

Romance and Revenge: Gender and Genre in
Contemporary Hollywood

by

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INTRODUCTION

“Formal devices are progressive only if they are employed with a goal beyond aesthetics alone”

—B. Ruby Rich¹

When I was growing up the two movies I was absolutely never allowed to watch were *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. I still have never seen either in full, even though I am now an adult and could watch them at any time. The parts that my parents objected to—still do—are that in *The Little Mermaid* Ariel must make the prince (does he have a name?) fall in love with her without her voice, with only her looks; and the moment in *Beauty and the Beast* where the beast hits Belle.

I was allowed to read the Hans Christian Anderson version of The Little Mermaid, a creepy tale in which the eponymous mermaid dies of sadness and turns to sea foam. And I was allowed to watch *La Belle et La Bête*, a similarly creepy 1946 French film directed by Jean Cocteau that I mostly remember for having fairly over-the-top acting and being really, really weird.

As a child I found this this incredibly annoying. Disney films were cultural capital that I did not have. Having seen *La Belle et La Bête* did not make me a cool third grader. But having grown up as a child of the digital age,

¹ B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 81.

submerged in more media than my parents could have ever foreseen, I am beginning to understand their reasoning.

Molly Haskell writes that “the big lie perpetrated on Western society is the idea of women’s inferiority, a lie so deeply ingrained in our social behavior that merely to recognize it is to risk unraveling the entire fabric of civilization.”² As the self-described feminist parents of two daughters, perhaps mine were trying to keep me from finding out about this lie.

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In 2008 Manohla Dargis wrote,

“Over the next few months the screens will reverberate with the romping-stomping of comic book titans like Iron Man and the Hulk. The sexagenarian Harrison Ford will be cracking his Indy whip (some old men get a pass, after all, especially when Steven Spielberg is on board) alongside the fast-talking sprout from “Transformers.” Hellboy will relock and load, tongue and cigar planted in cheek. Action heroes like Will Smith, Brendan Fraser, Nicolas Cage, Mark Wahlberg and Vin Diesel will run amok, as will funny guys like Adam Sandler, Eddie Murphy, Will Ferrell, Mike Myers, Steve Carell, Jack Black and Seth Rogen.”<sup>3</sup>

Things have changed since 2008. We now have *Bridesmaids*, *The Hunger Games*, Krisin Wiig, Amy Schumer, and Melissa McCarthy and more.

Representation onscreen is changing faster than behind the camera, but even that is changing. There are more female directors, producers, and cinematographers now than ever before. And comic-book movies have also begun to incorporate female heroes and villains. *Black Widow* is a standout,

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<sup>2</sup> Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Manohla Dargis, “Is There a Real Woman in This Multiplex?” *New York Times*, May 4, 2008, accessed April 18, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/04/movies/moviesspecial/04dargi.html>.

and I am looking forward to seeing *Wonder Woman* and *Thor: Ragnarok* soon.

But while the industry may be better, it is nowhere near perfect. In 2015 women accounted for 33% of all speaking characters, while men accounted for 67% of speaking roles. Women were 22% of clearly identifiable protagonists, which is an increase of 10 percentage points from 2014.<sup>4</sup> The study that found these numbers has been published every year for five years now, and each year the overall numbers reflect the same stagnant positions of the film industry: “women can’t direct. Women can’t open movies. Women are niche.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, when women do direct or write the numbers become even. In films in 2015 with at least one female writer, females comprised 50% of protagonists.<sup>6</sup> As Haskell writes, “If women, seeing these vices perpetuated, don’t complain, who will?”<sup>7</sup> Women in Hollywood in a position to upend the status quo are making changes, and it shows.

And for those of us who watch film, rather than make it, what does it say that women speak only 33% of the time? It is hard not to draw comparisons to this election, as when Donald Trump complained after the second debate that Hillary Clinton had spoken more than he had, even though the numbers were almost even; Trump spoke for about a minute longer than

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<sup>4</sup> Lauzen, Martha M. “It’s a Man’s (Celluloid) World: On-Screen Representations of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2015.” Report compiled from the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Dargis, “Is There A Real Woman”.

<sup>6</sup> Lauzen, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 15

Clinton did.<sup>8</sup> Hearing a woman speak as much as a man *feels* as though she's speaking longer than he is, and that is at least partially perpetuated by the film industry.

We see movie stars as role models and movies as reflections of reality. In his book *The Devil Finds Work*, James Baldwin writes about seeing *Native Son*, and the influence seeing a black man on screen had on him, remarking of its star, Canada Lee, that "his physical presence...gave me the right to live."<sup>9</sup> There can be no question that representation in popular art matters.

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In this thesis I look closely at seven films: *The Dark Knight*; *Mad Max: Fury Road*; *The Wolf of Wall Street*; *The Devil Wears Prada*; *Superbad*; *Ghostbusters (2016)*; and *Frozen*. The first six films are each paired by genre. In each genre—action, drama, comedy—there is a conventional, male-centered film, and a film that represents a feminist critique of, break with, or revision of that form. *Frozen* stands alone because it represents not only a break with the norms of Disney children's movies, but also with the entire lineage of the Disney Corporation and its use of genre to this point.

I use genre as a lens to look at specific conventions within modes of storytelling onscreen, the tools filmmakers are employing, and viewer expectations. I also use genre to situate these films in the present day. Each of these movies is relatively recent: the oldest, *The Devil Wears Prada*, came out

⁸ Politico Staff, "Speaking Time Near Even in Second Presidential Debate," *Politico*, October 10, 2016, accessed April 18, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/2016-presidential-debate-speaking-times-229502>.

⁹ Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, 34

in 2006, the newest, *Ghostbusters (2016)*, just last year. All were released within ten years of each other. All of these films were box office hits, and most were critical darlings as well. All were produced from within the Hollywood machine, from major studios, with large budgets, and big stars. All were directed by men, except *Frozen*, which was co-directed by Jennifer Lee and Chris Buck. All of these movies exist with the world of narrative, commercial filmmaking.

The four films I have chosen to represent feminist movies are all films that see what Haskell saw. They take an imperfect art form, one that has for years used the female body for money but has always “preferred its women malleable and pleasing to the eye...seen but not heard,”¹⁰ and use that art form to comment on gender norms within the genre through their characters. The female characters in these movies struggle with fantastical and realistic problems, dreams, goals, and ambitions. *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Frozen*, *Ghostbusters (2016)*, and *The Devil Wears Prada* are all movies that recognize women as human, rather than angelic ideals or whorish devils, and in doing so subvert their audience’s expectations.

The point is not that they are perfect films, or perfect representations of gender politics. These four films change only small parts of genre-mandated gender relations on screen, most often that of heterosexual romance. Each of these four movies was created within the same system, and by exploring the contrasts and similarities within genres and between genres we can see the tensions that exist in that system.

¹⁰ Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 7

The films I've chosen as normal, or representative of Hollywood's take on gender, are all critically acclaimed pieces of cinema. They are good movies, but they use women as symbols, as prizes (or objects) to be won. In some cases, they barely portray women at all. *The Dark Knight*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, and *Superbad*, are representative of their specific genres, and of Hollywood as a whole, and each uses women as the film industry has for decades: "looking glasses," to quote Virginia Woolf. "Reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size."¹¹

In these movies women are conquests, or flatterers, or symbols alternately helping and hurting the male hero in his deeply personal struggle. They are both unattainable and desperate for male companionship, beautiful romantics who will settle for boys unworthy of their looks (often all the women have), and the wispiest of characters, barely gracing the screen except for moments of male gaze. And while they may not be feminist pieces of cinema, each of these masculine-centered movies has something strong to say about gender, and about male identity within gendered institutions.

I chose these seven films because I like them. I did not want to write about movies I hated, or found boring. I chose films I genuinely enjoy, franchises of which I am a fan, pieces of art that I consider formative in my own film education. I chose movies I had some attachment to, films I knew I could watch dozens of times because I pretty much had already.

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, (1929. Adelaide: accessed online April 18, 2017: <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91r/chapter2.html>), 2.

The representation of gender in each of these movies is not indicative of its quality. Films are not “good” because they are overtly feminist or “bad” because they hold up or portray gender norms. All of cinema does not hinge on being good to women. There are wonderful films that are misogynistic, amazing characters who are chauvinists, and great stories that are retrograde. Rather, by looking at commonalities within genre and departures from the norm, I have tried—as a progressive lover of film—to examine gendered trends in contemporary Hollywood cinema.

Chapter 1. ACTION

Introduction

Here is an experiment. Remember the last action film you saw. Did it have a strong male hero, dark, brooding, and violent, who murdered—a lot—even though he felt conflicted about it? Was he angry all the time, unable to interact, or maybe even identify with humanity, but willing to protect them anyway? Probably. But did you like him? Did you identify with this male hero? I bet you did, and I bet I can tell you why. Was there a scene, maybe a third into the film, where he talked to a woman, who, against all odds, cared about him and loved him, or where a woman talked about him? Was she concerned for him? Did he care about her more than himself? Was his ability to be with her (probably romantically)—as they both wanted—compromised by his heroism? And did you realize, through her, that he was actually human? That he cared about this girl so much that he was willing to risk everything for her? This might describe any one of: *The Avengers* (any of them), *Jaws*, *Captain America: The first Avenger*, *Iron Man* (any of them), *Thor* (any of them), *Superman* (any of them), *Deadpool*, *Logan*, *Wolverine* (one and two), *Jack Reacher* (any of them), *Star Wars* (Episodes I, II, III, and IV), any Bond movie from 1962 until today, *Indiana Jones* (any of them), most of the X-Men franchise, *Mission Impossible* (except *Rogue Nation*), two of four *Bourne* films, the *Star Trek* reboots, any *Spiderman*. I could go on.

In action movies, including superhero films, adventure films, police procedurals, and westerns, male heroes get away with terrible things because they have women who love them. Women allow the audience to enjoy watching these heroes (or antiheroes) perform morally ambiguous acts. Women exist so that the audience will like and forgive the male hero.

A traditional male template for the western has to do with an outsider—a man who can't handle or doesn't belong in civilization, but is perfect on the frontier—riding in and saving the day. The man may or may not meet a woman and may or may not settle down. There might be a chase, a single goal-oriented struggle between a hero and a villain, and a focus not only on physical, but also on psychological pursuit.

Men in this western template are driven and focused. They are physically strong and (especially after World War II) emotionally flawed in some way. They value hard work and righteousness, and tend to put the job before any sort of emotional or familial connection. They are not victims; they are heroes. They are expected to be gruff and difficult to get along with, but in the end they will save the day, and then they will leave, because while they value society, they do not belong in it. Some examples include John Ford's films, and the work of men such as John Wayne, Humphrey Bogart, Clint Eastwood, and Gary Cooper, including *The Searchers*, *High Noon*, *Stagecoach*, *Shane*, and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. The men in these films are loners who believe in a cause so wholeheartedly that they push away everyone else in pursuit of what they believe is right.

They may be tempted to settle down, and these heroes' internal struggle deciding if they have a place in society is often important to their characterizations. There might be a woman or two women (often seen as a light and a dark woman, one representing civility and good manners and the other representing the temptation of the uncivilized world—or a good girl and a prostitute) who convince the audience (and the main character) that he has redemptive qualities, that he can have a family and settle down, or that he has emotions after all. Women often represent civilization in these Westerns, and the love of a woman might suggest that the man can be saved.

The modern superhero and action genres evolve from the long history of Westerns in cinema. Batman follows a line of Howard Hawks characters who devote themselves to professionalism at the expense of other aspects of their lives. Films such as *Only Angels Have Wings*, *Rio Bravo*, and *Red River* offer characters that can be seen as blueprints for Batman. The men in those films devote their lives to the protection of a town or the details of a dangerous job at the expense of their own morality, personal lives, or good name.

From these quintessential Hawksian heroes comes the more traditional western early anti-hero, a character devoted to the protection of society and civilization while living on the fringes of society himself. This type of character is probably best seen in *The Searchers*, where a morally ambiguous (at best) man saves civilized people while existing on the outskirts of society, neither accepted nor rejected, necessary, but kept at a distance.

Both *The Dark Knight* and *Mad Max: Fury Road* are engaging with this history in their plot structures and portrayal of gender. While *The Dark Knight* positions Batman in the morally ambiguous, heroic role, *Mad Max: Fury Road* places Max, who fits that same traditional description, as a sidekick for a female hero, Furiosa.

The Dark Knight is an action film that treats both women and men as they are normally seen onscreen. The women justify the acts of the emotionally stunted male hero. The male hero is physically unbeatable, and the male villain is a bit effeminate and completely psychopathic. *Mad Max: Fury Road* is an action film that subverts the gender norms of an action movie. The women are not symbols; the men are not always the most physically capable; the male and female heroes work as a team without any sort of romantic inclination between them; and the villain could be seen as the patriarchy itself.

Both films use gender to evoke emotion from the audience. Both films are aware of the action genre's roots and use lessons learned from the western to offer remarkable visual storytelling. But *The Dark Knight* is an example of an exceptional action film that treats gender normally onscreen, while *Mad Max: Fury Road* is an exceptional action film that is progressive in its gender portrayal.

The Dark Knight

"It's about what's fair!"

—Two Face¹²

The Dark Knight is the second in Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy, coming between *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight Rises*. Throughout, Christian Bale plays the growly Batman, with a supporting cast including Morgan Freeman and Michael Caine. (In *The Dark Knight*, Maggie Gyllenhaal plays Rachel, who is Wayne's childhood friend-turned-love interest. In *Batman Begins* she was portrayed by Katie Holmes. You may not have noticed the switch.)

The plot of *The Dark Knight* follows Bruce Wayne/Batman as he deals with the threat of the Joker. The mob is paying the Joker to kill Batman. Meanwhile, the District Attorney Harvey Dent and his girlfriend (also an attorney) Rachel (Bruce's childhood friend) are taking down the mafia legally by putting criminals behind bars. Batman continues his work from *Batman Begins*, taking down the mafia as a vigilante, which is why the mob is paying the Joker to kill him. The story advances through huge action sequences such as car chases and elaborately planned heists. About halfway through the film Harvey sustains gruesome burns on one side of his face at the hands of the Joker and becomes a vengeful villain. Prompted by the Joker, Harvey becomes Two Face, hunts those he believes wronged him, and decides whether to kill his victims by the flip of a coin. Visually and thematically, *The*

¹² *The Dark Knight*. Directed by Christopher Nolan. 2:32. Warner Bros. 2008.

Dark Knight is a much more somber movie than its predecessor, as Batman wrestles with more death, more terrorism, and how much more power and responsibility he holds.

When it came out in 2008 *The Dark Knight* was almost universally loved by critics and movie-goers. It has a 94% rating on Rotten Tomatoes,¹³ 97% among Google users,¹⁴ a 9/10 on IMDB,¹⁵ and a slightly lower but still high score of 82 on Metacritic.¹⁶ According to Box Office Mojo it had the tenth best domestic opening weekend of all time, grossing over \$155 million in its first weekend and over five hundred million total.¹⁷ It was for a while the second highest grossing film of all time, after *Titanic*. Worldwide *The Dark Knight* has grossed over a billion dollars.¹⁸

The Dark Knight is a stellar film; a showcase of gorgeous cinematography, superlative performances—Heath Ledger’s Joker is a standout—and tight screenwriting. It’s a superhero film that helped take the genre from the comedic end of the action spectrum to the dramatic, and it is fluid throughout, trying to get at an essential part of the human condition through a man who dresses up as a bat. It is a film that takes the national 9/11

¹³ “The Dark Knight (2008),” accessed April 18, 2017, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_dark_knight.

¹⁴ “The Dark Knight,” accessed April 18, 2017: <https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=the+dark+knight>.

¹⁵ “The Dark Knight,” accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0468569/>.

¹⁶ “The Dark Knight Metascore,” accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.metacritic.com/movie/the-dark-knight>.

¹⁷ “Box Office Mojo: The Dark Knight,” accessed: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=darkknight.htm>.

¹⁸ *ibid*

angst and uses it to make a point about abuse of power and spying on citizens. It is a film that thematically holds up even in 2017. It is not a stretch to call it the best Batman film ever made.

There's a moment a little over halfway through the film, where the Joker has been caught and put in jail. The camera lingers on a steel table in the holding block, as a nameless guard lays out what can only be described as a ridiculous number of knives, blades, and other weapons such as a set of nun chucks and what is definitely a potato peeler. It is funny, but it is also brutal, and violent. It's a perfect encapsulation of how *The Dark Knight* functions, taking a moment of violence, turning it to comedy, and pushing it further, over the line, putting the audience on the edge of their seats with the horror and tension of the moment. What could he have used that potato peeler for?

Cut to the Joker, who is sitting, framed within the frame by bars, standing out against hurried blue and gray movement in muted green and purple tones, sitting happily amidst the chaos on all sides. The camera gets closer and closer but we never get past the bars. It's a piece of filmmaking that highlights the theme of *The Dark Knight*: that the normal superhero categories of "good" and "evil" don't apply. Even confronted with a sociopathic clown, there is moral ambiguity at play. We like watching the Joker but in order for the film to be affective we have to hate him. He's evil, but he's also charismatic and sometimes sympathetic. Nolan keeps us at a distance, even as the subject matter draws us in. The idea that not caring or keeping emotion at a distance makes you better at your job—a better hero, if you're Batman—pervades *The Dark Knight*.

The cinematic understanding of masculinity and professionalism that appears in *The Dark Knight* stems from the western, and is almost without exception represented in superhero movies today. The themes that *The Dark Knight* explores—a lone protector; civility and civilization against a backdrop of organized crime; and wild, savage, and barbaric intruders—are classic western themes transposed into an urban setting. Batman is both an insider and an outsider in Gotham; he belongs and yet he will never fit in. Gotham needs him, but nobody, including Wayne himself, likes Batman. Wayne is a known and feared figure, called on when there is trouble and a protector is needed, but shunned the rest of the time. He uses his fame and physical prowess to help the civilized town being attacked by savage outsiders.

Furthermore, like some of Hawks's films, *The Dark Knight* places an importance on remaining true to your work and doing your job, rather than becoming entangled in relationships. Professionalism carries with it a high moral value. As Nolan establishes Harvey's character through the first act of the film, we consistently see him risk his life for the job—something Rachel bemoans again and again—and we interpret that dedication to his work as the morally upstanding thing to do. When Wayne tells Rachel that the time may come soon when Gotham no longer needs Batman it is with the understanding that as long as Gotham needs him, he will continue to risk his life for the city, at the expense of any relationship with Rachel.

In some ways though, Batman is unlike Hawksian heroes. His vigilantism is based on an emotional need for revenge, and he is often grieving, enraged, or both. While he does try to suppress emotion, his

predilection towards emotional turbulence is what makes him a good hero; he feels he has a personal duty to protect Gotham, and every strike against the city is a personal attack on him. For Batman, the emotional side of his personality is vengeful. Thinking about this as gendered, Batman displays emotion more than one would expect a male superhero to do, since it is women who are conventionally defined by emotion, and men by reason.

Batman manages to conflate justice and vengeance through working as a vigilante. *The Dark Knight* is predicated on Batman's need for revenge, and conversely, his desire to protect Gotham by enacting justice. This conflation of two traditionally opposite ideals—justice and vengeance—is at the moral center of *The Dark Knight*, and Batman's own questions about morality. He becomes a superhero to avenge his parents, and because of their deaths he must protect Gotham. He worries about whether his actions are just, but will always suppress his emotional desires and psychological faults so that he can keep a tentative peace in Gotham.

But while Batman acts outside of the law as a vigilante, he is always in consort with it, dispensing justice as he seeks vengeance by virtue of always working with law enforcement. We respect him both because he takes justice into his own hands, and because he is working towards the same goals as the police. Nolan never pretends that Batman is harmless, but his personal motivations align enough with Gotham's societal ones that vengeance for Batman becomes justice for Gotham.

The Joker comes and takes the peace achieved in *Batman Begins* from Batman, forcing him to reevaluate his priorities and motivations. Batman has

rules (mainly no killing, which he believes makes him better than the criminals he fights), but he will sacrifice his moral high ground in certain instances, specifically in order to take revenge on those who have harmed his family. Nolan repeatedly shows Batman using his position as Gotham's hero to avenge personal wrongs. In doing so, he asks us to question Batman's position as morally clean. Throughout *The Dark Knight* Batman fails as Gotham's hero, and those failures and resulting losses cause him to compromise his commitment to justice in order to make up for his losses. The most important loss Batman suffers in *The Dark Knight* is Rachel, which brings us to the discussion of gender.

Rachel is the moral center of Batman's life. He loves her and has known her all his life. She is his family. She fights for and with the law. While she is not physically powerful, she is beautiful and smart—two qualities that make both the audience and the male heroes want to protect her. She is the force that manages to draw the audience in and keep us aligned with all the hardened, stoic men. Her devotion to her childhood friend, Bruce Wayne, is reciprocated, and creates an emotional conflict because they are unable to act on their love, as she is dating Harvey Dent and Bruce is the Batman. Regardless, Rachel is the one thing Batman cannot live without, and she serves as a symbol of his humanity.

Her death catapults him into a hunt for the Joker that becomes morally corrupt. The Joker manipulates Batman psychologically, trying to emotionally break him by asking him to choose between saving Rachel or Harvey. The Joker informs Batman and the police that he has kidnapped

Rachel and Harvey, and that they are both in peril. Batman knows he should save Harvey, but he goes to Rachel instead. When he arrives where Rachel is supposed to be held, it turns out Harvey is there. If Batman had made the professional choice and tried to save Harvey, he would have found Rachel and she could have survived.

Rachel and Harvey represent the two sides of Batman's life: the personal and the professional (or the emotional, and the unemotional). Harvey stands for Gotham, which Batman must protect at the expense of his personal life and emotions, primarily his affection for Rachel. Rachel stands as a symbol for his family and humanity. He has a personal duty to rescue Rachel and a professional one to save Dent, and by picking the personal Batman puts Gotham in peril. The Joker forces Batman to choose in a scenario where both choices are wrong.

From the standpoint of the film's sentimental notion of male valor, however, choosing Rachel is the only choice. Her death authorizes Batman to escalate his righteous violence precisely because killing her is such a personal attack from the Joker. This, of course, just reinforces and emphasizes how Rachel functions in *The Dark Knight*, which is as a symbol. She is important because she represents Batman's emotional and moral world.

Rachel's death hits both Batman and the audience hard, and after her death we forgive his more morally uncomfortable actions. Batman wants revenge on the Joker for killing Rachel, and is willing to risk his humanity to get that. He loses the distance he has kept from the Joker and allows himself to be pulled completely into the game that the Joker is playing. He uses all the

cellphones in Gotham “for good” by employing a sonar device to spy on the entire city, and only stops himself from killing the Joker so he can get to Two Face, whom he then kills. Even when he is told that he is becoming what he is fighting, Batman doesn’t stop. The audience forgives him for his vigilantism because he is doing it for Rachel, whom the audience cared so deeply about.

Nevertheless, the story is not about Rachel’s death, and the audiences does not mourn her for very long; Nolan sweeps us right back into the action, and violence, and the ethical quandary of the fight between Batman and the Joker. Rachel is alive only until she serves Wayne (and Nolan) better as a memory than as a person—lending meaning to the emotional and moral struggles within his world, rather than as a character in her own right.

In *The Dark Knight*, to be a man is to be singularly able, the only one who can do a certain job. Harvey Dent can litigate and administrate Gotham into a civilized society; Batman can physically save Gotham by outrunning, outfighting, and outthinking any of the generic gangsters in the city; the Joker (Batman’s foil) can singularly cause chaos and defy logic. Even Alfred, Lucius, and Jim Gordon are special. To be a woman is to be generic—Rachel manages to be everything and nothing at the same time: a symbol. She is nostalgia, she is the memory of Bruce’s parents, she is a lawyer, she is Harvey’s girlfriend, she is the love of Batman’s life, she is his savior, and she is also totally and completely expendable. He needs her to die in order to become the titular dark knight, in order to save Gotham and beat the Joker.

Bruce's romance narrative with Rachel serves as a reason for him to keep fighting, to stay manic. His love for Rachel is doomed from the start; she will always be an emotional goad for him to continue to fight against Gotham's mob. She will always be an object to steal, a thing to pursue, a love to avenge. As much as he may want to retire and settle down with her, he will never be able to give up being Batman.

The Joker is the most powerful character in the film, and the only one focused solely on his job. As the Joker makes perfectly clear: compromised morals don't make you weak; love and family do. But Batman's weakness—Rachel—is what makes him good. Following in the footsteps of a long line of action heroes, Batman is able to get away with morally dubious actions because a woman cares for him.

Mad Max: Fury Road

“Who killed the world?”

—The Splendid Angharad¹⁹

Mad Max: Fury Road, the fourth film in the *Mad Max* franchise, is written and directed by George Miller. It stars Charlize Theron as Imperator Furiosa, and Tom Hardy as the titular Max. The film takes place in a not-so-distant future where resources like water, oil, and bullets are scarce. While the film begins with Max and lets the audience in on parts of his back-story, the main narrative is centered on Furiosa.

Mad Max: Fury Road is a traditional western combined with a modern-day superhero tale. The narrative is a chase, mixed with revenge, mixed with a captivity/abduction story, but the plot is as simple as a journey there and back again.²⁰

The film opens with a voiceover from Max Rockatansky (Tom Hardy), who informs us that the world has been consumed by nuclear holocaust. He lives on his own, running from hallucinations of “those he could not save” (his wife and daughter). He is captured and taken to the Citadel, where Immortan Joe (Hugh Keys-Byrn) reigns. Joe’s empire runs on the slave labor of an army of War Boys, wives for breeding, and thirsty citizens who live underground in the hostile desert environment. Max is chained up and used as a “blood bag” for Nux (Nicholas Hoult), a dying War Boy. At the same time, Imperator

¹⁹ *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Directed by George Miller. 2:00. Warner Bros. 2015.

²⁰ Much like the Hobbit

Furiosa (Charlize Theron) drives out to collect bullets from the Bullet Farmer and Guzzoline from Gas Town in a giant War Rig.

About half way to Gas Town Furiosa goes rogue and drives into unknown territory. Smuggled in her tanker are Immorten Joe's five wives (Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, Zoë Kravitz, Riley Keough, Courtney Eaton, and Abbey Lee), all looking, like Furiosa, for some form of freedom. Immorten Joe wants his property back, so he drives after them with a war party. Nux is among the party, with dreams of dying for Joe in the process. He chains Max to the front of his car so he can continue to receive Max's blood.

Along the way Furiosa and Max meet, fight, and form a tentative alliance that grows stronger as they travel together to the Green Place, where Furiosa was born. The Green Place is no longer green, and Furiosa's tribe—a female army called the Vuvalini—has been reduced to a group of nomadic women on motorcycles. The wives, the Vuvalini, Furiosa, Max, and Nux realize they cannot escape their pursuers, and decide to go back and fight, liberating the Citadel from Joe's tyrannical regime.

When it was released, *Fury Road* drew a little controversy for focusing on a story about women, specifically Furiosa, as opposed to Max. Overwhelmingly, though, critics loved the film. It has a 97% “fresh” rating on Rotten Tomatoes,²¹ and a Metascore of 90 (universal acclaim) on Metacritic.²²

²¹ “Mad Max: Fury Road (2015),” accessed April 18, 2017: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/mad_max_fury_road.

²² “Mad Max: Fury Road 2015 Metascore,” accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.metacritic.com/movie/mad-max-fury-road>.

Certain men's rights activists did call for boycotts of the film,²³ but even John Nolte (writing for Breitbart) thought *Fury Road* was both good cinema and strikingly feminist.²⁴

Even before *Fury Road*, Miller had been trying to make a female-driven action film, so he set out to treat his female characters well. He had Eve Ensler (who wrote *The Vagina Monologues*) consult,²⁵ and used her insight to help round out every role, from Furiosa to the supporting female characters, giving them backstories and personalities. It pays off, and not just for the supporting characters. Furiosa subverts expectations of a western or superhero film at every turn by being a female hero in the generic male blueprint. Max exists as a hero outside society; Furiosa revolts from within that society. She was a captive, but she saved herself. She worked her way up, she plotted, and she managed—alone, in a testosterone-fueled (almost literally) society—to become one of the best at driving, the most valued skill in the Citadel.

In *Fury Road*, most of the western template also applies to Max. He does not belong to or fit in with society—in fact he is on the run from

²³ Aaron Clarey, "Why You Should Not Go See 'Mad Max: Feminist Raod'" *Return of Kings*, May 11, 2015. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.returnofkings.com/63036/why-you-should-not-go-see-mad-max-feminist-road>.

²⁴ Nolte, John. "Mad Max: Fury Road' Review: Feminism and Metal Mangling Done Right." *Breitbart*, May 15, 2015. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.breitbart.com/big-hollywood/2015/05/15/mad-max-fury-road-review-metal-mangling-and-feminism-done-right/>.

²⁵ A.A. Dowd, "With *Fury Road*, Mad Max Roars Triumphant Back into Theaters." *The A. V. Club*, May 13, 2015. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.avclub.com/review/fury-road-mad-max-roars-triumphantly-back-theaters-219393>

humanity in general. He prefers to be alone. He is physically strong and psychologically flawed. He is an avenger and a protector, but he failed to protect his family and no longer considers himself suited for those roles.

The opening moments of *Fury Road* are some of the most terrifying. Max stands looking out at a bleak nothingness, a cowboy and his horse (in this case, his car), ready to conquer the wild. We know he hears voices, because we hear them too, and we assume (although it is not explicitly stated) that it is Max's daughter. Max is haunted by a hallucination of her, a flashing image that distracts him from the world around him and fills the screen, alternately hindering and helping him, tormenting his psyche, and allowing him to recognize humanity when he sees it.

When we see reality from Max's point of view, especially towards the beginning of the film, it is always disorienting and anxious. The sequence where Max attempts to escape from the War Boys as they brand him feels disjointed and confused; we learn the rules of the world with Max at every obstacle, and we fear the War Boys as Max does. His constant fighting combined with the loss of his daughter that is still haunting him and his being marked as different than the War Boys all cement his heroic status for the audience. While we may not know much about him, we know we want to be on his side, and we know that he is virtuous. This is a man who does not like to kill; he wants only to escape.

That he does not fit in with society aligns the audience with Max. Society is horrible, as we learn very quickly. Miller shows us haunting images of women pumping breast milk all day, War Boys fighting each other, or

peeking out from dark tunnels, scared of sunlight. Water is called Aqua Cola and is tightly rationed. Even the wives, living lives of relative luxury, are branded as property with Joe's insignia. Joe himself, leader of the citadel, cannot breath without an apparatus, and his higher-class children are similarly physically hindered. Max's distrust of society is another certification of his virtue: he is an outsider who can see the injustices of civilization for what they are, even if he is not in a position to be able to do anything about it.

After a brief introduction to Max's predicament, the audience is brought to the main plot of the film. The War Rig, with Furiosa driving, leaves to cheers. Furiosa drives off the expected route with no warning, and suddenly all the War Boys and Immortens Joe himself are driving after her. We have been set up to believe that Max will be the hero. But as soon as we begin to follow Furiosa, Max becomes first an afterthought, then a hindrance, and finally a sidekick.

Max meets Furiosa while she and the wives are resting. They have just survived a horrific sandstorm, and the wives are out in the open for the first time. They have water, and wire cutters, and so Max carries an unconscious Nux over to demand help breaking the chain connecting them. Furiosa is not wearing her prosthetic arm, and Max is wielding a gun that the audience knows will not fire, chained through a car door to Nux. As Miller has pointed out, "they are both handicapped."²⁶ They fight, on equal terms, each

²⁶ Mekado Murphy, "George Miller Narrates a Sequence from his Film Featuring Tom Hardy, Charlize Theron and Nicholous Hoult." *The New York Times*. May 14, 2015. Photo by Jasin Boland/Warner Bros. Accessed April 18,

alternately taking the upper hand, each with different levels of knowledge. They both want to escape from Immortan Joe, so they strike up an alliance that grows stronger as they overcome obstacles together over the next two thirds of the film, as they stop keeping secrets and start trusting each other.

In action films from westerns through *The Dark Knight* and the Marvel franchises, audiences care about male heroes because they protect women. In *Fury Road* a major genre subversion is that there exists no understanding that men will protect women. Max does not protect or save Furiosa because she is innocent or weak or female. It isn't a given in the world of *Fury Road* that women should be protected, unless it is because they are property. And Max is not seen as virtuous or human because of Furiosa. She is not a symbol for him. In *The Dark Knight*, masculinity is neutral: none of the male villains are threatening because they are men. In *Fury Road*, however the big scary thing that has to be escaped isn't a "savage" or a terrorist. Like much of the real world, the threat in *Mad Max: Fury road* is masculinity itself.²⁷ There is no way in *Fury Road* for Max to be a savior or a protector, because the very thing that these women need to be protected from is the patriarchy.²⁸

2017: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/15/movies/review-mad-max-fury-road-still-angry-after-all-these-years.html?referrer=google_kp&r=0.

²⁷ Lauren, Penny, "Mad Max' Is a Feminist Playbook for Surviving Dystopia." *Buzzfeed*, May 23, 2015. Accessed April 18, 2017: https://www.buzzfeed.com/lauriepenny/the-fast-and-the-feminist?utm_term=.rpRR86kxA#.mpbqv3kR6.

²⁸ Jessica Valenti, "Sexists Are Scared of Mad Max Because it is a Call to Dismantle Patriarchies." *The Guardian*, May 27, 2015. Accessed April 18, 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/27/sexists-are-scared-of-mad-max-because-it-is-a-call-to-dismantle-patriarchies>.

When Furiosa meets Max for the first time it would make sense for the two of them to team up, to trust each other, and to escape together. But they can't. For Max, Furiosa represents society, a stability that he doesn't desire or think he deserves. For Furiosa, Max represents every horror she and the Wives have had to live through their entire lives in the citadel.

Furiosa doesn't save Max in any emotional way, but she does save his life over and over again. He would not survive without her; she knows more than him, because she is stronger than him, a better shot than him, and is often smarter than him. Later, he saves her life, and it is left ambiguous, though hinted at, that he saves her because he cares for her. Together, they are invincible, which is a difference from a traditional western, where a woman is almost always a handicap, something that has to be protected.

In mainstream action films, it is uncommon to see women take revenge for violence against women. It is further surprising to see violence against women condemned onscreen, especially in an expensive, Hollywood film. Action movies rely on the use of women in peril as catalyst for male action. They don't often explore the question of what the woman could do to save herself, or treat her life as equally engaging and as narratively important as the male hero's.

Comparing *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and *The Dark Knight* reveals more clearly the large-scale changes *Mad Max* makes to the superhero genre. Furiosa's backstory is just as psychologically and physically intense as Batman's. Both grew up in the best society their respective worlds had to offer, Bruce with the protection and support of his rich parents, Furiosa in the

Green Place. Both had that ripped away from them, and underwent hellish training to rise to the top of the food chain in the dystopia they now inhabit.

There are many differences between these heroes, but none so glaring as the scale of what they are trying to personally accomplish. Batman is trying to save Gotham, millions of people, and the very fabric of civilization. Furiosa cannot think on that scale at the beginning of *Mad Max: Fury Road*. She is trying to save five people, and maybe herself.

Sacrifice is another key difference between the two heroes. Batman sacrifices his reputation (but only part of it, since he hides behind a mask), while Furiosa sacrifices human connection, any important relationship, her livelihood, and her life. She gives up tangible, physical aspects of herself, while Wayne is parting with an emotional tenderness, or a psychological principle. But as Wayne becomes a harder and less emotionally accessible person he is still the hero. Furiosa's main goal is to protect and save lives; her caring nature and willingness to physically sacrifice herself for others is an important part of her characterization, and a reason the audience aligns with her.

The greatest fear for the wives in *Fury Road* is not death, but recapture, rape, and torture. These traumas exist for women all over, as women on college campuses are sexually assaulted, access to contraceptives and abortion rights are taken away, and our president is a misogynist who has called women pigs, and admitted to sexual assault. Reality is reflected in the fiction of these films: men can think about saving the world; women have to worry about saving themselves.

In *The Dark Knight*, Rachel's death is a symbol, a confirmation that the Joker is evil and an invitation for revenge. In *Fury Road* this is not the case; the wives' deaths are not symbolic, they are real losses for Furiosa. But while Furiosa occupies the traditional role of protector, she has no interest in revenge for the deaths of her protectees. When she kills Immortan Joe it is for herself. Her last words to him are, "Remember me?"

As in *The Dark Knight*, there are huge utopian ideals at stake in *Fury Road*. Furiosa and the Vuvalini go back to take down Immortan Joe in order to redeem civilization. A difference is that in *The Dark Knight* Batman works with the law to preserve social order. In *The Dark Knight* society is imagined to be decent and benevolent. In *Fury Road*, our heroine wants to overthrow an oppressive and cruel social order. It is the difference between an essentially conservative perspective and an implicitly revolutionary one.

And the revolutionaries in *Fury Road* are majority female. The battle is Immortan Joe's War Boys against the wives and the Vuvalini, lead by Furiosa. *Fury Road* raises Furiosa as the hero and savior. The final shot of the film is one of her, bruised and broken but alive. The lens flares and the sun shining down on her present her as Christ-like, as she looks down on the people she saved, and spots Max, walking away in the distance.

Chapter 2. DISNEY

Frozen

“Who marries a man they just met?”
“It’s true love!”

—Kristoff and Anna²⁹

Since 1937, when *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* was released, Disney has relied on a specific mold for telling feature, animated, children’s stories. Recently the studio has been trying to diversify their tired narrative of princesses being saved by princes and marrying immediately, but they hadn’t quite achieved success—despite beautiful attempts like *Tangled*—until *Frozen*.

Frozen works because it is using decades of cultural norms—created by the studio that released it—against its audience. The standard Disney Princess Movie works like this: there is a beautiful princess. She has to leave her home for some reason, perhaps a wicked stepmother (*Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella* essentially *The Lion King*), or an evil witch (*The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, The Princess and the Frog*). She adapts immediately to her new surroundings, but always longs for her home. She falls into peril because of her original tormenter, and is rescued by a handsome prince. They get married, live happily ever after, and expel the evil stepmother/witch/lion from the kingdom. The end.

²⁹ *Frozen*, Directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee. 1:42. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures: 2013.

The stories these films tell rely mainly on two distinct conventions: the villain, who is the epitome of evil, and the princess, who is the embodiment of good. Disney's princess films evoke clear emotional dualities: the audience must hate or fear the villain and love or admire the princess. Within this structure, the heroes of these stories, the princesses, are less people than they are ideals or representations. Women this pure and perfect don't exist in the real world, just as villains without complexity are a construct of melodrama, rather than reality.

Which is not to say that Disney Princess films aren't complex in many ways. The pure visual elements of the animation—in *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and The Beast*, and *Pocahontas* especially—create worlds to which the computer-aided animation of today doesn't quite compare. For a viewer watching *Beauty and the Beast* it can feel not only as if we're being transported back to 1991, when live action remakes of classic animated films weren't yet a thing, but to a French village in the 1700s.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs was produced by Walt Disney Productions and released by RKO in 1937. It was briefly the highest grossing sound film of all time.³⁰ *Snow White* begins as the titular Snow White is born. Her mother dies and her father remarries. Her stepmother has a magic mirror, is vain and obsessed with power, and becomes queen when Snow White's father dies in the first couple minutes of the film. She tries to have

³⁰ "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," *Box Office Mojo*, accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=snowwhite.htm>

Snow White killed by a huntsman in her employ, but the huntsman cannot bring himself to kill her. Snow White finds refuge with seven dwarfs, until the wicked queen realizes (by use of the magic mirror) that she is alive. She gives Snow White a poisoned apple, seemingly killing her. The dwarfs, who cannot bring themselves to bury such beauty in the ground, encase her in a glass coffin. A handsome prince rides by, sees her, kisses her, and she wakes up. They all live happily ever after.

These same archetypes set forth in *Snow White* will return again and again in Disney films. Evil stepmothers who are also witches. Witches (always women) who are ugly inside and often out; and obsessed with power and beauty, especially the beauty of the younger princess. The depictions of femininity in these films are diametrically opposed. Women are either young and beautiful and good (and, later, smart), or old and ugly and evil (and, later, stupid, or at least blinded by greed). Masculinity is no more nuanced. Men are well-meaning, but silly (think of the fathers in *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, the dwarves in *Snow White*, the thieves in *Tangled*, Timon and Pumbaa in *The Lion King*, all the soldiers in *Mulan*), or gorgeous, suave heroes who save the day (the Prince Charmings). In the films about princesses these men don't tend to have real characterization ever; and in the films about princes they go through a selfish period and then find their humanity through their love for the princess (as in *Aladdin*, *Tangled*, and even *Mulan*).

Disney (and now Pixar) movies are often the first introduction children have to cinema. The first movies kids my age saw in theaters were *Finding*

Nemo, *Toy Story*, *The Lion King* and *Pocahontas*. The first movie I saw in theaters was *The Rugrats Movie*, which was terrifying, and then *Spy Kids 3D*, also terrifying, and I refused to step foot in a movie theater until *The Princess Diaries*,³¹ but they mixed up the projection and a theater full of small children watched the first fourteen minutes of *Original Sin*, an underperforming erotic thriller, so that was also terrifying, though the experience did begin a longstanding love of Anne Hathaway for me. But anyway, moving on.

Disney is our foray into the world of adults, and the lessons these movies teach are ingrained into American culture, and Hollywood film. Gender roles that Disney established permeate almost every movie produced in America today, because likely every filmmaker working in Hollywood has grown up on Disney movies. Rachel in *The Dark Knight* echoes Jasmine in *Aladdin*, validating Aladdin's humanity even through his hardened, "street-urchin" exterior. The way women exist as trophies, objects, and afterthoughts in *The Wolf of Wall Street*³² could be the story of *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, or *Moana* from the male lead's perspective.

With *Frozen*, Disney is building on decades of history, and using that history to subvert expectations in fascinating ways. The story of *Frozen* is about Elsa (Idina Menzel) and Anna (Kristin Bell), two sisters, also princesses, living in a fairytale Nordic kingdom called Arendelle. Very quickly

³¹ This is the order of events exactly how I remember them. However, in researching this thesis I have discovered that *Spy Kids 3D* was released in 2003 and *The Princess Diaries* in 2001. Memory, it turns out, is a fickle thing.

³² See chapter 3.

in the story, their parents, the king and queen, pass away, and the sisters are left alone until Elsa comes of age and can fill her parents' shoes and rule the kingdom.

Beyond being the future leader of a kingdom, Elsa also has to worry about her own magic. In a very early sequence, Elsa and Anna are playing when Elsa accidentally hits Anna with some sort of icy blast of magic. Anna is hurt, but saved by a group of trolls. Because of this, Elsa's parents help her to "conceal, don't feel" her powers, hiding them from the world, and her sister.

All of this happens within the first ten minutes of the film. The major plot revolves around Anna and her quest to make her sister open up to her about all the stress in her life, a surprisingly relatable goal for a film about a woman who has the power to create life.

Elsa and Anna could not be more different, in both personality and purpose; Elsa runs a kingdom, Anna mostly sings all day. Elsa walks around with abnormal control; she spends her life concealing her powers and her feelings from the world, while Anna wants nothing more than to feel, see, and experience everything. She is emotionally open and physically clumsy, receptive to the world around her.

Elsa comes of age and becomes the queen, so the gates of the castle, which have been closed for years, are opened. Anna meets Hans, a handsome prince, with whom she gets along perfectly (they "finish each others sandwiches"). Hans asks Anna to marry him, and she says yes. During the party after the ceremony, Anna asks for Elsa's blessing, and when she won't give it to a man she and Anna just met, the sisters get in a fight. Anna tears

Elsa's glove off (which she has been using to conceal her magic) and as Elsa and those around her become more and more scared her magic reflects her fear. She casts uncontrolled spells, which escalate into jagged icicles, swirling winds, and finally an eternal winter.

Elsa runs away, and Anna decides to go and find her. On the way she meets Kristoff (Jonathan Groff), who sells ice for a living, and Olaf (Josh Gad), a snowman created by Elsa. Together the three of them and Kristoff's pet reindeer Sven go to the castle that Elsa created for herself on top of a mountain and try to bring her back so she can reverse the eternal winter. At the same time, Hans and the Duke of Weselton—another guest at the party—send men to go and bring back or kill Elsa, which they think will stop the winter.

Elsa accidentally strikes Anna with her magic, and Kristoff and Olaf go to save Anna, taking her away from Elsa, while the men coming to bring Elsa back attack her. She is knocked out, and put in prison back in Arendelle.

Meanwhile, Anna is dying. Kristoff takes her to his family, the same group of trolls that saved Anna in the beginning of the film, who tell her that “only an act of true love” will save her. Anna and Kristoff take this to mean true love's kiss, and rush Anna back to Arendelle and to Hans, her fiancé and presumably her true love.

Hans reveals he has been lying to Anna, that he does not love her at all, that he has been using her to become king, and he leaves her for dead. Then he sentences Elsa to death. Elsa and Anna both escape, and Hans, Elsa, and Anna all meet on the frozen lake, surrounded by icy ships and snowy wind. At

the same time, Kristoff—who has come to care for Anna—comes back to save her. Anna sees Kristoff at one end of the fjord and Elsa at the other, and runs to save Elsa. Just as Hans is about to strike Elsa down, Anna turns to ice in front of her, stopping Hans’s sword and breaking the curse through her act of true love towards her sister. Anna returns to her normal, non-icy state, Elsa becomes queen, the citizens of Arendelle realize she is not a monster, and everyone lives happily ever after.

Elsa is the most interesting character in *Frozen* because she is given so much emotional turmoil. She is the ruler of a kingdom, in charge of economic, social, and cultural decisions, and she is hiding a huge part of herself. She is also the main source of merchandise from *Frozen*.³³ As children everywhere might tell you, it’s way cooler to be an ice queen than a normal princess.

Elsa puts on a severe emotional mask as a child, and *Frozen* is the story of her letting go (ha ha), first by mistake and eventually with purpose. She spends her time concealing her abilities from the world, for fear that she will be hurt by it, and especially for fear that she will hurt others. The fact that she cares is what drives her to anger. It is also what makes her hurt those she cares about, which is the reason the audience can identify with her. Elsa is not Maleficent or Ursula; she is not evil.

Even in subtle ways, Elsa defies years of cultural norms and feminine archetypes. She creates Olaf, literally gives him life, and then abandons him. She physically hurts her sister twice, both times severely. And yet the

³³ Michal Lev-Ram, “Frozen’s Elsa Wins in Retail, but Anna is the Real Leader.” *Fortune*, November 6, 2014. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://fortune.com/2014/11/06/disney-frozen/>.

audience is still asked to align with her. While she is essentially the antagonist of the film in the sense that she creates the obstacles the heroes face, she is also a quintessentially good person, scared and misunderstood, facing the world alone. She has her own struggles and triumphs that align the audience with her. She is a princess, she is beautiful, she is emotionally closed off, but she's still nice; and she is not interested in any romantic relationship. Such a complex female antagonist has never existed in a Disney picture before.

Elsa's inability to display her emotions is odd for a sympathetic female character. She appears closed off and cold, and fights hard to hold onto her emotions rather than display them to the world as Anna does. Even her song "Let It Go" is about how she would rather live alone than be herself around others. Anna is upset that Elsa didn't tell her about her magic. But of course Elsa didn't tell Anna because the trolls and her parents told her not to do so. It is understandable that she wouldn't want to tell anyone about her powers, considering the way they treat her when she does: calling her a monster and banishing her from her own kingdom. Elsa has to figure out how to interact with a world that can't possibly understand her, basically a metaphor for every marginalized group today.³⁴

The disparity between Elsa and Anna's emotional range cause problems between them. When Anna comes to take Elsa back to the kingdom, Anna is excited, and overwhelmed. Elsa is still regal and closed off. Elsa's version of letting her hair down is a slightly messy braid, a castle made of ice,

³⁴ Angel Daniel Matos, "Conceal, Don't Feel: A Queer Reading of Disney's 'Frozen.'" *angelmatos.com*, January 19, 2014. Accessed April 18, 2017: <https://angelmatos.net/2014/01/19/disneys-frozen-queer/>.

and a tight dress with a thin slit in it. Even when she is alone she maintains strict control over her emotions and powers. She mentions, “I never knew what I was capable of,” and Menzel delivers the line with a touch of pride. But there is always the knowledge that Elsa can only be herself when she is alone, far away from others. She backs away as soon as Anna starts talking about prior events, and as soon as she begins to feel attacked, she lashes out with her magic, causing serious, though accidental, damage.

Elsa’s entire motivation is one of fear that she has consistently been hurting the people and place that she loves. As she says to Anna in her ice castle, “I belong here, alone, where I can be who I am without hurting anyone.” And her characterization as a powerful woman handicapped by fear gives *Frozen* depth to its plot and characters. The twist in *Frozen*, that Elsa and Anna can save each other and themselves, is entirely new for Disney, and for their viewership. The primary catalyst for the plot of *Frozen* is Anna trying to understand Elsa, rather than any one villain. And while there are villainous characters, there is no traditional antagonist. It is a sophisticated story, especially for a children’s movie.

Like the two female leads, there are a range of male characters, all with different personalities, interests, and ideas. One of the reasons *Frozen* manages to have such well-rounded characters is the clarity of motivations for the whole cast. No one in *Frozen* is simply evil, and no one simply good. No character is pure or perfect; all have human flaws. And all the main characters act logically. For example, Hans is a great prince, but a horrible human being, as we find out in a twist at the end. His motivations are plain: he is thirteenth

in line for the throne in his own kingdom. While he does become an attempted murderer, he is still seen as trying to be a good ruler, giving blankets to the citizens and protecting the interests of Arendelle. Even the Duke of Weselton (Alan Tudyk), a more comedic-relief-type bad guy, has clear interests in trying to stop Elsa's curse: Weselton is Arendelle's closest partner in trade. *Frozen* exists in a universe strikingly similar to the one we live in: villains do not always look like villains, and sometimes our closest relations hurt us more than our enemies ever could.

Traditionally, women are seen onscreen as emotional, while men are seen as more physically intimidating (the one excepted emotion being anger, which men are allowed to feel and women are not). The rules often ascribed to men onscreen follow Elsa in *Frozen*, creating a foil for Anna. Elsa is physically strong and emotionally closed off, while Anna is clumsy and emotional. During *Do You Want to Build a Snowman*, when their parents are leaving, Anna throws herself at them, giving them a big hug, while Elsa refuses to touch her mother and father, preferring to curtsy.

Even when she is alone Elsa is concealing, by virtue of not being around anyone. Only in the very last scene of the film does she use her powers in a controlled way while around others. But Elsa cannot get past her fear until she is around others, expressing the emotions she's been trying to hide. What saves her in the end is raw emotion: her sister's love.

The entire end of *Frozen* exists in the face of years of both Disney and non-Disney children's films. Hans has been generally gracious, seems nice, and most of all takes care of Arendelle while Anna and Elsa are away. It seems

he only wants to be a good prince and help the kingdom. So when Anna returns and he locks her in a cold, dark room, leaving her for dead, it comes as a huge shock. *Frozen* sets up for the audience that Kristoff will be Anna's true love, as they travel together, and he saves her a few times. So the audience may already suspect that Anna does not end up with Hans. But Hans as a villain is a twist that only someone who has never seen, or heard of the Disney canon might see coming.

Hans's rejection of Anna also makes it clear, if it was not already, that Elsa is not the villain in *Frozen*. Throughout the Disney canon most all explicitly powerful female characters are villains. Women such as Cruella de Ville, Melefecent, and more recently Mother Gothel—all powerful characters—all have one dimensional motivations and characterizations. Elsa may have the ability to do what other animated villains achieve, but she is given such depth and emotional development that she cannot be a bad person, even if she is not the hero. Unlike other powerful female antagonists, the audience is asked to identify with Elsa, root for her, and care for her.

Anna is the hero, and her heroic actions similarly refute many of the themes and expectations Disney has worked on over years of filmmaking. In what should be the last moments of her life, Anna looks across the frozen fjord to see Kristoff on one side and Elsa on the other. She knows she will die if she is not saved by an act of true love, something she (and we, set up by years of Disney stories) believes must be a true love's kiss. Anna sees Kristoff as her true love, and yet, instead of running towards him, she runs to Elsa and saves her sister. Anna saving herself by saving Elsa is another twist on the

Disney archetype that no seasoned viewer could foresee. Anna turning away from Kristoff is unheard of in all of Disney before *Frozen*.

The choice to save Elsa seems logical, but somehow it is a choice that changes not only *Frozen*, but also every princess movie Disney has made. Anna decides that Elsa matters more than true love, than even her own life. Seen another way, *Frozen* is remarking that there can be true love outside of a relationship between a prince and a princess. Of course, Anna giving up her life for Elsa is an act of true love, and Anna saves herself by saving her sister.

A princess who can save herself might not need a prince. Like Elsa, with whom Hans mentions no one was “getting anywhere,” Anna does not need a man to save her. Her relationship with Kristoff is one that develops over time into a friendship, a mutual bond of respect and fraternity that comes with running away from a giant snow monster, and then is only hinted at becoming romantic. There is no marriage in *Frozen*, which is a relief.

In the final scenes of the film, Anna shows Kristoff the new sled she promised him, and he swings her around in the air, saying, “I could kiss you.” The music swells and cuts out at this moment, and, true to Anna’s character, it gets awkward. Kristoff continues, “I’d like to, could I, may we?” and then Anna kisses him. It’s a small moment and it earns a laugh, but it’s also a sweet moment of mutual consent and friendship-based romance. That Disney has come from *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* to *Frozen* is amazing.

Chapter 3. THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA and THE WOLF OF WALL STREET

Introduction

I have chosen *The Devil Wears Prada* and *The Wolf of Wall Street* as two films that accompany each other well. Both films revolve around a workplace. They each have a secondary plot involving personal romantic lives that go astray, and they each rely heavily on gender to tell their stories affectively. They both tell stories of high-powered New York offices, ambitious workers, and billion dollar industries. And they are each difficult to categorize by genre.

Is *The Devil Wears Prada* a romantic comedy or a workplace melodrama? Can we qualify it as whatever the filmic version of “chick lit” is? Perhaps it falls into the wide category of adaptation. I grew up with this film. I watched it at every birthday party I attended from sixth grade through eighth grade; maybe it’s a children’s movie. Maybe the genre is simply “Meryl Streep.”

Like *The Devil Wears Prada*, Martin Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street* is a film that is hard to classify by genre. In many ways it is a comedy; it is funny. It portrays exaggerated behavior and takes time out of plot to show long, humorous sequences only because they are funny. But it is also dark and dramatic. Perhaps the genre is “Martin Scorsese” or “Leonardo DiCaprio.”

Like *The Devil Wears Prada*, *The Wolf of Wall Street* indulges in satire, and raises the question for the viewer of whether it is depicting a world in order to make fun of it or in order to celebrate it. Both movies tell the stories of horrible, incredibly successful bosses. And both films rely heavily on the charm and charisma of their stars (Meryl Streep and Leonardo DiCaprio) to undercut how awful the characters they portray are.

The Devil Wears Prada

“A million girls would kill for that job.”

—Everyone³⁵

The Devil Wears Prada is a 2006 film based on a pretty boring 2003 book of the same name, by Lauren Weisberger. Weisberger worked for a while as the assistant to Vogue editor Anna Wintour, whom she loathed, and about whom she wrote a tell-all book.

Maybe surprisingly for a film adaptation of a novel, *The Devil Wears Prada* is a more nuanced story than Weisberger’s book, in a large part because of Meryl Streep, who plays the titular Devil—Miranda Priestly, the editor-in-chief of Runway, a Vogue stand-in—with the kind of grace and power that only Meryl Streep can.

The plot revolves around Andrea “Andy” Sachs, a recent graduate and aspiring journalist, who lands a coveted job at Runway magazine as Miranda’s second assistant. Andrea struggles to balance her ever more demanding work life with her personal life (she’s dating *Entourage*-era Adrian Grenier, whose character’s name I know only because I looked it up—it’s Nate—even though I have seen this film at least 30 times). As Andrea’s professional life flourishes, her personal life devolves to the point of nonexistence, and she becomes more and more like Miranda, the woman she supposedly hates. What her friends all

³⁵ *The Devil Wears Prada*. Directed by David Frankel. 1:49. 20th Century Fox: 2006.

determine to be corruption by the fashion industry culminates in Andrea double crossing Emily (Miranda's first assistant, played by Emily Blunt) and going to Paris on a fancy business trip. The Paris plot is possible only because Andy and Nate break up about halfway into the film, which is when *The Devil Wears Prada* picks up steam.

In fact, what makes *The Devil Wears Prada* so good is its apathy towards romance. The film soars when inter-office relationships are dissected, especially any involving Streep's Miranda, and falls flat when Andy's recently graduated friends and boyfriend show up. There is a B-plot involving a journalist Andy meets through her job (Simon Baker), but even that is quickly wrapped up right when it gets to the point any other Hollywood film would find interesting (i.e. when they sleep together). Andy's prioritizing of work over romance is her (and the film's) greatest strength.

The meat of *The Devil Wears Prada* has to do with the inter-office relationships at Runway. Miranda's first assistant, Emily (Emily Blunt), the creative director Nigel (Stanley Tucci), Andrea, and Miranda herself are endlessly in agreement and disagreement, and within those ever-changing working relationships there is intense conflict. Alternately they help and hurt one another in their never-ending climb to the top of Runway, their need for Miranda's favor, and their search for some form of professional success.

Andy begins as a naïve, hopeful journalist. Miranda hires her because she looks different than everyone else who has applied to the job before, and is scorned by Emily and her fashionable friends at the magazine for the same reason. As Andy learns how to do her job, she meets Nigel, who becomes a

mentor, and she impresses Miranda to the point that she eventually takes Emily's place as first assistant—a betrayal, in both Emily and Andy's eyes—but a promotion that earns her a trip to Paris for fashion week. Once in Paris, Andy and Miranda have to deal with Miranda's rival Jaqueline Folet trying to usurp her position at Runway. Amidst all this conflict comes some potent moments of intimacy including Andrea's visit to Miranda's home and Miranda's third divorce.

The Devil Wears Prada is fascinated with the façade that is the fashion industry, and whether something as purely capitalistic as a fashion magazine can create some good in the world. Is Miranda creating something akin to art each month, or is she a product of the world she appears to influence? The film is at its best when it pursues those questions and when it remains ambiguous in its answers.

While the novel saw the entire fashion industry and everyone who works in it, up to and including Wintour, as essentially irredeemable, the film version of *The Devil Wears Prada* is not willing to condemn the magazine or fashion industries so harshly. That might be because the people who get a movie like this made are those who *have* the assistants in Hollywood. They are the people who have forgone relationships and friendships to be professionals, industry climbers, and influencers. And they are also the people who make a commercial product that they believe has value or artistic merit even as others look down on it or take it for granted (like Miranda). Their sympathies are naturally with Miranda. Perhaps Andy's failed romantic life and all the drama related are unconvincing on purpose.

Are we supposed to come out of *The Devil Wears Prada* thinking that the fashion industry is glamorous and beautiful, or empty and lonely? Is Miranda happy? The novel assumes she is not, and that is why she is evil, but since the film's Miranda is not evil, the film cannot assume that she is empty and lonely. And Meryl Streep gives us clues that she is both satisfied and frustrated. She is seen crying once, and Andy often assumes Miranda has sacrificed her entire familial and emotional lives for her job. But Miranda also fights hard to keep her job when it appears she might lose it, revels in helping up and coming stars in the industry, and proves over and over again that she loves her daughters more than anything, taking pleasure in both her work and family. Streep makes Miranda multifaceted and real, not simply happy, sad, evil, or good.

The Devil Wears Prada is both offering a fantasy of the fashion world, and looking critically at the fantasy that the fashion world provides. The corruption at the magazine is part of the glamour. Getting to watch Andy transform from a recent college graduate who thinks clogs are fashionable to an executive assistant who brings her friends thousand dollar phones is pleasurable for us and for her. So when her friends warn her that she will end up as empty and lonely as her boss it's hard to believe, especially since Miranda is not empty or lonely. Andy may not want to be an executive assistant forever, but she likes her job, is good at it, and knows it will lead to a career she wants. In that context, her friends' warnings sound silly.

Besides the "insider look" at the fashion industry that *The Devil Wears Prada* provides, the film also spends time developing intense, platonic, female

relationships. There is a rivalry between Emily and Andy, and a mentor-mentee kind of relationship between Andy and Miranda. Both of these relationships take a good bit of time to develop. What is particularly enticing about the whole triangle is that all three women are constantly competing with each other. Onscreen oftentimes men are expected to be ambitious and women to be nice, but in *The Devil Wears Prada* women are ambitious, competitive, mean, and complex in a way that is usually reserved for men. This complexity tends to come through in those moments of workplace drama—competition with Emily, and Andy being “corrupted” by the glamour of the fashion industry.

The novel *The Devil Wears Prada* painted an overwhelmingly evil portrait of Miranda Priestly. The moral was unambiguous, clearly defined. It’s that line Sirius Black tells Harry and Hermione in a cave in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*: “if you want to know what a man’s like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals.”³⁶ The idea that “nobody, however glamorous, successful or celebrated, has the right to treat another person the way Miranda treats her assistants.”³⁷

But Meryl Streep is never simply good or evil, and she convincingly makes a case that it is worth it to suffer for one’s work. She is powerful, and *The Devil Wears Prada* is obsessed with power. Not only the power of one

³⁶ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2000).

³⁷ A. O. Scott, “In ‘The Devil Wears Prada,’ Meryl Streep Plays the Terror of the Fashion World.” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2006. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/30/movies/30devi.html>

woman over another, but the power of industry, of image, of a select few dictating fashion and popular culture to the masses. The movie takes Miranda's side with Nigel's loyalty and Emily's awe.

The Devil Wears Prada showcases success and what it takes. Like any film about fashion, a huge amount of screen time is devoted to the idea that clothes serve as a sort of shield, that looking good on the outside means something might be lacking, or at least inaccessible on the inside. Nate, fighting with Andy about her lack of commitment to their relationship, tells her, "you sold your soul the moment you put on that first pair of Jimmy Choos." Everyone who is not in the industry—including Andy at the beginning of the movie—wants to believe that those working for fashion are lacking emotional depth or complexity. But the most nuanced and open character in the film is Miranda.

In the opening moments of the film, as Andy is giving possibly the worst job interview ever to Miranda, she begins a speech about how she doesn't fit in, how she's "not skinny, or glamorous, and I don't know that much about fashion, but I'm smart," and the camera pushes in on Miranda. She doesn't speak, but she doesn't have to. Much of the nuance and intimacy in *The Devil Wears Prada* comes in the moments between dialogue, when Streep allows the viewer to imagine what Miranda might be thinking. For a few seconds, the audience can feel special as Miranda sees through us, as she sees through Andy. We've been in Andy's perspective for the entire opening, learning about the offices of Runway as she does, and it pays off in the close up of Miranda, studying us, placing a value, and ultimately deciding Andy

(and by extension the viewer) is worthy of becoming an insider and learning what Miranda knows.

We are slaves to the power of fashion, but really, as Miranda details in one memorable scene, to the power of consumerism, and possibly, once in a while, art. The fashion industry is there to make us look good. As Nigel snarks, “that’s really what this multi billion dollar industry is about, inner beauty.” It is a nice metaphor for Hollywood, an industry in the most basic, money-making sense of the term, and yet a place of sophisticated artistry. *The Devil Wears Prada* claims that Runway exists in the same universe.

The women in *The Devil Wears Prada* may be obsessed with fashion, but they are ambitious, professional climbers. They often put work over other relationships. While the cost of that choice is shown, it is never apologized for, the women never saved—as women on screen have been for a hundred years—by a man coming in and rescuing them from the workplace, marrying them, and leaving them in the kitchen where they belong. Additionally, dressing nicely in *The Devil Wears Prada* does not mean a character is narcissistic or egoistic, and the film goes to lengths to dissect that idea. Miranda understands that every fashion choice is connected, that the way we present ourselves remains within the overlapping circles of home, work, and industry—nothing exists in a vacuum. Looking good, feeling good, and being good may not all be the same thing, but *The Devil Wears Prada* tells us that they are all tied together.

If *The Wolf of Wall Street* is a film about cheaters and hustlers, *The Devil Wears Prada* is a film about hard, honest workers. In both movies

quality of industriousness in demanding workplaces is an obstacle—ethically and professionally—for the protagonist. In *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Jordan Belfort circumvents Wall Street by scamming it. In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andy climbs the professional ladder at Runway. After a particularly stern rebuke from Miranda for not getting her home during a hurricane, Andy goes crying to Nigel. “I would just like a little credit for killing myself trying,” she says. He responds, “you’re not trying, you’re whining.” The workplace expectations in *The Devil Wears Prada* are steep.

In some ways *The Devil Wears Prada* is a roadmap for women trying to “have it all.” The film lays out a few options for what that might look like, and the drawbacks and benefits of those options. There is some valid criticism of *The Devil Wears Prada* from feminist bloggers such as Tomris Laffly and Greta Christina, who argue that if any male character did what Andrea does in order to get ahead at his job, it would not provide the same moral conflict that exists in the film, because for men on screen ambition is seen as a virtue and for women it is often seen as evil (or at least a character flaw).³⁸³⁹

Another way to read the film, however, is in the struggles of a young woman navigating an important job and the balance of work and family in her life. Never once does *The Devil Wears Prada* preach any message about

³⁸ Tomris Laffley, “The Devil Wears Prada: 10 Years Later,” *Film School Rejects*, July 12, 2016. Accessed April 18, 2017: <https://filmschoolrejects.com/devil-wears-prada-retrospective-feminism-172d69ca5ba5>.

³⁹ Christina, Greta. “Professionalism = Selling Your Soul: A Feminist Rant on ‘The Devil Wears Prada.’” *Greta Christina’s Blog*. Accessed April 18, 2017: http://gretachristina.typepad.com/greta_christinas_weblog/2007/08/professionalism.html.

women leaving the workplace, and certainly not in the way that most romantic comedies tend to, with the female lead leaving the office for her man. Additionally, the office is never seen as a step towards a relationship, as is the case in other films that show professional women, like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *He's Just Not That Into You*, or *Trainwreck*. In fact, every character in *The Devil Wears Prada* has a professional or entry-level industry job at the expense of a romantic relationship. That women will have prestigious jobs and be doing good work is not ever questioned. The epilogue to the film shows Andy getting a job she wants; that she will be working in an industry she cares about after getting back with Adrian Grenier is taken for granted. Early on in the film Andy and her friends jokingly toast “to jobs that pay the rent.” Professional fulfillment is seen to be at least as important as romantic fulfillment, if not more so.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, as in many Hollywood films where women are in the workforce, when those women succeed professionally their personal relationships suffer. *The Devil Wears Prada* shows two options it presents as opposed, and both are seen as realistic and valid choices. The first in Andrea, who cares about her personal relationships and wants a group of friends, and the second in Miranda, who has put career above most else, and whose marriage(s) suffered as a result.

Miranda is the most atypical character in the film, first and foremost because she is seen only in her place of work. There is one sequence where Andrea sees Miranda in her home, working, used partway through the film to humanize her and create a sense of connection between the two characters. It

is strange that we do not see Miranda interact with her children or her husband. A study of male and female roles in film done in 2014 revealed that 61% of men on screen were defined only by a work related role, as compared to 34% of female characters.⁴⁰ Seeing a man in a movie only in a professional setting would not be strange at all, but to see a woman onscreen who has put work over being a “mother” in such a tangible way is abnormal.

Andrea’s real triumph of the film is not giving up an evil industry or getting rid of an evil boss—the story is too nuanced for a black and white moral—but realizing what she would have to sacrifice in order to get ahead in the fashion industry, and deciding that she doesn’t want it.

The fashion world, over and over, is portrayed as an important and cutthroat an industry. In *The Devil Wears Prada* women don’t always support each other just because they are women. Miranda rewards her assistant because she has a good work ethic, because she is more capable, because she just likes her more, a thousand reasons none of which are *because she’s a woman*. And while Andrea gets what she wants at the conclusion of the film, so does Emily, and so does Miranda—three different female characters with three different definitions of success.

⁴⁰ Lauzen, “It’s a Man’s (Celluloid) World,” 2015.

The Wolf Of Wall Street

“Good luck on that subway ride home to your miserable, ugly fucking wives. I’m gonna have Heidi lick some caviar off my balls in the meantime.”

—Jordan Belfort⁴¹

The Wolf of Wall Street is a 2013 Martin Scorsese film about fun, virtue and vice, and whether we can identify with morally grey characters when their moral defects are presented directly. *The Wolf of Wall Street* shows these morally grey actions as rooted in masculinity and sexual drive, and in doing so glorifies stereotypically male behaviors, making them look like a lot of fun. So another question raised is one of depiction and intention: is it possible to depict aggressive, sexual, morally grey behavior and condemn it at the same time? Or, is it possible to depict morally abject or sexist behavior and not glorify it while doing so? *The Wolf of Wall Street* struggles as a film that disagrees with, or at least disapproves of, its protagonist.

The Wolf of Wall Street begins with a lot of vice in a short amount of time, including naked women, cocaine, drugs, and crash-landing a helicopter. If this sounds exhausting, *The Wolf of Wall Street* might not be for you. The man responsible for these pleasures—if you can call them that, and Scorsese does make you wonder—is Jordan Belfort, a Wall Street stock trader-turned Wall Street scam artist. Jordan begins his career as a low level trader, learning the pleasures and pitfalls of Wall Street from an almost-mythical supervisor

⁴¹ *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Directed by Martin Scorsese. 2:59. Paramount Pictures, 2013.

(played by Matthew McConaughey), before his legitimate career path ends with the crash of 1987 and he takes what he learned on Wall Street out to Long Island.

Before long, Jordan manages to use his massive powers of manipulation to make similarly massive amounts of money, as Forbes notes, a “twisted Robin Hood who takes from the rich and gives to himself.” He sets up a prestigious sounding firm, Stratton Oakmont, and gets down to business, a business that neither Belfort nor Scorsese have any interest in detailing besides the enormous amounts of money being made and spent on food, women, drugs, and alcohol.

Jordan assembles a crack team of high functioning drug addicts. These are charismatic men with a “profane, hormonal vitality,”⁴² an essentially Scorsesian crew. Fraternity is an overwhelming theme in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, in both the help-a-brother-up kind of way, and also in the sophomoric, leer-at-women and there-will-never-be-any-repercussions kind of way. The intersection of these two fraternal forms seems to be money. A second obsession of *The Wolf of Wall Street* is money, and all the possible ways it can be used for a very specific type of fun.

The Wolf of Wall Street presents a very clear fantasy of gender from the opening moments, where women are objects and reputation is all that matters. In a scene where Jordan, his sidekick Donnie (Jonah Hill), and two

⁴² A. O. Scott, “When Greed Was Good (and Fun).” *The New York Times*, December 24, 2013. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/25/movies/dicaprio-stars-in-scorseses-the-wolf-of-wall-street.html>.

other partners at his firm are discussing the legality of throwing dwarfs at targets, Jordan reminds the group that he doesn't "want to get a bad reputation." You think for a second that they might not go through with the idea, but never underestimate Jordan's commitment to expensive, probably-illegal fun. The next scene is a group of traders in suits throwing dwarfs in helmets and goggles at a giant target. It reminds one of Prince Joffrey in its casual cruelty.

There's little to no plot; *The Wolf of Wall Street* is the story of a man who cannot fail, even at his lowest lows. But DiCaprio is such a likable Belfort, aware of his toxicity and at the same time as taken with himself as we are, as surprised at his own success, that for much of the film we forgive him for his lapses. We may not identify with Jordan, but even though he is a monster we still like him. We want to see him succeed because the fun of the film is in watching him do what we never would or could. In the end there is a short sequence where Jordan gives a talk about how we can be like him. Like the rest of the film, it is purposefully vague in its intent. It could be there so that the audience reflects on what we've seen, on our desire to mimic Jordan. Or it could be the beginnings of another scheme, or an epilogue, so we know where Jordan lands at the end of the exhilarating journey. Scorsese keeps any moral attached to the film ambiguous.

Eventually his ride has to come to an end. Kyle Chandler plays a strait-laced FBI agent who finally brings Belfort down. Chandler is impressive in his normalcy; this is who Jordan might have been if he hadn't become a criminal. At one point we watch Chandler take the subway home, looking depressed

after a conversation with Jordan. At the same time Jordan could be in his fancy sports car, his yacht, or his helicopter. Despite the fact that the FBI agent wins in the end (the film concludes with Jordan in prison), the audience isn't going to leave the theater thinking about how much they want to join the bureau.

The gender dynamics at play in *The Wolf of Wall Street* are fascinating. David Denby, writing for the *New Yorker*, particularly enjoyed a scene between Chandler and DiCaprio, on Jordan's yacht, commenting, "Scorsese has always understood the way that men try to outmaneuver and dominate each other."⁴³ And the men in *The Wolf of Wall Street* are powerful and interesting and fun to watch. But can't there be a clever or powerful woman who isn't a sexy dominatrix? Someone onscreen for more than a few seconds? Margot Robbie's entire character—she plays Jordan's second wife, Naomi—is based on how attractive she is. When she walks into Jordan's party with another man we watch as Jordan and Donnie get off on taking her from that other man. Possession is key. If a woman is onscreen she is going to be eye candy, and she is either married to a male lead or about to have sex with a man. In a way that is more uncouth than the rest of the vice shown in the film—and that's saying something—women are treated not only as objects, but as bodies, prized property shot throughout with the same care and attention as money, cars, and Quaaludes.

⁴³ David Denby, "Martin Scorsese's 'The Wolf of Wall Street.'" *The New Yorker*, December 16, 2013. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/martin-scorseses-the-wolf-of-wall-street>.

Another cringe-worthy moment of female degradation is an extended tangent towards the beginning of the film about a woman who is particularly gifted at oral sex. In a voice over, Jordan details how she slept with everyone at the office before she married a broker to whom she gave a blowjob in a glass elevator—portrayed onscreen—which Jordan finds uncomfortable. The marriage, not the blowjob.

I suppose the question begins with whether *The Wolf of Wall Street* is asking its audience to root for Jordan, feel for him, or merely take pleasure in his antics. If the audience is supposed to be on his side throughout the film it becomes difficult to watch as he steals, cheats, and hits his wife. But if we are allowed to root against him then we can enjoy watching his lavish lifestyle without moral repercussions. Maybe, like Emily Nussbaum suggests in her piece on The Bad Female Fan, we should consider Jordan a reaction to other Scorsese fare, like *Goodfellas*, *Casino*, *Mean Streets*, or *Taxi Driver*, movies that ask the viewer to root and feel for their (morally troubled and troubling) protagonists.⁴⁴ These films entertain us by creating a dramatic narrative that allows the viewer a deep understanding of the heroes' psyche, letting us in and giving us the knowledge needed to root for misunderstood people who do bad things. The comedy of *The Wolf of Wall Street* relies on Jordan being selfish, cruel, and narcissistic, but that same comedic tone keeps us at a distance, and precludes the audience from being able to identify with or root for him. He is never given deep-seeded psychological reasons for his bad behavior, he just

⁴⁴ Emily Nussbaum, "The Female Bad Fan." *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2014. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/female-bad-fan>.

does it, and while we are allowed to laugh at it, Scorsese makes it so visceral and overwhelming that it is difficult to condone it in any way.

All those Scorsese films to some extent pose the same questions as *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Scorsese is fascinated by the energy of these terrible men, who know that they are bad people. Like Miranda Priestly, Jordan Belfort knows exactly who he is, and he has no stake in pretending to be a nicer, better, or “purer” person.

But, as all war movies to some extent glorify war, *The Wolf of Wall Street* is never far from the fun in which its characters are indulging. Scorsese glorifies fraud, womanizing, and debauchery as much as he might be condemning those behaviors. Nussbaum has written a series of articles about the “bad fan” phenomenon, identifying fans of television shows who skip past the ethical ambiguities the creators may have intended to focus on the fun stuff, and who uncritically admire flawed protagonists.⁴⁵ In regards to *The Wolf of Wall Street*, the “bad fans” are the viewers who saw no ambiguity at all, who watched the film and then wanted to go get a job on Wall Street, or their counterparts, who complained about the treatment of women and minorities throughout and saw nothing else.

Either of these interpretations of *The Wolf of Wall Street* is reductive. *The Wolf of Wall Street* offers varied messaging and no clear moral. And the fun of the film comes not from watching nameless Wall Street employees, but from watching DiCaprio’s Jordan Belfort. Nussbaum writes about protagonists who “shimmer between the repulsive and the magnetic,” “on one

⁴⁵ Ibid.

level...it's just what it looks like... On another level it's the opposite."⁴⁶ We love watching these antiheroes, and then we grow, sometimes, to love them, because we want to see them continue to rise, or because we need to prolong their fall. Jordan and *The Wolf of Wall Street* fit easily into this category. It is funny to watch Jordan toss money around like it means nothing, crash a helicopter, and throw people covered in Velcro at foam targets, even as we cringe. And as in his previous films, Scorsese is as fascinated by these antiheroes as we are.

So, much as *The Devil Wears Prada*'s nuance lies in its trouble separating itself from the ruthlessness and superficiality of the industry it invites us into, *The Wolf of Wall Street* is a film that can't quite distance itself from the debauchery that it portrays. The ghost of the film industry, one that for a long time was as pathological in culture as that of Wall Street, pervades *The Wolf of Wall Street*, which cannot offer a clear moral picture. This moral ambiguity is sometimes to the film's benefit. It makes us think. But when it comes to gender, *The Wolf of Wall Street* is not as nuanced as it would like us to believe.

But I understand that what both Belfort and Scorsese are selling is a fantasy, and that fantasy is the same one that exists in *Superbad*,⁴⁷ namely that fun, attractive women will line up to sleep with a rude, abrasive Jonah Hill. And both films only semi-convincingly make the case that they are

⁴⁶ Emily Nussbaum, "The Great Divide." *The New Yorker*, April 7, 2014. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/07/the-great-divide-emily-nussbaum>.

⁴⁷ See chapter 4.

fantasies; that there is no reality in the way anyone at all is treated, from the women to the men. It is a kind of filmmaking that would like us to believe it is thinking about gender even as it uses use the female body as a prop and not much else.

Watching DiCaprio and Robbie make love on a bed of large denominational bills is indicative of the type of humor that is woven into the fabric of *The Wolf of Wall Street*. The relationship Jordan has with money is as important as any in his life. And while it is excessive to the point of humor, it is also treated with respect by the camera (cinematography is beautifully done by Rodrigo Prieto). The point is obviously that the men are chauvinists, but it's a more halfhearted point than the rest of the film makes towards money and crime. As A.O. Scott wrote in his review, "the movie's misogyny is not the sole property of its characters;"⁴⁸ Scorsese's camera feels at least a bit similarly to Belfort about women. Margot Robbie and Cristin Milioti (Jordan's first wife) are both dynamic actresses, here given little to do besides look pretty and pretend to be in the dark about their husband's misdeeds. Robbie gives an incredible performance, but it is hard to know if either Robbie or Milotti's characters know anything about Jordan's debauchery and general misconduct because in the three hour run time of this film, each are on screen for somewhere between four and ten minutes.

Scorsese so amplifies every inch of Jordan's life that the audience is forced to think about the moral ramifications of what is happening onscreen. In regards to women, attraction becomes lust, interest becomes obsession,

⁴⁸ Scott, "When Greed was Good (and Fun)."

and the film takes time out of the plot to give us long tangents on how one can pursue women. Early on there is a fairly long sequence detailing the three tiers of prostitutes one can hire, from the very best, cleanest, most expensive, down to the “blue chip” hookers that Jordan doesn’t need to pay for because he can afford better, but whose services he purchases anyway. It’s a funny sequence, with jokes both in the dialogue and the image, as we see and hear about each type of prostitute. The very fact that Jordan cares enough about these distinctions, and knows so much about them, is funny. But no matter how satirical and comedic *The Wolf of Wall Street* might be, the audience is still asked to laugh at three hours of brutal treatment of women, which is really hard to watch, and makes the film incoherent at times. While what is portrayed onscreen may be a fantasy, it is not a fantasy in which I want to partake or inhabit. And the drugs and the women and the cursing all become numbing, making it difficult to even care about Jordan, let alone think about the moral questions Scorsese seems to be asking.

As Sara Benincasa, writing a feminist defense of the film for Jezebel argues, portraying sexist characters does not make a film sexist.⁴⁹ But Scorsese is reaching for a moral ambiguity that comes with certain costs, for instance, the criticism that the film is sexist. Comparing *The Wolf of Wall Street* with *The Sopranos*, as Benincasa and Denby both do, is helpful. Benincasa notes that almost everyone in *The Sopranos* is despicable, and many of them are quite sexist, while the show itself is not abnormally so, and

⁴⁹ Sara Benincasa, “A Lady’s Defense of *The Wolf of Wall Street*.” *Jezebel*, January 1, 2014. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://jezebel.com/a-ladys-defense-of-the-wolf-of-wall-street-1492397853>.

may even be better to its female characters than most of television. But *The Sopranos* spends time—every episode—developing the women portrayed, and giving their feelings substantial weight and their movements substantial influence. Never once in *The Wolf of Wall Street*'s considerable runtime is the idea that a woman could be more than a possession or a token ever even considered. The women are shot, in glorious, aesthetically pleasing, artistically framed widescreen shots, with larger than life anatomy, as though the camera is the male gaze. And they are never given the chance to change the story, to influence the outcome at all.

The one scene that falls slightly on Naomi's side comes towards the end of the film. Jordan is under indictment and wearing an electronic tracking anklet while awaiting trial. He and his wife have sex (Jordan calls it "making love," it could probably also be termed marital rape, as Naomi says "no," several times, including while Jordan is on top of her) and afterwards she asks him for a divorce. In one of the most telling bits of dialogue he asks her, "What kind of person are you?" and she responds, "You married me," throwing years of inattention and ignorance in his face. The fight escalates, she slaps him, and he punches her. The moment is framed through two doorways and is at a considerable distance, but is shocking nonetheless. Scorsese never brings us up close to emotional violence, only unemotional, funny, violent moments.

Jordan runs from Naomi and snorts some cocaine he had hidden in the couch, the feathers from the cushions flying around the room like snow, clouding the frame, and proceeds to punch Naomi again, this time in the

stomach. He tries to kidnap their daughter, and ends up alone, in his wrecked car, blood pouring down his face. The next cut is to the FBI agents taping a wire to his chest, and the whole incident, while despicable, is used to catapult us into understanding the next steps of his downfall. We understand his actions as those of a desperate man seeking a way out, which is a very nice way to treat such a horrifying moment. Scorsese pulls Jordan's punches a bit, showing them at such a distance, through layers of aperture framing, or cut off by the bottom edge of the frame, as the stomach punch is. And we never visit Naomi again; never get to see her side of this moment, or any repercussions, which makes it all the more part of Jordan's long downfall than an exceptional moment of domestic abuse.

The film stagnates with its depiction of gender. Because Scorsese at least asks his audience to consider many of the moral issues at play in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, we feel exhausted at the end of the film, burnt out and maybe even confused. We leave asking ourselves whether *The Wolf of Wall Street* is a condemnation of a certain culture or a celebration of it. While Scorsese gives us enough ammunition to fight for either side in his portrayal of money and drug use, his portrayal of women is less nuanced. Jordan treats the women in his life in the same way as his prized objects, thereby dehumanizing them. There is a difference between a woman and a Quaalude, and that difference is where *The Wolf of Wall Street* fails its female (and male) viewership. The camera follows Jordan so lovingly; the staging is always in his favor, he rises above the world he inhabits, always standing on stages or looking out from raised places—his balcony, the deck of his yacht—while the

voiceovers remind us both how depraved and charismatic he is. However, the ambiguity that allows the audience to imagine the piece as condemnation of Wall Street is not present in the treatment of women in general, and named female characters especially. There is nothing in *The Wolf of Wall Street* that even suggests that the treatment of women portrayed in the film is anything but reasonable.

I have had a lot of trouble writing about this film. I love it, I think it is beautiful and funny and complex and utterly fascinating. I have watched it many times, and will watch it again. But it is so indicative of Molly Haskell's "big lie." I am willing to allow that Scorsese treats the women in *The Wolf of Wall Street* like objects in order to make a point about our complicity in misogyny, in the same way he approaches capitalistic excess or bacchanalian debauchery. But that doesn't make it any easier to watch this movie as a woman.

There is one scene, around the midpoint of *The Wolf of Wall Street*, that particularly sticks out to me as failing the women making and watching the film. Naomi is mad at Jordan, so she decides to punish him by wearing tight, revealing clothing and withholding sex. She sits down on the floor of their daughter's room and, while Jordan watches with longing, slowly spreads her legs in front of him and tells him "mommy is just so sick and tired of wearing panties." Jordan crawls toward Naomi, who pushes him away with her foot and tells him, "no touching." We see Jordan through the crook of Naomi's bare knee. To get back at her, Jordan reveals that she has exposed

herself to the nanny-cam in their daughter's teddy bear, and is currently being watched by their two bodyguards (both named Rocco).

It is arguably the only moment in the film where any woman has power over Jordan. It is telling that the only power she has is sexual, but even more telling is that Jordan immediately and easily takes that power away from her. It got a huge laugh in the theater where I saw *The Wolf of Wall Street*. I laughed. But it is indicative of the female archetype *Wolf of Wall Street* settles on and never strays from: attractive women worth little more than what they can sexually provide for the men.

The Wolf of Wall Street is about Jordan Belfort, about excess and the pleasures of debauchery and vice. And there is the feeling throughout the film that allowing women into that space in any significant way would contaminate it, that a penis is as important to this specific type of raucous pleasure as money or power. But it makes the audience question the moral trap Scorsese is setting for us, and makes the whole film complicit in the very crimes it is trying to pin on Belfort.

Chapter 4. COMEDY

Introduction

If action films revolve around physically capable men saving cities and ladies, comedy is often about physically incapable, highly emotional men failing and trying and failing again—often to have sex with ladies. From films like Hawks's *Bringing up Baby* (1938) or *Ball of Fire* (1941), to *American Pie* (1999), *Step Brothers* (2008) or *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (2010), comedies rely on the archetype of the emasculated man living in a world run by competent women. In these films women almost always feel bad for incompetent men, and act as sort of divine shepherdesses, guiding stray boys or manchildren towards adulthood with eternal patience and what turns out to be unconditional love.

At the same time, women in comedy can be aggressive and masculine in the most stereotypical way. They order around or otherwise subjugate an emasculated man, a role reversal that is an easy source of laughs. The great paradox of these films is that women are at once both unattainable goddesses, with knowledge beyond the male protagonists' and also idiotic, easily manipulated pieces of meat to be consumed and then tossed away.

Comedy films about women tend to be romantic comedies. They are about relationships, clingy girls, attractive, but stupid men, and often

culminate in a wedding a la Shakespeare. In terms of gender portrayal, these rom coms can feel like reductive wish fulfillment.

Superbad, as Manohla Darghis wrote in 2007, similarly works as “a masculine variation on aspirational wish fulfillment.”⁵⁰

I remember sneaking into the movie theater the summer before seventh grade to see *Superbad* with a group of friends. I don’t remember for sure, but it is likely that we were all girls. We all thought it was absolutely hilarious. For weeks we called each other “McLovin” and drew penises on each others’ notebooks in class. It was different than anything we’d ever seen before. Even as pre-teens, we understood at least a bit of the joke.

Judd Apatow started a form in comedy that remains to this day, and can be traced through *Superbad* to *Ghostbusters (2016)*. The movies in this trend rely on funny actors improvising with each other in front of a rolling camera and a very loose story. Neither *Superbad* nor *Ghostbusters (2016)* follows a tight script, rather both allow for huge amounts of improvisational leeway from their stars.

Ghostbusters (2016) is a different kind of wish fulfillment from either *Superbad* or romantic comedies, closer to the “have it all” set forth in *The Devil Wears Prada*, but with worse clothing, no relationship drama, and a happy embrace of the strange and supernatural. *Ghostbusters (2016)* is funny for many of the same reasons that *Superbad* works—talented stars and witty

⁵⁰ Manohla Dargis, “For Three Virgins, the Path to Sunrise is Paved With Excess.” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2007. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/17/movies/17supe.html>.

banter, mostly—but has nothing to do with sex, which allows it to tell a feminist story.

Superbad

"It's like ball, dick, ball..."

"...It's like a division sign."

—Seth and Evan⁵¹

There's something about a virgin onscreen that is endearing, especially if that virgin is a young man. In *Superbad*, written by Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, and loosely based on their own teenaged experience, Seth and Evan (Jonah Hill and Michael Cera) try to rid themselves of their virginity, to varying degrees of un-success. Greg Mottola directed the film, but it looks and feels like the Judd Apatow canon (Apatow produced it) throughout.

Superbad is a comedy, but just as you could call *The Wolf of Wall Street* a Martin Scorsese movie, the genre might more specifically be defined as "Judd Apatow." Like *Freaks and Geeks*, *The 40-Year-Old-Virgin*, and *Knocked Up*, *Superbad* tells a fraternal, sex-driven story about basically decent, heartfelt guys.

Seth (Jonah Hill) and Evan (Michael Cera) are high school seniors, a few weeks away from graduating. They are decidedly uncool, nerds who don't even realize they're nerds, with unrealized dreams of climbing the social ladder. Evan is going to Dartmouth in the fall, and Seth, who did not get in, is going to "State." Their friend, Fogell (Christopher Mintz-Plasse), also got into Dartmouth, but equally importantly, he just got a fake ID. Seth mentions the ID to Jules (Emma Stone), his crush, and when she asks him if he can get

⁵¹ *Superbad*. Directed by Greg Mottola, 1:53. Columbia Pictures, 2007.

them alcohol he realizes that bringing booze to a party is a great way to up one's social standing and possibly have sex.

Everything these boys do is in pursuit of sex. As Seth says to Evan, "you know you hear a girl saying like, 'ah I was so shitfaced last night, I shouldn't have fucked that guy?' We could be that mistake!" Their attempt to attract girls takes them through a series of hijinks, including a liquor store, a graduation party, and a cop car. Eventually all three of the friends have the chance to sleep with a girl, and in the end none of them manage it (Fogell comes the closest, but is "cock-blocked"). These boys are nerds, unpopular and unattractive. A classmate spits on Seth at one point; all three are constantly bullied. So from the beginning it is hard to imagine that any of them would achieve their goal. In a way, their whole infatuation with their female classmates can be summed up by a moment towards the beginning. Evan is sitting in his room, playing a video game, talking to Seth. He's having trouble. Finally, he bursts out, "if I can't win, why even fucking play?" Still, you know he's going to try again later.

Seth and Evan are "nice guys" to an extreme. They are especially non-predatory and nonthreatening; there is nothing abusive about their sexuality. This is taken for granted despite some aggressive, if juvenile, moments early on in the film, including Seth miming some indecent acts with a spoon and an unaware Jules during home economics class. But the juvenile nature of Seth and Evan's sexuality is what makes them seem pure in their intent. Whenever they come in contact with a girl or woman she is not only smarter than they are, but also better equipped, and more mature.

This understood hierarchy limits the female characters in *Superbad*. Girls and women are seen as smarter, better adjusted, and more sensible, but the comedy in these movies comes from inability and unpreparedness, a complete misunderstanding of one's place in the world, which is something these women do not have.

Like the female characters in *Superbad*, Apatow's early women were either put on pedestals, mother figures who cannot fail, or they were physically imperfect, seen as sluts, and unworthy of the audience's affection. Alison and Debbie in *Knocked Up*, Rachel in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, Beth, Amy, Paula, and Trish in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, although Katherine is an exception to the rule, Laura in *Funny People*, Jackie Q, Daphne, and Destiny in *Get Him to the Greek*, Nancy, Alice, and Denise in *Step Brothers*, Carly, Lucy Bobby, and Susan in *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*, and all the old ladies who sleep with Adam Sandler's character in *You Don't Mess With the Zohan* are all examples. There are some wonderful exceptions besides Katherine; Lindsay and Kim Kelly in *Freaks and Geeks*, and Amy in *Trainwreck* are all dynamic, smart, flawed, but ultimately endearing women. And more recently Melissa McCarthy and *Bridesmaids* has changed this dynamic. Apatow putting his name on Lena Dunham's *Girls* has also changed his brand a bit. But like any Leslie Mann character in Apatovian media, the women in *Superbad* exist to take care of the boys surrounding them. Emma Stone's Jules and Martha MacIsaac's Becca will scold, forgive, nurture, and coddle these boys, but what they want—want any woman wants—remains an unasked question.

If there is a masculine “normal” in film, it has to be in the paradigm of James Bond, Han Solo, or Tony Stark—men who are confident in their sexuality, who have girlfriends who are as attractive as they are, or who are unabashed playboys. *Superbad* plays to the comic opposite of that image. These boys are funny, because although they have raging hormones and dreams of “getting laid,” if they ever encountered a woman who was willing to sleep with them they would have no idea what to do. Seth and Evan think they are supposed to be suave and confident and not care about women. That ideal is not remotely attainable for them. When Evan tells Seth not to worry, as they will be able to find women who want to sleep with them in college, Seth snaps back, “yeah, but we’re supposed to be good at it by then.” The comedy in *Superbad* is for adults who know that this statement is both patently false and overtly true; it’s what every adolescent feels.

The whole film functions as an inquiry into the way the world works for boys who are still growing up, taking bits of knowledge from home economics class, pop culture, and the things peers higher up on the social ladder say. As Manohla Dargis wrote in her 2007 review, Apatow’s comedies are essentially about “The divide between what a man says — and what he thinks he should say, especially to other men — and how he really feels inside.”⁵² It is not any sort of outside pressure that forces sexual fantasies on Seth and Evan; it is only their own hormones, mixed with their dismal social standing. These boys exist in a world with strict codes of behavior, and showing emotion is not allowed. At their best, Apatow’s films ask what exists in the gap between those

⁵² Dargis, “For Three Virgins...”

codes of behavior and the boys' feelings; how is a man supposed to behave? Seth and Evan question their own masculinity constantly, and *Superbad* is certainly self-aware about gender and gender presentation.

The homosocial, bordering on homosexual friendship that Seth and Evan have is another crucial Apatovian structure. For a film about chasing women, *Superbad* spends a lot of time showing how much Seth and Evan really love each other. They go to great lengths to perform heterosexuality, in public and in private, and there is the constant, underlying worry of "what if I'm gay?" Male characters in *Superbad* are always trying to prove something about themselves and their sexuality, to themselves, each other, and the world at large. These boys have a lot of fear about being different and alone. They are leaving each other's sides in three weeks, and while they mostly don't discuss it, their impending separation is the catalyst for their poor decisions. They truly, deeply love each other.

Superbad at its heart is a love story between two male friends. The biggest betrayal in the film has nothing to do with girls; it is that Evan will be roommates with Fogell at Dartmouth, rather than with Seth as they had been planning since middle school. *Superbad* gives us a romantic comedy between Seth and Evan, a bromance exploring the feelings that they think men are supposed to leave unexpressed. But Seth and Evan's greatest strength is their love for each other. While they may wish to be like the classmate who spits on Seth, the audience can see their pure intent and deeply caring natures, and love them for those qualities.

At the end of the night, after they fail to lose their virginities, Seth and Evan have a heartfelt conversation and profess their love for each other. Seth tells Evan, “I just want to go to the rooftops and scream ‘I love my best friend, Evan.’” Evan responds, “Let’s go up on my roof” and Seth whispers back, “for sure.” These are boys with overactive sex drives in love with each other.

To compensate for their homophobia, and because they are extremely horny, they discuss young women with a reverence that implies ignorance, but it is a shield that allows Seth and Evan to keep feeling comfortable around each other. They tell each other the most intimate details of their physical lives. One memorable dialogue occurs when Seth and Evan are talking about breasts and nipples. Seth says, “Look at those nipples,” and Evan responds, “It’s just not fair they get to flaunt that stuff, you know? And I have to hide every erection I get.” To which Seth replies, “you know what I do? I flip my boner up into my waistband. It hides it and it feels awesome. I almost blew a load into my bellybutton.” The film is full of these specific, intimate, physical details of Seth and Evan’s lives, almost all of them sexual, a trend that adds to the homoeroticism inherent in a story about two young men who love each other.

Finally, while Seth and Evan spend the whole film attempting to lose their virginities, neither of them actually does. All three main characters talk about getting girls drunk in order to sleep with them, but it is with so much incompetence that it lands like an innocent joke, not a rape joke. And when Evan is given the chance to sleep with Becca, he feels “unethical” because she

is drunk and he is not. So he drinks, to even the score, and he still chooses not to sleep with her.

While the cringe comedy is funny, it gets numbing after a while. The sweetness of Seth and Evan's friendship is the heart of *Superbad*. An early sequence that shows a young Seth drawing "dicks" on everything is an example of a joke that numbs the audience. It is funny at first because it is surprising, and then it is horrific. Anything to do with female anatomy and Seth and Evan's incompetence with it, from Evan punching Becca in the boob accidentally to Seth trying to get a glimpse of a former classmate's breast implants, becomes obvious. Seth's particular ability to make everything about sex when speaking to and about adults is jarring (and funny) when it is in the opening sequence about Evan's mother, funny (because it is still unexpected) when he does it to his home economics teacher's face, but then becomes the norm for the rest of the film. And the two incompetent police officers become boring very quickly—their shtick never changes. The constant cursing turns into a rhythmic sort of dialogue, easy to tune out.

Some of the funniest moments of *Superbad* are ones of fraternal joking and adolescent naiveté. One that jumps out is when the boys discover that Fogell has named himself McLovin on his fake ID. The easy ribbing from the friends feels natural, and is genuinely funny. "You only gave yourself one name? Who are you, Seal?" asks Evan. Another moment of naïve humor is when Evan reveals that he has brought a condom and "a little bottle of spermicidal lube," and the following incredulity from Seth.

Seth and Evan are both wholly unreliable narrators. We discover this early on, as Evan describes an evening to Becca (his crush) in a way that makes it sound both sophisticated and cool, while the audience witnesses a montage of what actually happened (they play video games, get kicked out of a club, vomit on each other). That the story is told by exaggerators is endearing—anyone would tell a white lie to his crush—and it makes the audience trust Seth and Evan more. They might lie to others, but they can't lie to us, because we see the truth onscreen.

Superbad raises the question of what is “normal” and “real” all the time. These are constant worries for the boys, and a source of humor for an adult audience that has already been through what they are experiencing. In terms of relationships with women, there is a “normal” male behavior espoused by *Superbad*, and an understanding that for Seth and Evan there is a gap between that “normal” and what their lives really are. The boys all live in a fantasy world that the girls and women do not seem to inhabit. A moment that stands out as both clearly fictional and essential masculine is that Jules considers sleeping with Seth. For students acutely aware of their social standing in their high school (and really, which of us wasn't?), Seth, Evan, and Fogell pine after and manage to charm girls who, in any realistic world, wouldn't give them the time of day.

The fantasy that sexy, well-adjusted women—no matter if they are teenagers as in *Superbad* or adults as in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*—would be willing to put their lives on hold, or their popularity in jeopardy for immature manchildren is Judd Apatow and Seth Rogen's stock in trade. And

it has become an archetype that filmgoers accept, despite that it runs contrary to our own experiences. For a film so deft in most of its portrayal of adolescence, this particular lapse in feasibility is especially overt in *Superbad*. Seth admits to Jules that he thinks he only has a chance with her if she's drunk, and rather than be creeped out she—like us—finds his innocence endearing.

Ghostbusters (2016)

“Safety lights are for dudes”

—Dr. Gillian Holtzmann⁵³

The original *Ghostbusters* was released in 1984. It starred Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, and Harold Ramis, was directed and produced by Ivan Reitman, and has, over the years, become well regarded. The plot, as one might expect, based on the title, is about a group of “ghostbusters” who go around New York City hunting ghosts, in a parody of horror tropes and a comedy style picked up directly from Saturday Night Live.

The original review from the New York Times, by Janet Maslin, was not particularly kind. She wrote that the film “hasn’t gotten very far past the idea stage. Its jokes, characters and story line are as wispy as the ghosts themselves, and a good deal less substantial.”⁵⁴ Pauline Kael found it “dumb.”⁵⁵ Generally, though, the film was appreciated, as Roger Ebert wrote, as “wonderful summer nonsense.”⁵⁶

⁵³ *Ghostbusters: Answer the Call*. Directed by Paul Feig. 1:56. Columbia Pictures/Sony Pictures Releasing.

⁵⁴ Janet Maslin, “Film: ‘Ghostbusters,’ with Murray and Aykroyd.” *The New York Times*, June 8, 1984. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9904E6D9123BF93BA35755C0A962948260>.

⁵⁵ Richard Christiansen, “Pauline Kael Finds Today’s Movies Are as Tired as She Feels.” *The Chicago Tribune*, December 9, 1985. Accessed April 18, 2017: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-12-09/features/8503250217_1_movies-new-yorker-pauline-kael.

⁵⁶ Roger Ebert, “Ghostbusters,” *rogerebert.com*, June 8, 1984. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/ghostbusters-1984>.

Those who were teenagers when *Ghostbusters (1984)* came out are now in their forties, a fact only relevant because those adults have had over thirty years to come to terms with the way that the Hollywood machine works, to watch their other favorite films become butchered remakes, and see their favorite superheroes become part of the moneymaking enterprise that is Marvel-Disney-Lucasfilm. *Ghostbusters (1984)* was the second highest grossing film of 1984; it was given several underperforming sequels and a videogame; of course it was going to be remade.

Ghostbusters (2016) is the same film as *Ghostbusters (1984)*. It is about a group of “ghostbusters” who go around New York City trying to stop the supernatural, a parody of action films and horror-parodies. It stars Melissa McCarthy, Kristen Wiig, Kate McKinnon, and Leslie Jones, making it, like the 1984 version, a Saturday Night Live vehicle. It follows in the comedic tradition of Judd Apatow and *Superbad*, stuffed with improvised moments. Paul Feig, director of the similarly hyped, similarly styled, *Bridesmaids*, directed *Ghostbusters (2016)*, and did a similarly fine job of it.

Before the film was released there was already a backlash against *Ghostbusters (2016)*. To summarize a saga that makes very little sense, fans of the original *Ghostbusters* wanted a third *Ghostbusters*, and thought it might happen twice, in 2012 and then again in 2014. It didn’t happen either time, but there was a video game made, which Dan Aykroyd called “better than the third movie because it lasts longer and there’s more development of the

characters.”⁵⁷ When the reboot was announced, there was a whole subset of twitter devoted to writing horrible things about a movie that did not yet exist. The trailer was the most disliked video on YouTube, overwhelmingly based on a small group of extremely sexist (and oftentimes also racist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic), generally male people. Even Donald Trump weighed in on a vlog post in 2015, “and now they’re making *Ghostbusters* with all women; what’s going on?”⁵⁸ This sexism-based social media attack did not stop when the film was released.

I have seen defenses of these trolls based on the idea that they are protecting a franchise they love, or that Sony is somehow selling out by rebooting a moneymaking machine. In the history of Hollywood, it is likely that no studio has produced a film they believed would not make money, and in recent memory many beloved franchises have been rebooted (X Men, Star Wars, Star Trek, Spiderman) and there has been no vitriol to the extent of what has been directed at Paul Feig and the *Ghostbusters (2016)* cast.

The nostalgia that became backlash against *Ghostbusters (2016)* exists because some smart executives knew there was money to be made from anything with that iconic *Ghostbusters* logo on it, “from bedspreads to

⁵⁷ Caroline Framke, “How the All-Female Ghostbusters Reboot Became a Lightning Rod of Controversy,” *Vox*, July 15, 2016. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.vox.com/2016/6/30/12027882/ghostbusters-reboot-all-female-backlash-sexism-sony>.

⁵⁸ Donald J. Trump, January 28, 2015. “Indiana Jones and Ghostbusters-what’s wrong???” #TrumpVlog.” Accessed April 18, 2017: <https://www.facebook.com/DonaldTrump/videos/10155136336740725/>.

breakfast cereal.”⁵⁹ And as much as I adore certain franchises—I had an unhealthy obsession with Harry Potter for a long time—it’s hard to feel like childhoods are being ruined when that nostalgia comes from a deeply manufactured and capitalistic place to begin with. If we can handle three different Spidermen in about as many years, we as a media-consuming society can probably handle a new *Ghostbusters* 32 years later, especially one as enjoyable as what Feig and his talented cast have built.

Ghostbusters is amusing, and lighthearted, and just good fun. It’s a perfect summer blockbuster, and might not have been the subject of so much argument if it didn’t have four female leads. Even so, *Ghostbusters* shouldn’t have been such a big deal. It should have just been a kind of good, hilarious-but-soon-forgotten summer comedy.

So thanks, alt-right, for letting us keep talk about how funny this movie—and its female protagonists—are.

In a recent *Rolling Stone* article, Charles Bramesco noted that *Ghostbusters (1984)* “essentially kickstarted a genre that delivered everything to everyone—a steroidal blockbuster mash-up of everything playing at your local multiplex in a single package.”⁶⁰ *Ghostbusters (2016)* similarly conflates genres. While *Ghostbusters (2016)* is technically a comedy; the genre could be classified as action or adventure as well. The best genre classification for *Ghostbusters* might be blockbuster.

⁵⁹ Charles Bramesco, “How ‘Ghostbusters’ Gave Birth to the Modern Blockbuster.” *Rolling Stone*, June 8, 2016. Accessed April 18, 2017: <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/how-ghostbusters-gave-birth-to-the-modern-blockbuster-20160608>.

⁶⁰ Bramesco “Modern Blockbuster.”

One of the best things about *Ghostbusters* is that it is so similar to the original. The similarities make clear how casting female actors for roles of power and plot importance changes—and doesn't change—the comedy or blockbuster genre. The things that make *Ghostbusters* a feminist film—that men don't define the women, that the female leads don't have relationships, that their work and collaboration is more important than petty squabbles—are normal for the genre. They just happen to be normal for men.

Usually when women are in a comedy, it is going to be a romantic comedy. The expectations that the audience has are that they will see relationships, meet-cutes, family squabbles, and maybe a wedding at the end. *Ghostbusters (2016)* is not a romantic comedy. In fact, there is no romance at all in the film. There are no dates, no boyfriends. No one hits on the ghostbusters. No one's family disapproves. None of the normal female-based comedic archetypes exist in the movie. I cannot think of a single other comedy with a female lead where that is true.

Even in previous Paul Feig comedies women have been seen in a fairly traditional light. *Bridesmaids* is about a wedding and a romantic relationship, even if it was a female-heavy ensemble. Of course, *Bridesmaids* is hilarious, so it's not to say that romantic comedies can't be good. But it is exciting to see something different.

So *Ghostbusters (2016)* is a feminist comedy because the female characters could be interchangeable with men. There is no relationship drama, no love triangles, nothing that usually exists in female-centric comedies. And there is little to do with gender as it is usually played in male-

led comedies either. The women in this film are not obsessed with sex like the boys in *Superbad*. They are not juvenile or immature. They are silly and crazy but also competent professionals. Even as *Ghostbusters (2016)* makes fun of the ghostbusters, it does not disrespect them or their abilities.

The originality of the characters and the stellar performances are what makes *Ghostbusters (2016)* funny. Kristen Wiig plays Erin, an uptight, excited, but strait-laced professor of particle physics at Columbia, who used to be best friends with Abby, Melissa McCarthy's character. Abby is just as much a professional as Erin, but she is unconcerned with public image, and incredibly concerned with wonton to broth ratio in her Chinese takeout. She works at a twelve-year-old university that has forgotten she exists. Leslie Jones plays Patty, a friendly MTA worker who is also incredibly smart and happens to know an encyclopedic amount of New York City history. Finally, Kate McKinnon plays Gillian Holtzmann, an engineer who is smart, reckless, and utterly absurd. The interactions, disagreements, and teamwork among the four leads are the driving forces of comedy for *Ghostbusters (2016)*.

McKinnon's performance especially is a standout. She moves around her environments like she is constantly dancing. She wears long trench coats over layers of patterned pants and ties and shirts. When we meet her, she pops up from behind a desk and flashes Erin an enormous grin, while wearing two pairs of goggles and wielding a pointy instrument. When the ghostbusters move into their new lab space there is an extended dance sequence where Erin watches Holtzmann lip sync to DeBarge. She is dancing with lit flame guns and starts a fire. She then dances to a fire extinguisher and points and shoots

it somewhere above the flames without looking at her target, grinning manically. As Erin gets more and more uncomfortable, Holtzmann never lets out the slightest hint that she even notices.

Another standout performance is Chris Hemsworth's work. His take on the attractive, ditzy, blonde secretary is a clear parody of the female archetype. He is hilarious as Kevin, playing him completely serious and deadpan. He interviews for the receptionist job with Erin, Abby, and Holtzmann, and in the interview asks if he can bring his dog to work—his dog's name is Mike Hat, which prompts confusion about whether Mike is a dog or a cat—scratches his nose through the frames of his glasses, and offers the ghostbusters the Seven Eleven logo and a graphic of a house and a hot dog for their use. When Erin tells him not to listen to the three women talk about him he covers his eyes and says, completely seriously, "I won't". Later, he tries to answer a fake telephone in a fish tank, listens to a saxophone by putting it next to his ear, and is otherwise comically terrible at his job.

And of course all four of the leads are talented improvisers. Feig, as in his previous work, pretty much runs the camera and lets his actors talk each other into funnier and funnier material. In that way *Ghostbusters (2016)* is similar to *Superbad*. They both rely on extended dialogues between funny people talking until the director calls cut.

And *Ghostbusters (2016)* is also playing with science fiction and action tropes. Holtzmann is always talking science-y mumbo-jumbo. There's a phenomenal scene about a third into the film where Holtzmann shares her new inventions with the other ghostbusters and they go to try them out.

Melissa McCarthy flies around, “doing a marvelous impression of a deflating balloon.” Patty narrows her eyes a bit and says, “She’s not bending her knees enough, right?” Leslie Jones and Kate McKinnon’s delivery makes the scene humorous, along with Melissa McCarthy’s physical comedy. But it is also funny as a parody of that moment in action movies where the hero suits up and loads his (or her) gun.

About halfway through the film the Ghostbusters actually manage to capture a ghost. They enter a heavy metal concert, and, to thunderous applause, capture a giant, undead, dragon-like creature. The whole sequence is perfectly genre in tone, beginning like a horror film with dark hallways and scared women, and ending like a comedy, with four ladies in jumpsuits wrestling a huge dragon demon into a metal tube. Ecstatic, they return to their lab to run tests like the scientists they are.

Then Bill Murray’s character, a professional debunker of the supernatural, comes to their headquarters to tell them he doesn’t believe them. Erin, in an understandable rage, releases the ghost, because, as she says, “he doesn’t believe us.” His disbelief, completely put on, it transpires, is so devastating to her, and creates in her such anger, that she has to release their prize.

It’s a moment of anger that feels particularly female, reminiscent of women from golden age musicals to generations of comedies reacting against men who continue to goad them, until they are speechless and the men have won. Men in media are often able to talk circles around women, remain calm

in the face of duress, and restrain their emotions, while the women become more and more emotionally reactive in a way that only demeans them.

Of course that's not how the scene in *Ghostbusters* plays out, because it is a feminist film and these women are the heroes. But it feels like it comes from the same place. It's one of just a few moments that only female actors could pull off. Abby calmly says so to Erin, "who cares what he says," and Dr. Heiss condescendingly laughs, "you two are something." So I laughed when the ghost then threw him out the window.

After killing Dr. Heiss, the ghostbusters are brought to the mayor's office, where he and his assistant reveal that they know there is a ghost problem in New York, and while they privately support the ghostbusters, they publically cannot do so.

In essence that progression is the story of *Ghostbusters*. These women are not taken seriously, they prove themselves, in the process injuring many, and making the audience laugh, and then the cycle begins again. So much of comedy is watching people get hurt. Watching women hurt people, even accidentally, and not feel bad about it, not try to fix it, is a huge difference to how women normally appear in comedies.

By putting women in the place of men in *Ghostbusters* there is some comedy that could not otherwise exist, and that is wonderful. But a lot of the film is just women doing things that could be done by men, and that is also wonderful. In *Mad Max: Fury Road* Furiosa has to be a woman for the plot to make sense. That's not true in *Ghostbusters*. The fact that Chris Hemsworth is playing a ditzy blonde male secretary is funny and good satire, but none of the

jokes he makes have anything to do with his gender. If anything, *Ghostbusters* proves that comedy (or at least this brand of blockbuster) can be performed by great actors and comedians of any gender.

In some ways it feels like *Ghostbusters* is defined by what it is not. It's not great, it's not bad, and it's not the original. It's not a love story. It is funny to see Chris Hemsworth lusted after like so many female secretaries in the movies, and it is refreshing that nothing romantic is ever seriously hinted at. A through line for *Ghostbusters (2016)*, *Max Max: Fury Road*, *Frozen*, and *The Devil Wears Prada* is a stark difference in how relationships between men and women are treated on screen (if they are even seen at all) from how heteronormative relationships are usually portrayed in mainstream Hollywood. When films abandon the idea that romantic relationships are necessary to successful movies the films become more interesting, more conscious, more equal, better.

So much of the experience of female characters in film is being an object, a sounding board, a piece of often-very-pretty meat. None of the ghostbusters are eye candy. Of course all of the women are attractive (they have film careers!) but Feig works hard to dress them down. Near the beginning of the film Charles Dance's administrator makes a comment to Erin about her wardrobe (which can only be described as very conservative) and she asks "too sexy for work?" It is commentary-based, feminist jokes like that one that make *Ghostbusters (2016)* enjoyable. It is also moments like Erin being vomited on by a ghost and getting covered in green goop reminiscent of Nickelodeon's slime from *Slime Time*.

These moments are both funny because they subvert our expectations of women in the genre. The women in *Ghostbusters* aren't damsels in distress. They may be scared but they get over it, and then they do their job. They are unconcerned with romance. They flirt, but never commit. They invent and use ridiculous ghost-catching devices. They engage in absurd physical comedy. In essence, they act exactly like the 1984 ghostbusters. And yet no one, not youtube commenters, not scientists, not even each other, for a while, takes them seriously. The male ghostbusters never seemed to have such an issue with public interest.

Ironically the trolls who attacked the movie made the experience of *Ghostbusters* a political one, while it only should have been a mild pleasure. Every time I laughed I laughed harder, everything I liked about it I liked more because it was laughing in the face of those who think that the idea of a woman with a doctorate and a job and no children is the epitome of evil. I have spent more time on Breitbart researching this film than anyone should ever have to, and the overwhelming opinion seems to be that the only funny place for a woman is the kitchen. Hilarious.

If you put the ongoing wonton joke in another movie I might roll my eyes and chuckle, but Melissa McCarthy makes it laugh out loud funny because she is hysterical, and because *Ghostbusters* deserves good vibes. Going into the theater I *needed* to enjoy it. It wasn't about the film; it was about supporting actors I love, giving my money so that more female-lead projects will happen, and proving to people I will hopefully never meet that

most people disagree with them. While it's great that *Ghostbusters (2016)* turned out to be funny, the alt-right made buying a ticket a moral act.

The alt-right and “meninist” response to *Ghostbusters* should have been a warning about what would happen in the 2016 presidential election. *Ghostbusters* is about entirely fictional mythical creatures, but in some ways it is the most true-to-life film that I'm discussing. It exists in 2016 in a very visceral way. The struggles these female ghostbusters—funny, smart, with doctorates—face are the same ones these female actors—funny, smart, accomplished—face. The biggest change from the original is the overwhelming disbelief, both diegetic and in response to the film, that women cannot bust ghosts.

Look, I campaigned for Hillary Clinton the summer that *Ghostbusters* came out. I saw it with a group of talented women working to elect the first female president. So obviously I'm writing from a place of strong emotional bias. But I do think the things that those bigoted commenters on youtube and Breitbart wrote are false. That the film has cheesy special effects and is overwhelmed by its franchise's legacy are not, in my mind, valid criticism. The special effects are cheesy, both over the top and insufficient, but they aren't meant to be frightening or realistic—they're meant to be funny, and they are. It's impossible not to laugh at the enormous marshmallow man towering over New York City, and it should be; *Ghostbusters* is a comedy. Those cameos from previous ghostbusters are just as fun. For a summer crowd pleaser it certainly pleased the crowd that I saw it with.

Like *Bridesmaids*, *Ghostbusters (2016)* had a lot of pressure on it, pressure a summer comedy should never have to shoulder. It had to live up to the unreachable expectations of fans of the franchise, in addition to proving (again) that women are funny, that making comedies with all-female casts will generate money, and is an enterprise worth pursuing. And unlike male-lead comedies, if *Ghostbusters (2016)* failed, it would reflect on the ability of any woman to ever be funny again. As Roxane Gay wrote about *Bridesmaids*, “this is the state of women in entertainment—everything hangs in the balance all the time.”⁶¹ And *Ghostbusters (2016)* was supposed to reenergize the franchise and create a whole ghost-centered, female-character-led, expanded universe. Which would have been so cool! But it won’t happen, because a tiny, hate filled group of people decided they could not allow *Ghostbusters (2016)* to prove itself.⁶²

Film today, especially comedy, is still a male dominated enterprise, and movies like *Ghostbusters (2016)* are fewer and farther between than is ideal. Never is it more obvious than when movies with funny women in them are released, because of the pressure heaped upon them, in addition to the worry that if this movie does poorly at the box office, that’s it for female-centered comedies. *Ghostbusters (2016)* was good. It was funny. I laughed. I would like to see more movies with McCarthy, Wiig, Jones, and McKinnon. I would like to level critique, to note that it is blatantly racist to have the one actor of color

⁶¹ Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 53.

⁶² It is worth noting that this is a double standard. Male-driven franchises like *G.I. Joe*, *Pacific Rim*, or *Olympus Has Fallen* got sequels even though they underperformed at the box office.

play the one non-scientist ghostbuster. I would have liked more Leslie Jones and Kate McKinnon in general.

But then I find myself defending a film that I should never have to think about again, that I should put in the same category in my head as *Dodgeball*, *Tropic Thunder*, or *Mean Girls*: funny, really funny, but that's it. Enjoyable but not worthy of so many think pieces.

In a world of boring reboots, it is special to make a change as big as casting female actors to play beloved male characters. And there is a difference in the film, in the comedy, in the tone, because the leads are female. I have spent my life watching comedies that revolve around men, dramas that revolve around men, action movies that revolve around men, and I will continue to do so. I have watched and succumbed as male writers have used women as nothing more than an extension of a male character, a reason to like him, or the butt of a joke. It is a distinct change to the genre to have four ladies lead an aromantic comedy, and if that means that some little girl is watching *Ghostbusters (2016)* at her birthday party instead of *Ghostbusters (1984)* then it is worth so rigorously defending the film.

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