, in addition to self-discovery and acceptance. She is outspoken, fiercely loyal, a skilled technician, and persistent - all characteristics that he has before she discovers her incredibly strong connection to the Force. She's first introduced scavenging for old Imperial technology inside a Star Destroyer ship, which she later exchanges for food to feed herself, since her parents aren't in the picture (Abrams, 2015). Rey has been taking care of herself for a while, and she's not shy to point it out to others either. When she meets Finn in *The Force Awakens*, a defector from the evil First Order, they are both attacked by stormtroopers. Finn keeps grabbing her hand as they run away, but Rey is clearly annoyed by him for doing so:

“I know how to run without you holding my hand!” (Abrams, 2015).

Her allegiance to alliances and those she wants to protect is unwavering. She refuses to let BB8 be bought, even for a lot of food that she desperately needs. When Kylo Ren tries to extract information from her memories about the map to Luke Skywalker that BB8 possesses, she proves to be strong-willed. She resists his efforts and turns it around on him, instead reading his mind and calling out his own insecurities, causing him to recoil and flee the room. And she is dedicated to the mission always. It is her who gets BB8 back to the Resistance base. It is her who finds Luke Skywalker in *The Last Jedi*, following him around for days until he gives in and teaches her the way of the force (Johnson, 2017). And despite numerous temptations to turn to the dark side throughout the series, she does not abandon her moral obligations to the members of the Resistance.

Her ability to fix the Millennium Falcon's mechanical failures on many occasions is impressive. She prevents a propulsion tank from overflowing, bypasses the compressor when there's an electrical overload, and knows to push the right buttons that save others

many times. Even Han Solo, the owner of the Falcon who knows it better than anyone else, is shocked by her knowledge of spaceship technology and offers her a job.

“The girl knows her stuff” (Abrams, 2015).

Rey accesses the Force not to just defeat the enemy, but to save herself. In *The Force Awakens*, Rey uses the Force to influence stormtroopers to let her go when she is first held prisoner by Kylo Ren. Finn and Han Solo go to the Starkiller Base to save her, but Han points Finn towards Rey, who has already freed herself and is hiding from the troopers in a hangar bay opposite of where they are standing. And so she establishes early on that she can rescue herself if she finds herself in entrapping situations, which Han Solo also recognizes pretty quickly. He hands Rey a blaster in the first film, and when she claims she can handle herself, Solo affirms that he agrees.

“I know you do. That’s why I’m giving it to you. Take it” (Abrams, 2015).

She also repeatedly comes to the rescue of other Resistance members. In *The Last Jedi*, she saves the remaining surviving members of the Resistance by using the Force to lift up the rocks blocking the exit to the shelter they are trapped in (Johnson, 2017). In *The Rise of Skywalker*, she transfers some of the force energy from herself to a monster that is blocking the exit to the underground area that she, Finn, and Poe are trapped in after sinking in quicksand. Finally, Rey faces Emperor Palpatine and is ready to sacrifice her life for the cause. It is here at the end of the trilogy that audiences see just how strong with the Force Rey is, as she effectively kills a villain that can’t seem to stay dead once and for all (Abrams, 2019).

And while she is the descendent of Palpatine, she refuses to brand herself as one just because they share the same blood. She shuns her Palpatine ancestry and adopts the

last name of the Skywalker twins who supported her till their last breaths at the end of the saga. And she begins a new chapter as she buries the Skywalkers' twin sabers in the sand, instead pulling out a new, unique lightsaber of her own. It is a gleaming gold blade that she has self-built out of her signature scavenger staff (Abrams, 2019). Thus, Rey comes out of this three-film journey choosing her family name to establish some roots, but also making a lightsaber that sets her distinctly apart from anybody else. Rey is essentially one of the strongest female Jedi that the *Star Wars* series has ever seen.

*Rogue One's* Jyn's Erso is another natural-born female leader in the Star Wars universe. After being abandoned by Partisan members, she was forced to commit a number of crimes to survive on her own in the dangerous galaxy. She demonstrates a unique ability to think and respond clearly, fighting her way out of various entrapping situations. She is tough, but empathetic. She is commanding, but inspiring to Rebel Alliance members who have just met her:

“You give way to an enemy this evil with this much power, and you condemn the galaxy to an eternity of submission. The time to fight is now” (Edwards, 2016).

She leads a team to successfully steal and deliver the Death Star plans that Leia is seen with in the beginning of *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*. Jyn joined a fight that she initially was skeptical about, ultimately sacrificing her life for a greater cause.

Carol Danvers is already a confident, laser-focused, and determined individual before she steps into the full capacity of her powers as Captain Marvel. Forced to rediscover her entire identity, she fights off the lies that have confined her and has a moral compass that is strong enough to override her allegiance to the genocidal mission of the Kree. Once she comes to the decision that she no longer needs approval, she tears

apart their entire system, fighting on behalf of the Skrulls who have wrongly suffered in the hands of the Kree. It's at the climax of the movie that Carol Danvers realizes that her powers truly have no limits.

“I've been fighting with one arm behind my back, but what happens when I'm finally set free?” (Boden & Fleck, 2019).

From this point onward, she becomes unstoppable. Her superhero powers expand, she saves Earth from incoming Kree missiles, destroys their space fleet, forces the fearful Kree starlord to withdraw his forces into hiding, and returns to Earth to beat up her former mentor, Yon-Rogg. Throughout the film he is seen commanding Carol to control her emotions, to stop using her heart and to start using her mind, and threatening to take away her powers if she refuses to submit. But she soon realizes that leaning into her human emotions and empathy are her strengths, not weaknesses. When he proposes they fight hand-to-hand to remind her that she's still too emotional, she blasts him across a wasteland, drags him to his plane, and sends him off with a message to the Supreme Intelligence that she's coming for them (Boden & Fleck, 2019). Even during the moments when Carol Danvers doubts herself, she's still the most self-assured person in the room, resolving to dedicate her next several years finding a home for the Skrulls and overthrowing the Kree.

Belle's unconformity, strong choices, and selflessness make her a well-rounded, complex character that is in charge of her own destiny. From the beginning of *Beauty and the Beast*, the audience is made aware of Belle's resistance to her village's expectations of what her life should look like. She shows skepticism towards marriage and wards off Gaston's unwanted advances repeatedly, expressing her lack of interest in being married

off to the paragon of toxic masculinity. As an inventor and an avid reader, she doesn't want a man who just considers her to be a piece of meat, but someone who will appreciate her love of knowledge as well. She wants adventure and more than her provincial life, but her village doesn't understand that, instead talking about her behind her back by calling her strange, dazed, distracted and peculiar. And yet, Belle doesn't care what they think of her. At one point in the movie, almost every person in the village is against her as she's trying to defend the Beast, but Belle holds her ground with strength and ferocity (Condon, 2017).

Belle's bravery reminds one of Katniss's. When her horse returns home without her father, she is not afraid to go into the wintry woods to look for him. Like Katniss, she takes the place of her loved one when the situation presents itself. She'd do anything to protect her father, and offers to take his place in captivity in the Beast's castle. And for the entirety of her stay at the castle, she keeps her independence and defiance. When the Beast asks her to join for dinner, she reprimands him.

“You've taken me as your prisoner and now you want to have dinner with me? Are you insane?” (Condon, 2017).

She doesn't let anyone, including the Beast, order her around. She is not afraid to get into arguments with him, telling him to control his temper. Her ability to respond to crisis admirably and calmly transforms the Beast into a more loving individual. Belle's inner beauty - her unique capacity for kindness- is one of the many reasons that the Beast ultimately falls in love with her.

*Incredibles 2* sees a role-reversal as Elastigirl goes to work while her husband, Mr. Incredible, looks after the kids at home. She accepts an offer from a corporation to fight crime in order to rebuild the public's trust in superheroes to make them legal again.

The siblings in the corporation ask for Elastigirl over Mr. Incredible, because she uses her powers in less destructive ways. Thus, she's sent on missions and encouraged to fight crime and save lives on her own terms. And she's so inspirational that superheroes in hiding come out to fight crime under her leadership (Bird, 2018).

And while she may not have the clearest memory, Dory comes through when it counts most in *Finding Dory*. She's loyal to a fault, constantly dishes out positive compliments, makes friends everywhere she goes, and can even speak whale (Stanton, 2016). Her determination to find a way out when the odds aren't in her favor and to not give up on finding her parents make her an unforgettable character that takes the audience on a deeply emotional ride.

These films center on female leadership and strength via emotional intelligence to fight the patriarchal expectations that typically prevent women from even trying to defy the stereotypes in place. Word by word, followed with action by action, these iconic female leads proved not only to themselves but to their respective societies that they are not to be underestimated due to their gender.

### *Stepping Into a Male-Dominated Sphere: Action-oriented Films*

Who says women can't open an action film? Typically, action films have a male character in the lead, emphasizing the stereotypes of the weak, passive woman and strong, active man. Almost every single one of the top 15 grossing movies in this past decade features the lead female character as the one who drives the action-oriented plots. And each of them defy the narrative trope of a damsel in distress in dire need of a knight in shining armor for rescue and survival.

*The Hunger Games* movies see Katniss Everdeen as exceptionally skilled with a bow and arrow, striding through the forest to bag birds and the occasional deer to provide for her family, and later aiming at tributes for survival during the Games. She's kept her mother and sister from starving since she was 11, and her sharp aim doesn't fail her during both attack and defense in the Games. She proves that she doesn't need saving from the typical male hero. She is the hero in the movies, rescuing herself and others again and again with her resourcefulness and skill. She will fiercely protect those that she loves, but doesn't hesitate to kill either (Ross, 2012). And it's not just Katniss that demonstrates this typically male-given characteristic of using force and violence. The other female tributes, from survivors like Johanna and even victims like Clove, prove to be equally lethal and skillful in these cruel, survival-of-the-fittest Games (Lawrence, 2013).

Both female leads in *Frozen* get a considerable amount of action sequences in both installments. Elsa is constantly on the run, creating icy paths for herself over bodies of water and staircases over cliffs. She battles the guards in her ice castle, responding to the arrows shot at her with shards of ice that corner the men. When she is taken prisoner by Hans, she has no trouble freeing herself from the shackles and escaping through a window (Buck & Lee, 2013). And as she attempts to cross the tumultuous waves of the Dark Sea during a stormy night, she fights off the Nokk, the mythical water spirit in the form of a stallion that tries to drown Elsa until she takes control of it by using her self-created icy reins (Buck & Lee, 2019). While Elsa has her ice powers to assist her to escape these dangerous situations, Anna's human ability to climb mountains, survive falling down waterfalls, outrun Elsa's marshmallow snow monster and even the



Enchanted Forest's rocky Earth Giant is quite unmatched. Like Elsa, Anna too can command a horse, as she rides through unfamiliar regions on horseback to find her sister (Buck & Lee, 2013). And similar to the Hunger Games, it's not just the female leads that demonstrate their ability to survive. There are plenty of female warriors among the Northuldra, and their leader, Yelana, is a woman as well (Buck & Lee, 2019).

*Wonder Woman* begins with a young Diana growing up among her fellow Amazons on an island with an immense amount of space dedicated just for fight training. She grows up watching honorable, hard-as-nails fighters that have unparalleled athleticism. She is seen bullet-pinging with her bracelets, using a bow and arrow, lassoing, free-handing climbs on long vertical surfaces, jumping across and over large cliffs, and more. And of course, the men surrounding her are constantly surprised by her abilities to not only defend herself but others. She easily throws a guy across the room at a bar, fights off a circle of soldiers in a German house with her sword and shield, throws machine guns with her bare hands, and has the physical strength to kill her enemies, one of which happens to be a God (Jenkins, 2017). Diana steps into an ever-growing power she didn't realize she had, and the audience gets to see her defy the odds over and over again with her impressive combat skills in beautifully choreographed scenes.

Just because Claire handles the business side of the park in *Jurassic World* and is an activist for dinosaur rights doesn't mean she just looks in from the outside. Any time that either she or another person is in imminent danger, one sees her running through jungles, driving people to safety while being pursued by vicious velociraptors or the faculty encroaching volcanic lava, killing the dimorphodon about to snack on Owen and even confronting the dinosaurs herself with whatever weapon she can find (Trevorrow,

2015). And when she gets injured, she gets right back up on her own. Zia, the paleontologist, and Maise, an innocent child, handle themselves pretty well too in the second film. Zia isn't afraid to pick up a gun and stand her ground when their own rescue team turns on them, and Maise spends most of the film successfully escaping the grasps of Mr. Mills and dinosaurs by running through the mansion and climbing out windows (Bayona, 2018). Thrust into dangerous expectations that they don't anticipate, Claire, Zia, and Maise prove to be self-reliant and capable when fighting for their lives.

Rey's role as the protagonist of the *Star Wars* films puts her the center of the dangerous adventures she embarks on. She fights, shoots, kills, and defends herself. She is particularly impressive with her staff. In one of her first encounters with the First Order, Rey handles the attackers in the Jakku marketplace with ease, beating them off her with her staff in a couple swift moves as Finn stops dead in his tracks, realizing she doesn't need his help (Abrams, 2015). Her skills with the staff prove to be useful later in her lightsaber battles with and against Kylo Ren. In the fights against him, she claims victory every time. And she's constantly on the run from the First Order, running through jungles, free-handing climbs up and down long vertical surfaces, doing crazy-high air jumps, and blasting her way through stormtroopers. Yet, perhaps the most empowering parts of the films are when Rey is flying the Millennium Falcon and driving other space ships. Rey is always the one piloting or co-piloting and will direct someone else in the gunner position. From successfully piloting their way out of Jakku away from First Order TIE-fighters to driving a skimmer over turbulent waters, Rey shines when she's in control of various vehicles.

One of Carol Danver's first scenes in *Captain Marvel* is her hand-to-hand combat training with commander Yon Rogg, during which she proves to be more powerful than him with her unique super strength and ability to shoot photon blasts from her fists. She shines in the numerous fight sequences in the film, whether it's on top of a moving train, in the air stopping warheads, or arm-wrestling multiple people off at once for the tesseract. The latter is a pinnacle moment during one of her final fight sequences, as she kicks everyone's ass to the tune of Gwen Stefani's 1995 hit "I'm Just a Girl" (Boden & Fleck, 2019). Captain Marvel ends up becoming one of the strongest Avengers there is in the universe.

Raised as a soldier, Jyn Erso has had years of training before she embarks on a mission to help the Rebel Alliance in *Rogue One*. We see Jyn repeatedly running, climbing, blaster-shooting, and engaging in hand-to-hand combat to escape from dangerous situations as her male companions stare at her ability to defend herself in awe (Edwards, 2016). In *Incredibles 2*, Elastigirl speeds through the city on her new Elastibike. She saves a runaway train from going backwards after it malfunctions, flies across the city with her elastic powers, and saves innocent people as often as she can (Bird, 2018). Even Belle proves to be skillful on horseback (Condon, 2016) and Dory is one incredibly fast fish that loves the adventure, no matter how dangerous in *Beauty and the Beast* and *Finding Dory* respectively (Stanton, 2016).

As the central figures in these action-adventure films, the female leads of these movies are in full command of the narratives, carrying the action in ways normally reserved for male protagonists.

#### *Supportive Female Relationships*

Perhaps a feature of films that is more prominent now than even before in both the current 4th-wave feminist movement and the changing dynamic of female representation on screen is the focus on female relationships. This feminist archetype, the alliance of women who support each other in the face of oppression, constitutes some of the most heart-warming, empowering, and emotional moments of the films. These relationships manifest between sisters, friends, mentors, and even mere acquaintances.

Katniss's relationship to Prim as an older sister is actually the basis of much of her drive during the Hunger Games. The very opening scene of *The Hunger Games* is Katniss tenderly embracing her younger sibling from a nightmare. She sings to her to provide comfort, affirms her natural beauty, and volunteers in her place for the Games:

“I volunteer! I volunteer as tribute!” (Ross, 2012)

Katniss screams this as she shoves herself past the Peacekeepers towards Prim, who lets go of Katniss screaming and crying only after Gale drags her away. And this act of self-sacrifice is not gone unnoticed by the members of the district, who applaud her selflessness with a three-finger salute that symbolizes thanks, admiration, and good-bye. However, these scenes in both the first and second installments where the sisters are separated after the reappings are gut-wrenching to watch. And yet, instead of crying and worrying about the horrors that await her, Katniss is more concerned about her family's survival, making Gale promise to bring them food and demanding her mom to not abandon her duties to Prim again:

“You can't tune out again...No. You can't. Not like when Dad died. I won't be there for her anymore, you're all she has. And no matter what you feel, you're going to be there for her, do you understand?” (Ross, 2012)

While Katniss is preparing them for a life without her, Prim makes Katniss promise to win the Games and return home safely, reminding her of her skill as a hunter and giving back the Mockingjay that Katniss had originally given her for good luck. When Caesar Flickerman, the tv host who interviews the tributes before the Games asks her about that specific conversation, Katniss makes it evident that her motivation to survive the Games wasn't for the fame, or the fear of dying, but to be there for the sister she loves so very much (Ross, 2012). And during the second Games, the Gamemakers use this relationship to hurt her in the only way they know how to. They use jabberjays to imitate Prim's screaming voice, and Katniss is stuck listening to her screams for an hour, traumatizing her. When Katniss starts to fear for her family's life if she defies the Capitol any more, it is actually Prim who gives her the confidence she needs to continue to be the resistance leader:

“You don't have to protect me, or mom. We're with you” (Lawrence, 2013).

Katniss looks back at Prim in shock, surprised by her quick growth and maturity, embracing her. The same kind of protective, supportive, big-sister relationship that Katniss has with Prim is echoed in her relationship with Rue, the female tribute from District Eleven. In the first installment, they form an immediate partnership based on blind trust, as if they had an unspoken understanding. Rue helps Katniss escape from the “career” tributes by pointing out a hive of tracker jackers above her on the tree that could be dropped on the sleeping tributes below her. Unfortunately, Katniss herself is poisoned by the tracker jackers and falls into a deep sleep for a couple of days. She protects and takes care of an unconscious Katniss, and in turn, Katniss takes Rue under her wing, providing her with food and devising a plan to take down the other tributes. Their scenes

of conversation create an out-of-place sense of warmth in the midst of their murderous environment. Unfortunately, Rue is caught in a net and then killed by another tribute. But Rue saves her life even after her death. The strongest affirmation of Katniss's decision to partner with another woman comes at the Cornucopia when Clove is threatening Katniss and mocking her for protecting Rue. Thresh, upon hearing that Clove's buddies were the ones who killed Rue, immediately kills her. He shows Katniss mercy, letting her escape in thanks for her kindness to Rue. Thanks to their bond, Katniss earns the right to live and inspires Rue's district and eventually an entire nation to rebel against the Capitol. Her agony over Rue's death, combined with her hatred of the Capitol's cruel intentions leads to her first real act of rebellion. As Rue lies in Katniss's arms dying and begging Katniss to win the Games, Katniss sings to her to comfort her until her last breath. She covers her body with beautiful white flowers and finds a camera to do the three-finger salute, essentially stating that the Capitol will not take her humanity as she acknowledges the worth of an innocent little girl (Ross, 2012). And on the Victory Tour in *Catching Fire*, Katniss speaks from the heart to Rue's family, ignoring Effie's speech cards:

“I did know Rue. She wasn't just my ally, she was my friend. I see her in the flowers that grow in the meadow by my house. I hear her in the Mockingjay song. I see her in my sister Prim. She was too young, too gentle and I couldn't save her. I'm sorry” (Lawrence, 2013).

A man in the crowd responds with the three-finger salute and the iconic three-note tune from Rue. This gesture of solidarity begins the insurgence that grows through the rest of the trilogy.

Katniss's relationships with the other female tributes provide additional moments of acknowledgment - of bravery, of intelligence, and of defiance. In *Catching Fire*, when

Katniss is looking for allies during the training session, she goes straight to Mags, an elderly female tribute, to acknowledge her bravery for volunteering in place of another young girl:

“I saw you volunteer for that young girl. That was really brave”  
(Lawrence, 2013).

In turn, Mags shakes her head and puts her hand on Katniss’s heart to recognize her own bravery for stepping in for Prim. It’s a beautiful moment of sympathy and understanding between the two.

When nobody wants to deal with a quirky and shocked Wiress, Katniss is the only one who pays attention to her and realizes that Wiress is trying to convey the important information that the arena is designed in the shape of a clock. Katniss connects with Johanna, a tribute from District Seven, even after a few road bumps in their relationship. It is obvious that Katniss does not like Johanna after she strips naked in front of her, Peeta, and Haymitch in the elevator, but they connect over their mutual hatred of President Snow for putting them back into the Games. And Johanna saves Katniss’s life multiple times during the Games, holding onto Katniss’s arm as long as she can when the arena is rotating and taking out Katniss’s tracker towards the end of the Games so that the Capitol can’t find her. Johanna also comforts Katniss when she least expects it, assuring her that Prim was not tortured to get her voice for the Jabberjays. Katniss realizes that they are more similar than she realizes after learning that Johanna also shares the experience of pain from the loss of a family member (Lawrence, 2013). While Katniss is not as openly tender and loving with Johanna as she was with Rue, there’s a certain level of mutual respect and admiration of each other’s strength and defiance that is empowering.

The *Frozen* movies' underlying message is about the power of sisterhood. The girls realize that ultimately their strength comes from their love for one another. The movies take us through not just their present day relationship, but pure moments of love from their childhood. Both movies introduce the sisters in their happiest state, playing and giggling with each other as kids. Anna never seems to mind that her sister gets to be queen and have ice powers. She just thinks her big sister is the coolest, and is thankful for every moment they have together. Their connection is so tight-knit that even after they are forced to grow apart because their parents feared Elsa's power, they immediately fall back into the same routine of fun conversation and laughing over the scent of chocolate at the coronation ball (Buck & Lee, 2013). The audience barely knows the characters as individuals, but immediately understands that their relationship is precious.

And thus, their moments of separation are incredibly difficult to watch. A particularly heart-breaking scene occurs in the beginning right after their parents die at sea, and Anna slumps down in front of Elsa's door, begging her to come out so they can be each other's support system (Buck & Lee, 2013). This same gut-wrenching moment occurs when each of them thinks the other has died in both movies. When Anna saves Elsa from Hans at the end of *Frozen*, everyone is shocked. The people of Arendelle, Olaf, Sven, and Kristoff all stare in disbelief and with immense sadness as Elsa bawls her eyes out, with her arms embracing a frozen Anna. And in *Frozen II*, the opposite occurs when Anna thinks Elsa has died. Her grief is expressed through an entire song, with her voice constantly breaking from losing her breath over crying:

“I can't find my direction, I'm all alone. The only star that guided me was you. How to rise from the floor when it's not you I'm rising for?” (Buck & Lee, 2019)



In both movies, Elsa makes it clear that she wants to do everything in her power to protect Anna. When she accidentally hits Anna in the head with ice as a child, she's devastated and so scared. It's why she isolates herself from Anna in her childhood - out of fear that she'll hurt her. When Anna attempts to convince Elsa to come home after finding her in her ice castle, Elsa tells her to leave for her own safety (Buck & Lee, 2013). Elsa's protective big sister instincts don't disappear in *Frozen II* either. When Anna asks Elsa why she didn't tell her about the mysterious voice she's been hearing, Elsa states that she didn't want to worry her. Later, Elsa refuses to let Anna follow her through the Enchanted Forest as she chases the voice. When she does run after her, she gets admonished by Elsa:

“What were you doing? You could have been killed. You can't just follow me into fire” (Buck & Lee, 2019).

And so in her determination to protect her younger sister, Elsa continuously pushes Anna away. But Anna never gives up on her, and is in fact just as concerned for her older sister's well-being. Anna embarks on a journey to find her after Elsa runs away the first time her powers are revealed, when as a princess, she could have easily sent castle guards to do her work for her. In the sequel, Anna is so preoccupied with looking after Elsa that she doesn't realize Kristoff tries to propose to her three whole times, quite unsuccessfully (Buck & Lee, 2019).

It is eventually Anna's love that saves not only Elsa, but herself from death. When Elsa accidentally freezes Anna's heart, the trolls tell Anna that only an act of cure love can cure her. Anna assumes that a kiss from Hans or Kristoff will save her life, but it is actually her love for Elsa that saves her. Anna is moments away from kissing Kristoff, but she sees Hans holding a sword over Elsa's head and jumps in front of his blade to

save Elsa's life just before she turns into a completely frozen statue. This remarkable act of "true love" in turn thaws her own heart. It's Anna's sacrifice that teaches Elsa the power of love, allowing her to control her ice powers and unfreeze Arendelle (Buck & Lee, 2013). Anna saves Elsa's life again, perhaps more indirectly, in *Frozen II* as well. For once, a Disney princess's true love has nothing to do with another man. And while Anna does eventually agree to marry Kristoff, the audience understands via comparison of the respective relationships that nothing can surpass the magnitude and depth of Anna's love for Elsa. The movies' ability to underscore the fact that it is a sisterly love, not a romantic love, that saves the day was quite a groundbreaking departure from the norm and an important feminist advancement in film.

*Frozen II* does a fantastic job of emphasizing the importance of the sisters' relationship throughout the film, not just the beginning and at the end. And it adds an extra layer by pointing out the importance of communication as well. While the first installment focused on the "act of true love," the second one demonstrates that words of encouragement and support are just as empowering. Elsa in particular slowly learns that being vulnerable with Anna about concerns actually helps ease her fears. There is a moment in the film when Elsa breaks down in tears because she blames herself for her parents' shipwreck, since the only reason they went on the voyage in the first place was to look for answers to Elsa's ice powers. Anna's never-ending support shines through her words:

"You are not responsible for their choices, Elsa. If anyone can resolve the past, if anyone can save Arendelle and free this forest, it's you. I believe in you Elsa, more than anyone or anything" (Buck & Lee, 2019).

Elsa empowers Anna as well. Anna is a natural-born leader, and Elsa has seen enough to know that Anna could take on the role as queen of Arendelle better than she ever could herself. She gives Anna the encouragement and the extra push to take on this huge leadership role, and we see Anna excited and ready to take on this role at the end of the movie (Buck & Lee, 2019). Thus, women's ability to lift each other and build one another up is identified as a major source of strength in the Frozen movies.

Until she meets Steve, Diana has spent her entire life with females only. It is lovely to see the influence of the Amazons on shaping young Wonder Woman. Mentors, friends, and loved ones - they are all women. Diana's relationships with her mom, the Queen of the Amazons, and with the general, her aunt Antiope, are influential in different ways. Although both women each have Diana's best interests at heart, they each have their own ideas on how to raise and train her. Her mom wants to shield her from the rest of the world, warning Diana against the society of men that doesn't deserve her and refusing Diana's numerous requests to train.

“Fighting does not make you a hero” (Jenkins, 2017).

Thus, Diana's mom teaches her that her morals are far more valuable than any amount of physical strength she may have been gifted with. On the other hand, her aunt wants to prepare Diana for the battle with Ares that she must inevitably face one day. The audience gets a glimpse at the older sister's arguments with each other, where Antiope eventually convinces her sister that giving Diana the skills she needs to protect herself is advantageous for her own safety:

“I love her as you do, but this is the only way to truly protect her” (Jenkins, 2017).

As the general, Antiope doesn't hold back in pushing and mentoring her niece to find her inner strength. When the island is invaded by German sailors pursuing Steve, Antiope sacrifices herself to save Diana. Devastated by this loss, and taking on her aunt's defiant, rebel-like nature, she is determined to leave the island to face the war. Her mother attempts to stop her, but eventually lets her go because she understands better than anyone else that she cannot intervene with Diana's will or fate. Of the disappointingly low number of females she encounters on the mainland, her interaction with a suffragist, Etta, is refreshingly genuine and sweet. Diana appears confused by the foreign concept of a secretary, and remarks innocently that Etta's job as Steve's secretary sounds like slavery, leading them to form an immediate connection. And when Ares tries to pit Diana against the female German scientist, Dr. Poison, she refuses to attack a woman who cannot defend herself (Jenkins, 2017). Thus, while Diana doesn't have much female interaction for the majority of the film's timeline, it is precisely her placement smack in the middle of the typical, male-centric social sphere that allows us to realize how paramount Diana's all-female upbringing was to developing her loyal, intelligent, empathetic, and heroic moral qualities.

Carol Danvers' female influences have special significance, for she is who she is primarily because of her female relationships and despite her previous male relationships. In a time period when the Air Force was still not allowing women to fly combat planes, her piloting commander Wendy Lawson lets Carol and her best friend Maria to test experimental planes. Losing her mentor comes off as an obviously difficult loss for Carol. Carol keeps her spirit alive by picking a superhero name inspired by Lawson, who's original name was Mar-vell (Boden & Fleck, 2019).

It's the sets of relationships among Carol, Maria and Monica (Maria's daughter) that steal the show in *Captain Marvel*. Her fellow female pilot in training, Maria's relationship with Carol is sisterly - light and sarcastic but also encouraging and supportive. Maria is ultimately the one who helps Carol realize how her humanity is the foundation of her resilience. Maria reminds her of who she really is, which is not an alien warrior or a merciless killer, but Carol - best friend and auntie.

“You are Carol Danvers. You are the woman on that black box risking her life to do the right thing. My best friend who supported me as a mother and a pilot when no one else did. You are smart, and funny, and a huge pain in the ass. And you were the most powerful person I knew, way before you could shoot fire from your fists. You hear me? Do you hear me?” (Boden & Fleck, 2019).

Emotionally charged from her lack of answers about her own identity, Carol is pulled out of this anger by Maria's inspirational words. They embrace each other in their arms and cry as they both realize what a blessing that the other is in their lives. It all comes full-circle when they have an opportunity to co-pilot through space once again after years apart (Boden & Fleck, 2019).

Monica's confidence and honesty in speaking her mind easily shows what a great mother Maria has been to her. Raised by a single mother, Monica is portrayed as brave, shameless and independent, similar to what audiences could see a young Carol Danvers being like. When her mother hesitates over joining Carol for their final mission together, Monica insists that she go and make a difference rather than sitting on the couch watching a kid's show.

“I just think you should consider what kind of example you're setting for your daughter” (Boden & Fleck, 2019).

And it's cute how much Monica looks up to "Auntie Carol." Upon seeing her for the first time in six years, Monica jumps into Carol's arms, as if no time had passed. She proceeds to show Carol all of the pictures she saved of them together, gives back her jacket, and chooses the colors on Captain Marvel's superhero suit before staring in awe as she flies off towards the end (Boden & Fleck, 2019). Monica already has a strong, independent role model in her mother, and now she has another in Captain Marvel.

Claire has virtually no interaction with any other female character in *Jurassic World*. The little communication she does have with her assistant and her sister occurs via phone call, and it's not until the very end of the film that she has any face-to-face contact as she physically embraces her sister in a hug (Trevorrow, 2015). The second installment improves upon this a little. Claire has some scenes with Zia, a former Marine who now works with Claire in the Dinosaur Protection Group as a paleo-veterinarian, during which their partnership helps save the life of the most beloved dinosaur on the island (Bayona, 2018). It's her relationship with Maise that comes into light in the second film. Terrified, little Maise is running through the mansion after her grandfather is smothered to death, and it's not until Claire catches her eavesdropping that Maise finally trusts someone that she recognizes to follow. She convinces Maise to join them, offering more than just joining forces over a common goal:

"We could use a friend too" (Bayona, 2018).

Claire immediately takes on the role of Maise's protector, standing between her and Mr. Mills when he tries to get to Maise after she first escapes. Later when Owen causes distractions to stop the dinosaur auction from happening, Claire makes her priority looking over Maise, insisting to Owen that he leave her behind and find Maise when she

is injured (Bayona, 2018). Her drive to be the supportive, older friend, mentor, and guardian to Maise is a departure from interactions with her nieces in the first film.

Likewise, Rey shares very little screen time with other female Resistance members in *Star Wars*, but the little moments she does have with them are powerful. In the first film, Rey finds her first mentor in Maz Kanata, a former pirate and smuggler. Rey's quest for understanding her identity is immediately understood by Maz, who gives her wise words of advice about letting the light guide her.

“The belonging you seek is not behind you, it is ahead” (Abrams, 2015). In the third film, Rey meets Zorii, the leader of the Spice Runners of Kijimi. When Zorii attacks Rey, Rey smacks Zorii down on the ground with her staff. In an unexpected turn of events, Rey tells Zorii that she'd like to have an ally in Zorii, stating that the Resistance could use her help. Zorii responds with a statement of respect towards Rey's defense skills:

“Not that you care, but I think you're okay” (Abrams, 2019)

And Rey tells Zorii that she does care, pulling her lightsaber away from Zorii and offering a hand instead to create a tender, empowering moment. Perhaps the most heart-warming and gut-wrenching moments of the films result from the relationship that Rey has with Leia, leader of the resistance, Luke Skywalker's twin sister, and Kylo Ren's mother. It's obvious that Rey has an immense amount of respect for Leia, referring to her as her “master,” and thus, she's a little afraid to disappoint her. Rey uses her brother's lightsaber as Leia trains her for battle, but Rey has difficulty concentrating during her training sessions. She gives the lightsaber back to Leia, saying that she wants to earn it because she doesn't feel worthy. But Leia gives it back to her when she goes on her final

mission with Poe and Finn, telling Rey to not to doubt her ability and identity. They provide each other considerable comfort when their loved ones die, whether it be the simple touch of their hands after Luke dies, or a warm hug after Han has died. They are sweet embraces considering the tragic loss of a life of someone they both cared for. In the end, it is Leia's self-sacrifice to distract Kylo Ren momentarily during his lightsaber duel with Rey that saves her life. Leia's death hits Rey harder than anyone else's, as she is distraught and cries in shock. Rey later discovers through Luke that Leia knew she was a Palpatine and still trained her because she saw her spirit and heart. Luke gives her Leia's lightsaber:

“She surrendered her saber to me and said one day, it would be picked up again by someone who would finish her journey” (Abrams, 2019).

She is reminded of Leia's spirit again when Luke repeats her words from the Battle of Crait that she has everything she needs to go finish the fight. Ultimately, it is the force of Leia's lightsaber combined with Luke's that gives her the power she needs to defeat Palpatine. Leia has always been presented as a symbol of hope, and her ability to inspire Rey even after her death establishes how crucial their relationship was for Rey to not only lead the Resistance to victory, but to help Rey come to terms with her identity.

The Resistance in *Star Wars* is full of numerous female members that interact with each other. *The Last Jedi* adds a couple memorable interactions. General Leia and Vice Admiral Holdo hold a special relationship, especially seen when Holdo reveals her plan of self-sacrifice to the General. Leia is the only one who appreciates and understands Holdo's selflessness:

“She was more interested in protecting the light than she was seeming like a hero” (Johnson, 2017).



Although we never see Rose and her older sister interact because Paige dies at the beginning of the film by sacrificing her life during the evacuation of a Resistance base, the audience learns how influential Rose's relationship with Paige was. It's clear that Rose gets her motivation to continue fighting for the Resistance from her sister's heroic actions and words of advice:

“Know right from wrong, and don't run away when it gets hard” (Johnson, 2017).

The last shot we get of Paige is of her holding onto her half of a partner necklace moments before she dies. Later in the film, Rose's half of the necklace is used as a conductor to open a door, allowing for them to complete their mission successfully (Johnson, 2017). Similar to the Mockingjay pin between Katniss and Prim, and the lightsaber between Leia and Rey, the necklace shared by Rose and Paige is an important material symbol of how powerful and important that relationship was to her.

The little female interaction that Jyn has in *Rogue One* is also with a Rebel leader that fills in the role of a mentor, Mon Mothma. As Jyn weighs her options, it is Mon Mothma who gives her a different reason to join their fight - a chance to make a fresh start from the lonely, directionless life she's led for the last few years (Edwards, 2016). Similarly, the only other female that Belle interacts with is the little girl she teaches to read in the beginning of the film and Mrs. Potts, a teapot that greets and assures Belle that everything will be alright. Even when Mrs. Potts notices that Belle is trying to escape, she is still extremely kind to her, applauding Belle's actions to take her dad's place as prisoner.

“That was a very brave thing you did for your father dearie” (Condon, 2017).

*Incredibles 2* had a bigger impact by the female characters. Even though she's interacting with the enemy, Elastigirl has pretty empowering conversations with tech-savvy Evelyn Deavor. In one scene, they share a drink and talk about workplace gender dynamics and Elastigirl gives Evelyn tips on how to navigate a man's world.

“Don't wait for permission, assert yourself and impose your will on the status quo” (Bird, 2018).

When Evelyn is falling to her death, she decides to save her and let her experience justice through the court system instead. In a different scene, the Ambassador's support of Elastigirl is emphasized. She's already a fan of Elastigirl, hyping her up upon seeing her for the first time. She later makes a speech supporting all superheroes after Elastigirl saves her from an attack. Another instance of female support occurs when Elastigirl meets the new superheroes, and one of them, Karen, is in shock over meeting her idol. Karen explains to Elastigirl what an inspiration she's been to her, stating that she felt like an outcast until she heard about her. She later helps Elastigirl go after Evelyn in the final action sequence. And last but not least, her interaction with her daughter, Violet, is heart-warming. When Elastigirl is worried about leaving her infant alone in a dangerous situation, Violet gives her mom the assurance she needs to go off and save the world while she personally looks over her little brother (Bird, 2018).

Like Carol Danvers, Dory reconnects with her childhood pipe-pal friend Destiny, a near-sighted whale shark. Audiences realize that her relationship with Destiny is the reason Dory knows how to speak whale in the first film, *Finding Nemo*. They pick up right where they left off, and the both of them join forces to successfully escape their areas of confinement at the Marine Life Institute (Stanton, 2016).

These female characters' ability to find strength in each other and to support one another in their endeavors makes the feminist movement that much more powerful. Their mutual cooperation and nurturing of each other allows each of them individually to find strength and determination in themselves. It's a great testament to female friendships and the female agency.

#### *Appearances - Women's Clothing: Dressed for Action and Expression*

The notion of appearances takes a different approach on the more modern movies than they have in the past. While wearing dressed-down clothing for comfort and ease in combat is typical, many characters don't shy away from using their style to make a statement about their personality.

In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss is introduced wearing threadbare clothing and scuffed boots, nothing quite out of the ordinary for a hunter in the woods. But when she arrives at the Capitol prior to the Games, she can hear the stylists there gossip behind her back about her lack of cleanliness as they wax her legs, pluck her eyebrows, and wash her down. And when Cinna, the personal stylist for District 12, walks into her room, Katniss immediately assumes he's there to make her "look pretty," to which Cinna responds:

"I'm here to help you make an impression" (Ross, 2012).

Cinna redefines what looks can represent and signify, giving Katniss the iconic "Girl on Fire" label due to his flame-changing dresses for her in the pre-games parades and talk show interviews, accurately representing Katniss's spirit and temperament. And just before she enters the arena both times, he pins her mockingjay pin onto her arena wear (Ross, 2012). The pin represents her connection to Prim and roots from District 12, but later becomes a symbol of the rebellion that she inspires against the capitol. When

President Snow forces her to wear her would-be wedding dress during her interview with Caesar Flickerman, Cinna allows her to twirl and defy the Capitol even then, her bright white dress burning into a black mockingjay costume as a pair of wings emerge wrapped around her arms. The destruction of her wedding dress and of subversion lets her express her honest, personal beliefs and position against the Capitol. And nobody is untouched by her effect, for even the citizens in the Capitol demand the canceling of the second Games after her act of defiance. President Snow's own granddaughter is seen with Katniss's trademark braided hair (Lawrence, 2013). Katniss is a symbol of change, and while it is her actions that inspire the rebellion, her appearances carry on the same message.

Elsa and Anna's costume transformations clearly represent their change in character. As Elsa becomes more secretive and secluded growing up, her clothes cover her up more, making her look more restricted in movement. She wears longer sleeves, gloves, higher collars, and darker colors. It's not until we see her "Let It Go" that the audience sees her unrestricted, freer self from childhood make a comeback with her self-created, light blue outfit change. Her hair comes down from an up-do into a side braid, much like the one that Katniss wears. While Anna pulls off one of her gloves at the castle and Elsa is pleading for it back, Elsa willingly lets the second glove go into the wind (Buck & Lee, 2013). Similarly, Elsa creates herself new clothes during "Show Yourself" in *Frozen II*, opting for her hair completely let down and pants with a cape instead of a dress. Her pants allow the viewer to see the ease at which she runs and jumps, the flexible dress allowing her to make longer and quicker strides (Buck & Lee, 2019). This is a sharp distinction from the scene where Elsa has to flee her kingdom during *Frozen* in an inconvenient dress, in which she tries her best to run fast but is obviously held back by

her dragging dress. Her clothes in this movie are also distinctly more comfortable looking and lighter in hue. For example, “Into the Unknown” has Elsa running around the castle in the middle of the night in her loosely-flowing nightgown. Anna’s wardrobe changes in *Frozen II* are somewhat reversed in order to Elsa’s. She goes through most of the movie with her hair mostly let down for the adventurous part, but puts it up by the end of the movie when she is crowned the queen of Arendelle - signifying the new sense of responsibility she holds with this new title. And her capes are bright in color, but when she thinks that Elsa has died, she is seen without her vibrant cape, revealing her dark black costume that conveys her mourning and emotional state of mind very well (Buck & Lee, 2019). The sisters in *Frozen* thus convey emotion, freedom, and their physicality all through the representation of their outfits.

Wonder Woman’s gear from start to finish is designed for battle. She’s always in metal armor, including belts and tiara-like head pieces, gauntlets, and the design motif of angles and lines that form the letter “W.” But upon arriving to civilization, she is immediately asked to cover up to blend into civilization. She tries on a series of modest dresses, deciding that none of them are suitable for her purposes and she rips the dresses trying out her signature kicks and jumps. And she openly voices her concern over the constricting clothes:

“How can a woman possibly fight in this?” (Jenkins, 2017).

She eventually settles on an all-black, stripped-down, more masculine wear that clings more loosely to her body to allow for flexibility of movement. She still has her armor on underneath, allowing for her dramatic and emotional superhero costume reveal in *No Man’s Land* when she finally stops hiding herself. Later, Steve insists that Diana not

enter a castle due to her “distracting” nature. Realizing that she has to make some effort to blend in, she rejects his advice and fashions herself a floor-length dress that adheres to the gala’s dress code by camouflaging her weapons as components of her dress (Jenkins, 2017). Diana can always change into her fighting armor at a moment’s notice, preferencing convenience to fight over style.

Like Elsa, Claire finds herself in a dangerous environment in an outfit that requires her to make some changes as well for ease of movement in *Jurassic World*. She has impeccable straight, short hair, is wearing nude heels with a white shirt and blouse, quite appropriate for the business meetings she attends to on a daily basis. But in the jungle, it’s not exactly prime running material. When Owen tells her to stay behind as he looks for her nieces because he doesn’t think she’ll make it far in what she’s wearing, she quickly takes off her belt, unbuttons her silk shirt and ties it around her waist - making do with what she is wearing so she can be swifter in the jungle. However, she never ditches the heels, even when she is trying to outrun a T. Rex (Trevorrow, 2015). Claire keeps the heels in the sequel for work environments, but when given the advanced notice that she will be going back to the island to rescue the dinosaurs, she trades in her heels for sturdy boots, jeans, a trench coat, and her longer hair is tied back in a ponytail (Bayona, 2018). Her exchange of high heels in civilization for combat boots in the jungle in addition to opting for pants instead of a skirt represents part of her bigger character transformation to becoming an active participant in the adventure instead of controlling the situation from the outside.

Everything about Rey’s appearance set her up as a character of mystery. The opening scene of *The Force Awakens* keeps her entire face and body covered for the first

couple minutes, and we don't realize it's a female until she reveals her face (Abrams, 2015). She is dressed in desert-appropriate clothing that is lightweight and changeable to deal with the different climate changes and as a poor scavenger, her work requires the sense of agility that her outfit allows her to have. Her white and gray V-neck bodice includes bandage-wrappings on her arms, cropped leggings, boots and panels that flap around her legs giving the outfit a Jedi robe-like effect - all very Luke-esque clothing. But if you take a look at her hair, which is an odd placement of buns that she wears for most of the three films, reminding us of Leia's iconic hair buns. The only time that her hair is let down is during her mystical cave journey where she is begging for answers about her identity in *The Last Jedi*. During this movie, her Jedi-like desert robes are also switched out for a quilted woolen vest, which is relatable to the bomber style jackets worn by Han Solo (Johnson, 2017). She also adds what seems like arm-warmers to deal with the colder climate and switches out her predominantly white outfit for an overwhelmingly gray one. In the *Star Wars* Universe, one that seems strictly divided between the light and dark sides, she consistently finds herself in the gray areas. She is simultaneously attracted to both members of the Resistance and Kylo Ren. Her clothes are the darkest when she goes to see Kylo Ren specifically. So it's not surprising that there's so much speculation concerning Rey's origin during the saga. Who did she descend from and what side will she give her allegiance to?

Jyn's clothes also fit her purpose in *Rogue One*. She sports pants that are neither too loose nor too tight, sturdy combat boots, a jacket and a shawl that gives her the head covering she needs to blend in while she's on enemy territory (Edwards, 2016). In *Captain Marvel*, Carol always wears comfortable and practical clothes, whether it be for

a t-shirt and jeans or her superhero suit (Boden & Fleck, 2019). Elastigirl's stretchy bodysuit makes it possible for her to exercise her superpower of elasticity by lengthening and contorting her body and limbs in numerous positions (Bird, 2018). Belle is an active heroine in *Beauty and the Beast*, too. She's constantly on the move and her boots allow her to do so. She also wears bloomers underneath her skirt so she can hike it up into her waist if needed. Her apron acts as a tool belt. She rides a horse in not only this outfit, but even in her iconic yellow ball gown that's made with a flexible bodice (Condon, 2017). Nothing that any of these heroines wear is inhibiting their agenda.

Thus, while some characters express themselves through their personalized costumes, other characters have a wardrobe change for more practical purposes. The trend towards a female lead, especially in action movies, wearing sensible attire for fight sequences is a promising shift in cinema today.

### *Evolving and Dismissing Established Archetypes*

Two unique features of these films change or debunk the established archetypes of female characters that are all-too common in films historically. While the case of the absent mother might be a pattern attributed specifically to these films, the changing discussion around the mental health movement might have a longer lasting effect on debunking the "mad-woman" archetype.

#### *The Absent Mother Figure*

The mother figure is most likely an archetype that will never disappear from film. However, these particular movies show an overwhelming absence of the mother of the lead, female hero. While Katniss's mother is alive, she is not very present in taking care



of and raising her daughters after the death of her husband. Katniss becomes the mother figure, becoming the head of the household and essentially raising Prim while her mom is clearly submissive to her teenage child (Ross, 2012). The young boys in *Jurassic World* find themselves at the park on their own instead of with their parents because their mom and dad have to meet with divorce lawyers. And while their aunt Claire is supposed to step in as their guardian for the weekend, she pawns them off for her assistant to watch so she can attend business meetings (Trevorrow, 2015). We find out that the young girl in the second installment, Maise, doesn't have an actual mother. Her grandfather makes it seem like her mother died when she was young, but Maise is the product of genetic engineering - a clone of herself. The closest person she has to a mother is Iris, the caretaker. Even Iris is dismissed later in the movie after Maise's supposed grandfather dies and her guardian, Eli Mills, demands that Iris give up her job (Bayona, 2018). Elastigirl is not with her kids for most of the film as she goes off to work to save the day. When Mr. Incredibles can't handle the stress of being a parent to three kids, the Incredibles' fashion designer fills in the role of a babysitter for their youngest son, Jack-Jack (Bird, 2018). On the other hand, *Captain Marvel* doesn't even mention the mother's existence once during the multiple flashbacks that Carol Danvers has to her childhood experiences with her father and her brother. Maria fills in this role for Monica instead (Boden & Fleck, 2019). And Dory went missing, so she has grown up without parents to guide her for years until she finds her way back to them at the end of the film (Stanton, 2016). *Wonder Woman* is the one exception of a film among these that has an active, present mother for the majority of the protagonist's upbringing (Jenkins, 2017).

The rest of the films have protagonists with mothers that die at a young age. Elsa and Anna's mother died along with their father during a shipwreck when they were younger (Buck & Lee, 2013). We initially wonder if Rey's mother and father abandoned her, but later discover that they died when she was young trying to protect her. The closest person that Rey has to a mother is Leia, but even she dies at the end of *The Rise of Skywalker* (Abrams, 2019). Jyn's mother has just a few minutes of screen time in the beginning, sacrificing herself to save her daughter in the middle of a war zone (Edwards, 2016). We learn that Belle's mother died from the infection of the Black Plague (Condon, 2017).

Nevertheless, a mother's importance and effect on her daughter(s) is seen well beyond death. In *Frozen II*, Elsa and Anna's father tells them a story about how a woman saved his life when he was younger. The girls later discover that this hero was actually their own mother, realizing that Elsa's magical powers were partly a result of her mother's ability to interact with the elemental spirits. The memory of their mother is one of the few things that bring their comfort, for whenever they feel sad or lost, each of them drapes their mother's scarf around one another. Their mom also gets her own solo song in the second installment, in which she gives Elsa directions about a future calling she will have. Even after death, her mother's spirit is calling out to her, guiding Elsa towards her true calling in life. During "Show Yourself," an image of her mother appears to her, telling Elsa that she herself is the savior she's been looking for this entire time:

"You are the one you've been waiting for" (Buck & Lee, 2013).

Leia's message of love right before her death is the reason that Kylo Ren turns back the light side in *The Rise of Skywalker*. Rey has such a deep connection with Leia that she

shows mercy to Kylo Ren, healing him from dying after she stabs him with a lightsaber. This ends up benefiting her at the end of the film when Rey herself dies, for it is Ben Solo, a.k.a. Kylo Ren, who brings her back to life (Abrams, 2019). Leia's love is the reason they reconcile and eventually defeat Palpatine.

The live-action version of *Beauty and the Beast* includes an extra scene that gives more information about the details surrounding Belle's mother's death than the original animated version did. In the beginning of the film, Belle is begging her father to tell her more about her mother, who says little but enough to give Belle the peace of mind that she needs.

“Your mother was fearless. Fearless” (Condon, 2017).

Using a magic atlas that transports anyone to anywhere they want to go at any time, Belle chooses to go to her childhood home in Paris when she's at the castle with the Beast. We are transported to a moment in time when Belle's mother is dying from the bubonic plague and begs her husband to flee with their daughter so she would not catch the infection as well (Condon, 2017). Belle realizes that her mother lets go of her to give her a better chance at survival and finally understands where she gets her sense of selflessness from.

Dory's short-term memory means she retains almost no information, but the one phrase that she always repeats is the one that her mom taught and sang to her as a child. “Just keep swimming” ends up being the very advice that Dory needs to find her way back to her parents (Stanton, 2016).

Thus, while the nurturing and caring motherly archetype is largely absent from these particular films, it doesn't take away from the fact that they are an influential component to the protagonist's personality, character development, and actions.

### *Quashing the "Mad-Woman" Archetype*

A big part of the character development for most of the lead female characters includes some kind of flashback to their younger days or previous years when significant, traumatizing events took place. The origin of mental struggle for these characters provides insight into the reasoning behind their actions in the present day. And while these heroes fight off physical enemies successfully, it's an important acknowledgement that the demons inside of them are often longer-lasting, as many of them exhibit various symptoms of PTSD throughout the film. Some of the common manifestations of PTSD are through experienced trauma, nightmares or flashbacks, avoidance, persistent preoccupation, and sudden emotional or physical outbursts (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Katniss from *The Hunger Games* exhibits numerous signs of psychological trauma. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss has flashbacks to her days of starvation due to their low socioeconomic status and dealing with her mom's depression and neglect of the kids after her father's death. Through this flashback, the audience understands why she acts like both the mother and father figure in her household, protecting and raising Prim in addition to putting food on the table from hunting and navigating the black market. No wonder she states that she refuses to have kids in the beginning of *The Hunger Games*, for she can't imagine putting her kids through the period of starvation that she had to experience (Ross, 2012). It's also here where we realize that Katniss was forced to

mature quickly and provide for her family, leaving her with little time to socialize and explaining her difficulty in making friends and alliances with other tributes, especially in *Catching Fire*. In fact, she is so anti-social and adamant on being self-sufficient that Peeta and Haymitch force her to make alliances with Finnick and Johanna. In the second installment, she is haunted by witnessing the brutal killing of tributes from her first Games. When she goes hunting with Gale in the beginning of the second installment, she sees her first kill in the place of the animals she is aiming her bow and arrow at, falling into a moment of hyperventilation and backtracking from the fear. Later, we see her waking up screaming from a nightmare, and pleads Peeta to stay with her the rest of the night. In this scene, she seeks physical comfort from Peeta, and thus it actually has more of a pragmatic rather than romantic subtext (Lawrence, 2013). She also can't help but cry every time she is reminded of Rue's death. Her survivor's guilt is established when she speaks to Rue's family during the Victory Tour, apologizing for failing to save her. When she goes in for her skill test and sees Peeta's painting of Rue's death, she is seen angrily and emotionally hanging that mannequin of Seneca Crane to instill the fear of death in Plutarch, the new Gamemaker. Katniss lives in a constant state of fear. When Gale asks Katniss if she loves him, she replies:

“All I can think about every day since the Reaping is how afraid I am; there is no room for anything else” (Lawrence, 2013)

Katniss's PTSD is actually even more prominent in the final two films, *Mockingjay 1* and *2*. And while it's not quite resolved in any of the films, her happy ending and improving state of mental being finally comes from the safety and comfort she feels around Peeta, the man she eventually ends up marrying and having kids with at the very end of *Mockingjay 2* (Lawrence, 2015).

Elsa's PTSD most likely stems from the intro scene of *Frozen* when she accidentally hits her sister's head with ice. Her fear of hurting someone innocent is what holds her back from embracing her own powers. At the coronation, Anna and Elsa spend some time together, enjoying the people's presence from having open gates for the first time in years. When Anna wishes that their lives could be like this all the time, Elsa momentarily wishes for the same, but immediately regresses into her cautious ways when she has a flashback to that event of hurting Anna with her powers as a child. Like Katniss, she exhibits some of the classic signs of PTSD, from flashbacks and avoidance behaviors to constant worry and sudden physical outbursts (mostly ice) when she is afraid. At her coronation, Elsa's hands are shaking and she is involuntarily icing the objects in her hand because she is so fearful of losing control. And her panic attacks are unrestrained, as manifested during the scene when she accidentally puts ice in Anna's heart because her immense fear is fueling her powers to become out of her control. Her singing becomes incoherent and is reduced to a repeated shouting of "I can't" until she physically lets out a burst of ice that puts Anna's life in danger (Buck & Lee, 2013). The films leave the viewers with the message of how suppressing one's authentic self is highly damaging by highlighting Elsa's improving mental health trajectory as she finally begins to grow into herself.

While Elsa's mental health battle is made apparent from the very first scene in the first film, Anna's is a little more subtle until *Frozen II*. Both sisters are traumatized from the near-death experience of each other, and Anna has a solo song in the second installment after she thinks that she has lost Elsa. She ends up in a dark place, trapped in a cave, and expresses how abandoned she has felt. One can assume she is referring to the

death of her parents and the distance that Elsa put themselves as kids, and more recently, the perceived death of Elsa. Anna has a moment where she is ready to give up because the grief is so overwhelming:

“I’ve seen dark before, but not like this. This is cold, this is empty, this is numb. The life I knew is over, the lights are out. Hello, darkness, I’m ready to succumb” (Buck & Lee, 2019).

Anna’s journey to overcoming her grief, like Elsa’s, comes from within. The film does a great job at making it clear that it was okay to feel like all was lost when something earth shattering happens. Then, Anna’s solo song conveys a way out of the darkness that is realistic and offers a message of hope in the midst of a dark situation. She pulls herself out of her grief one step at a time during “Next Right Thing,” acknowledging that it’ll be a slow, but certainly do-able process of recovery:

“Take a step, step again. It is all that I can do the next right thing. I won’t look too far ahead. It’s too much for me to take, but break it down to this next breath. This next step, this next choice is one that I can make” (Buck & Lee, 2019).

When Claire is back at the island for the rescue operation in *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, she is seeing the park for the first time since the life-or-death situation she was in not too long ago. The look of worry and shock as she is reminded of the destruction and chaos that ensued then is easily noticed by a member of the rescue team. He asks her if she has bad memories of this place, to which Owen responds optimistically in order to alleviate some of her tension, saying that some were good. Claire smiles, comforted by the fact that at least one person there knows from experience what mental state she’s in (Bayona, 2018).

Rey has numerous flashbacks to the exact moment that her mother and father left her as a child, as she is screaming for them to come back. Her abandonment issues

manifest as she gravitates towards Leia and Solo because they fill in the absent mother/father roles to her. Kylo Ren verbally tortures her with this idea when he reads her mind as she's captive:

“So lonely, so afraid to leave. At night, desperate to sleep...Han Solo. You feel like he's the father you never had” (Abrams, 2015).

She refuses Solo's job offer and is determined to return to Jakku in *The Force Awakens* because she so desperately hopes that her parents will come back one day (Abrams, 2015). In *The Last Jedi*, she cannot resist the temptation to go into the dark hole in a cave to find answers about her parents (Johnson, 2017). While she eventually accepts her identity and understands her parents' sacrifice, the trauma she's faced from that early-age abandonment will have long-lasting effects that we see will hopefully be alleviated from the new family she's found with the Resistance.

The pattern of re-experiencing the emotional pain from the loss of loved ones is apparent in most of the other films as well. Jyn has dreams of the few precious moments she remembers with her parents before she was separated from them, but she is forced to come to the harsh reality that they are out of her life forever. Her mother dies right before her eyes as a child, and her mother's necklace is the only material possession she has left of her (Edwards, 2016). Most of the memories that Captain Marvel has are when she was bullied - for being a girl, from her brother and father, and from her recruits as a pilot during training at boot camp (Boden & Fleck, 2019). Belle is uncertain about the sudden circumstances of mother's death, placing her in a constant state of fear over her father's safety, especially when he doesn't return from his annual trip to the market (Condon, 2017).



With the fourth-wave feminist movement taking place alongside the recent mental health movement as well, it isn't a surprise that main-stream movies are promoting and reflecting the heightened public awareness of mental illness via the female experience. It is progressive in a sense that the female protagonists are not portrayed as crazy or insane but as a human being struggling and doing the best she can under the given circumstances. Keep in mind that this is a sharp departure from earlier times, when females were labelled as emotionally dependent, hysterical, hormonal, or unstable for exhibiting the same reactions that males did in response to traumatizing situations (Koeber, 2018).

The mad-woman archetype isn't the only one that the films in the last decade dismissed. The warm, motherly figure and the damsel in distress archetypes from the top five grossing films were replaced with much more verbally assertive, independent, and active characters that saved not only themselves from danger, but others too. Skin-tight corsets and dresses were traded out for looser-fitting pants and proper running footwear. Women were no longer pitted against one another for their mothering skills or for having the same male love interest, but partnered with each other to combine forces against a common enemy. And instead of viewing their female companions as inferiors to be controlled, these films had far more male characters that supported and encouraged their power, confidence, and individualism. What a turning point for female representation in film this last decade has been!

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Comparing the Past, Present, and Future of Female Representation in Film

In the past, the film industry has generally failed at producing female characters that are well-rounded with depth. A study of gender roles in 855 of the top-grossing films from 1950-2006 not only showed that there was an average ratio of two male characters for each female character, but that female characters were portrayed as being involved in sex twice as often as male counterparts (Bleakley et al., 2012). Another study looked at diversity across 100 of the top-grossing films every year from 2007-2013, for a total of 600 films. It showed that in front of the screen, only 30% of speaking roles were female characters, and behind the screen, there were five men for every one female film worker (Smith et al., 2014). When female characters are not given their due screen time, it is near impossible to create a developed character that seems real and relatable.

The last decade did a better job at producing characters that were more multidimensional, bringing to the screen female protagonists that were able to convey leadership, physical agility, intellectual curiosity, and emotional vulnerability by increasing the female to male ratio on-screen, including more female filmmakers behind the scenes, and debunking old gender tropes.

#### *Feminist Twists to Original Stories*

As encouraging as it is to see these 15 films with female leads or co-leads perform as well as they did in the box-office, it is imperative to acknowledge that their successes are due in large part to the existing, massive fan bases. Some of these movies are film adaptations of widely popular stories originally published as books or comics. Suzanne

Collin's best-selling *The Hunger Games* trilogy was released in 2008, 2009, and 2010, just a couple years before the film adaptations released from 2012 to 2015. *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* are based on fictional superheroes from two of the most popular comics in the world, DC and Marvel respectively. *Frozen* is also loosely based on Hans Christian Anderson's original *The Snow Queen*, but the storyline has enough differences to make this much less recognizable. The rest are remakes or sequels to quite popular original movies that were released decades ago. The *Jurassic World* movies are a follow-up to the three blockbuster *Jurassic Park* films in the 1990s and early 2000s. Episodes VII-IX of the recent *Star Wars* trilogy and *Rogue One* came after six movies that created and developed the worldwide pop culture phenomenon over four decades. *Incredibles 2* picks up right where the Incredibles family left off after the universally acclaimed 2004 original and *Finding Dory* similarly continues the beloved Finding Nemo original from 2003. Last, but not least, live-action *Beauty and the Beast* is a remake of the 1991 animated musical film. These books, comics, and original movies sold thousands upon thousands of copies and tickets to an ever-growing fan base. Thus, it is no surprise that the top 15 female led or co-led movies in the last decade did so well considering that they brought to life protagonists and supporting characters that were already so vivid and empowering in the minds of millions of viewers.

Even though the movies closely followed or continued the style of the original stories and sagas, there were several significant changes made for the film adaptations and sequels that most definitely added a modern-day feminist twist to fit the times. The biggest changes in female representation are most easily identified when comparing the *Star Wars* sagas. In the new trilogy, Rey is more independent than Leia was ever depicted

as. She manages to break out of confines and makes her own escape without the help of a male character. She also becomes the first female character of importance in *Star Wars* to wield a lightsaber in combat. The moment she grabs the Skywalker lightsaber from under Kylo Ren's nose by using the Force is a huge triumphant moment that establishes Rey as a female Jedi hero. On the other hand, Leia never used her power in an active manner (Lucas, 1997). In addition, Belle in the live-action *The Beauty and the Beast* film is given more credit than just being a pretty face and an avid reader. The live-action film makes Belle's mind her greatest asset, turning her into an inventor as well with her self-made laundry machine-like contraption. She also more fiercely stands her ground, sharply rejecting Gaston's romantic advances and actively arguing with the Beast constantly (Condon, 2017). The animated Belle was a little more submissive (Trousdale & Wise, 1991).

Another major difference is that the films are more centered on female interactions and less on romantic interactions. For example, in *The Hunger Games*, the romance between Katniss and Peeta isn't explored as in depth as it is in the books (Collins, 2008). In the original *Star Wars* saga, Leia was largely recognized as the love interest, and while that subplot is not entirely absent in regards to Rey, it's also not her character's driving force. The movie gender swapped Mar-Vell from the comics, changing the Kree military officer from a male to a female, creating a lovely female mentorship in *Captain Marvel* (Lee, 1967). And of course, unlike the book, an act of true love in *Frozen* values sisterly love over romantic love (Andersen, 1844).

Costume differences also cannot be ignored. In the latest trilogy, Rey is dressed more conservative and is never sexually objectified like Leia was. Leia's first

introduction in *Star Wars: A New Hope* is her wearing an elegant flowing white gown where she's lying down in a seductive position (Lucas, 1977). And In *Return of the Jedi*, "slave Leia" is depicted in a golden bikini chained to a giant slug (Marquand, 1983). Rey is never showing any cleavage, instead wrapped in white fabric and wearing loose-fitting pants. In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle's gown did not have a corset like the original, making it less restricting for her to move around. Similarly, Wonder Woman's heels were redesigned from over-the-knee boots with pointy heels to a sportier sandal-boot hybrid that allows her to run around in more comfortable wedges .

Thus, although much of the successes of these films can be attributed to the existing fan bases of well-developed fictional worlds, there is no doubt that the releases of these films took into consideration the modern-day feminist movement to break the old stereotypes that restricted women to submissive, sexualized, and romantic roles only.

#### *Behind the Scenes: Female Filmmakers*

Let's not forget about the progress made for women behind the scenes as well. A 2015 study showed that films with only male directors and writers have male leads in 87% of the films, male and female ensembles or co-leads in 9% of films, and female leads in only 4% of films. However, when a female director or writer is involved in the film, 39% of the films have female leads, 26% have co-leads, and the other 35% have male leads (Lauzen, 2015). Thus, films with female filmworkers behind the scenes show a more balanced distribution between the sexes.

Jennifer Lee became the first female director at Disney animation for co-directing *Frozen* in 2013, nearly 75 years after *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* released in 1937 and around 50 animated films later (Whitfield, 2017). Patty Jenkins got to direct *Wonder*

*Woman* in 2017, the first female superhero to get her solo movie, and she made headlines when it became the highest-grossing live-action movie ever directed by a woman - only to be beaten by *Captain Marvel*'s female co-director, Anna Boden (Freeman, 2018). In 2019, *Captain Marvel* became Marvel's first film with both a female superhero in the lead role and with a female director, after exactly 20 other male-led superhero films (Tanus, 2020). In addition, 2019 marked the first time that more than 10% of the directors of the year's top 100-grossing films were female (Smith et al., 2020).

Another benefit of having more women behind the screens is how they artistically combat the sexualized male gaze. Jenkin's portrayal of Wonder Woman was particularly forward in that there were no slow camera pans over the heroine's body - one of the many ways a camera can replicate the male gaze. In addition, the only time a nude body is on screen is when Diana walks in on Steve bathing, which can be interpreted as a nod towards the female gaze. Like Jenkins, a number of female filmmakers are trying to construct alternative images by working with subtle cinematic effects, like lighting, color, and camera movement to change established cinematic practices surrounding photographing of women's bodies. It has taken much too long for films to utilize female talent both in front of and behind the scenes in bigger roles and higher positions, but the shift in hiring practices for female film directors surely is evidence of progress.

#### *The Future of Film: What Audiences Can Hope For More Of*

Yes, there is a formula for success in movies that has worked for decades. But with the changing demographic of society today, directors and screenwriters have to appeal to the both male and female audiences if they're going to achieve the box office numbers that they desire. In fact, females have comprised a larger or equal share of

moviegoers consistently since 2010, peaking at 52% between 2012-2014 (MPAA, 2014). It should come as no surprise that these were the years that released *The Hunger Games* trilogy and *Frozen*. Based on the successes and failures of the top 15 grossing films with a female lead or co-lead in the last decade, more female interactions, a continued rejection of gender roles, and intersectionality at the forefront of films would hopefully bring in a new dynamic that would have movie-goers hooked and begging for more.

### *More Female Interactions*

The Bechdel Test is a standard that has been used to describe the level of female interaction in movies for over a century. Originating from Alison Bechdel's comic "Dykes to Watch Out For" (Bechdel 1986), the test is a series of three questions:

- 1) Are there at least two named women in the movie?
- 2) Do these women talk to each other?
- 3) Do these women talk to each other about something besides a man?

If all three questions can be answered "yes," then the movie is said to pass the Bechdel test. The Bechdel Test is a low standard, however. It's a relatively simple test, but it is astonishing the number of movies that can't pass it. All of the movies analyzed in the last chapter do successfully pass the test. *The Hunger Games* movies, the *Frozen* movies, *Captain Marvel*, and *Incredibles 2* are among the movies that are the least questionable passes. *Wonder Woman*, *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, and *Finding Dory* also do okay. But films like the *Star Wars* trilogy, *Rogue One*, *Jurassic World*, and *Beauty and the Beast* barely scraped by. It's disappointing because women's complex and intricate lives as they intertwine with other women's lives are so terribly underrepresented in the film industry. And yet, they are some of the most beautiful moments of these films.

There are many forms of true love that are not romantic in any sense. A mother's love for her daughter. A mentor's love for her mentee. A sisterly love. The love between two best friends. These are the kinds of "love relationships" I'm craving to see more of. I want to see movies with stories featuring sisters and best friends that save each other from danger and despair rather than the romantic partner, like *Frozen* and *Captain Marvel* so brilliantly do. Both movies make the lost love that's found again to be Elsa's sister and Carol's best friend respectively. *The Hunger Games* gives Katniss both of these relationships with Prim and Rue, two girls she loves so deeply that she almost sacrifices her life for one and sparks a revolution for another. How powerful is it to go to the ends of the Earth to fight for your family, friends, and mentors?

I would pay to see movies centered on these kinds of relationships over and over again. Having a sister myself, I know how exhilarating and lovely the concept of sisterhood is. It really is special, and it's a pity that the film industry doesn't celebrate female relationships like this more often.

### *Gender Role Rejection*

Carl Jung's theory of archetypes discusses how each sex has an unconscious side stemming from the opposite biological sex. He claimed that the psyche of a woman contains masculine aspects (the "animus" archetype) and that the psyche of a man contains feminine aspects (the "anima" archetype). However, in modern Western civilization, men are discouraged from expressing their feminine side and women from acting on their masculine tendencies. Jung concluded that this is the reason that the full psychological development of both sexes was undermined (Jung, 2014). A fascinating



pattern in the recent decade is how these female-led movies explore character interactions among individuals that reject binary gender roles.

*The Hunger Games* movies particularly do a fantastic job of not assigning defining character traits to each gender. For example, take Katniss Everdeen. She has an overwhelming mixture of both “feminine” and “masculine” characteristics. She is feminine in the sense that she prioritizes family, is modest, is nurturing in certain situations, and kills only in self-defense. She is masculine in the sense that she drives the action of the film. She provides the food for the family, is strong and athletic, has no primary interest in romantic entanglements, and prefers not to verbalize her emotional struggles. And when put next to Peeta, one realizes that there is nothing inherently masculine about aggression or feminine about passivity. Peeta, a baker’s boy who’s primary knowledge lies in the realm of baking and frosting, is the one committed to the love story. He’s the one that openly states his emotions via his facial expressions while Katniss wears a poker face a lot more. He also fills in the role of the male damsel in distress, as Katniss repeatedly saves him from danger. I think the fact that *The Hunger Games* movies don’t put limitations on gender roles is what makes them so revolutionary.

*Wonder Woman* is another interesting case study. Because Diana grew up on a secluded island of women, she doesn’t know or care to follow gender roles once she comes into contact with mainland civilization. Her power isn’t diminished for being incredibly kind and fierce at the same time. And she becomes the knight in shining armor for Steve, who takes on the role of another male damsel in distress, similar to Peeta. And much like Peeta is with Katniss, he’s never threatened by Diana’s physical and intellectual superiority. Instead, he’s her biggest supporter.

The *Frozen* movies also follow this gender role rejection model, particularly with Kristoff. Kristoff is strong, adventurous, and does his fair share of action-driving in the movies. He's also emotionally vulnerable and comfortable with sharing his feelings. Just like Peeta shares his fears of the capitol changing him, Kristoff sings his heart out about his insecurities in the second installment:

“Who am I, if I'm not your guy? Where am I, if we're not together forever?” (Buck & Lee, 2019).

Kristoff's song is so important in a world where there is such a stigma around men sharing their feelings. In fact, this is a specific point called to question in Emma Watson's 2014 UN Goodwill Ambassador Speech:

“Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive. Both men and women should feel free to be strong...It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum not as two opposing sets of ideals. If we can stop defining each other by what we are not and start defining ourselves by what we are - we can all be freer and this is what HeForShe is about. It's about freedom” (Watson, 2014).

In the future, I would hope that emotional vulnerability shown more equally among female and male characters would encourage women and girls to not be ashamed of their range of emotions, but to recognize them as a source of strength against oppressors that claim their feelings make them too unstable or unreasonable. Thus, these movies did an excellent job at allowing heroines to embrace both their tenderness and tenacity as a sign of strength. A critical part of the films, true male allies like Jack, Peeta, Kristoff, and Steve also help the respective films manifest their “show-don't-preach” approach to feminism. Perhaps one day we'll live in a world where personality traits aren't gendered, but are simply all the things a human can be.

### *More Intersectionality*

Movies today might have better characterization of women, but not necessarily more representation of women. The first three waves of feminism benefited white women much more than women of color. “White feminism” does not address the distinct forms of oppression faced by women from marginalized communities. First-wave feminism was primarily organized by straight, middle-class, educated white women and thus, the Seneca Falls Convention concentrated on issues pertaining to them. Feminist authors like Beauvoir and Friedan that received attention during second-wave feminism were from and aimed at reaching this same subset of the female community. The fight for equal wages and other landmark legal victories largely excluded women from marginalized communities. Even today, we see a disparity in wages not only between the white man and the white woman, but among the white woman and woman of color (Gender Pay Gap Statistics, 2020). Third-wave feminism’s “Year of the Woman” similarly was a win for white women in Congress. It wasn’t until the midterm elections of 2018, shortly after the #MeToo movement set fourth-wave feminism into high-gear, that women of color and women from the LGBTQ+ community set historic precedents. Minnesota’s Ilhan Omar and Michigan’s Rashida Tlaib became the first Muslim women elected into congress. Ayanna Pressley and Jahana Hayes became Massachusetts’ and Connecticut’s first black congresswoman respectively. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez not only became the youngest Latina elected to congress, but the youngest woman. Sharice Davids became the first Native American congresswoman from the LGBTQ+ community. LGBTQ+ people of color won several seats in state legislatures as well (Shannon, 2018).

While wildly popular shows like *Grey's Anatomy*, *Scandal*, *The Fosters*, and *Euphoria* represent how television has made far more advances in filling the gap of intersectionality on-screen and behind the scene than movies have, the lack of female diversity continues today. Lauzen's 2019 study on female representation in film also accounted for diversity on-screen. In 2018, 68% of all female characters were white, 20% were black, 7% were Asian, and 5% were Latina. The top 15 grossing films in the last decade with a female lead or co-lead had all white female characters in the lead. All women of color were reduced to the role of the "sidekick," such as Rue in *The Hunger Games*, Maria in *Captain Marvel*, Rose in *The Last Jedi*, and Jannah in *The Rise of Skywalker*. Even worse was LGBTQ+ representation, represented by a singular kiss between two female Resistance fighters in the background of *The Rise of Skywalker*. Not one of these movies features a minority woman or a woman from the LGBTQ+ community in the lead role. Disney may lead the way with its upcoming release of the live-action *Mulan*, which may very well become the first film with a minority in the lead female role to enter this prestigious top 15 list.

Diversity has long been a problem in the film industry, for various groups are severely under-represented in film. In 2018, Academy Award winner Frances McDormand used her Oscars acceptance speech to draw attention to the inclusion rider clause. It is a clause that requires film companies to hire a more diverse range of candidates both on and off screen to reflect the demography of a film's setting. Since then, it has generated immense social discussion that existed within the broader #MeToo and #TimesUp movements to demand better standards for equality and inclusion. Hundreds of celebrities have come out in public support of the clause, pledging to

incorporate it in their own future contracts. In September of 2018, Warner Bros became the first major Hollywood studio to adopt the company-wide policy to put into practice the inclusion rider clause (Brierley-Hay & Elphick, 2019). I hope that the ensured employment of talented but under-represented individuals will bring more women from racial minorities and the LGBTQ+ community to the front and center of the big screen. As an Indian-American, I know there are so many more amazing and necessary stories that can be brought to light, and I am eagerly waiting for the day that I see myself represented in huge blockbuster films like East Asian and African-American communities got to experience with *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Black Panther*. At the end of the day, I want to see myself - parts of my life that I can recognize. *Scandal*'s Kerry Washington explains it best upon receiving the Vanguard Award for promoting equality at the 26th Annual GLAAD Media Awards:

“Having your story told as a woman, as a person of color, as a lesbian, or as a trans person or as any member of any disenfranchised community is sadly often still a radical idea. There is so much power in storytelling, and there is enormous power in inclusive storytelling, in inclusive representations” (Washington, 2015).

Intersectionality embraces the idea of “all of me.” For women particularly, there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live one-dimensional lives. As forward as the top-grossing female-led or co-led movies in the last decade were, no single franchise can change the centuries-long, embedded mode of thinking that’s been influenced by largely patriarchal power structures. 2020 marks the 100th year anniversary of the 19th amendment, which earned women the right to vote. It’s now time for women of all ages, races, ethnicities, and sexualities to work together in greater numbers in all

social spheres - from politics and sports to STEM and entertainment - to tell their own stories.

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