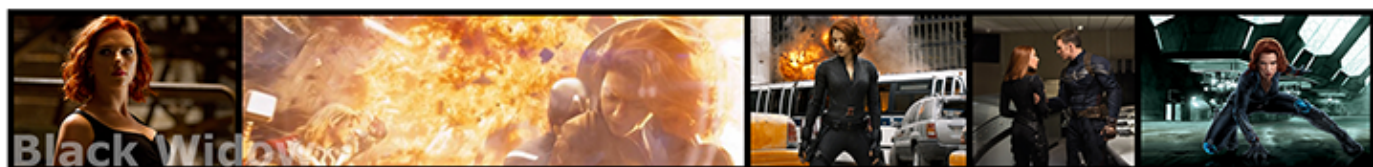# The Female Hero
Finding Her Place in the Male Dominated World of Film

By
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Abstract

Within the filmic landscape, the male gaze has always had the upper hand. Films are generally made by men, for men and although this may seem as something from the past, it is still the case. There is an imbalance between the presence of women and men in film, how they are presented and, more importantly, who the films are made for.

Within this thesis I want to explore this further and see how this lack of equality has influenced the possibility for identification with the characters on screen by the female spectator. With this I want to focus on the female (super)hero as she is up and coming, but struggling to truly settle in within the male genres of film. I want to try to discover whether her presence has made a difference for the female spectator and if she is someone they can identify with, as this has for the most part been difficult to do in the past. Moreover, I want to look at what female heroes have been important over the past decade and whether they have changed the gender imbalance or have kept it intact, only seemingly changing things on the surface but not on a deeper level. What possibility for identification have they been able to offer to the female spectator?

Introduction

Of the top one hundred grossing films in the United States in 2015, a mere 22 percent had a female protagonist. Although this meant an increase of ten percent compared to 2014, which according to the institution conducting this annual research, the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film, was an 'exceptionally poor year for women in these roles', and an increase of six percent compared to 2002, it also points at how unbalanced the scales are regarding the position of women in film. Aside from these figures regarding the protagonist, it was also concluded that females accounted for just 34 percent of all the major characters in this top one hundred and of all speaking characters, women covered a mere 33 percent. Of the antagonists, women comprised eighteen percent.

What also came forth within this research is that there is a connection between the position of women behind the scenes and the percentage of women within the cast of a film. Films that had at least one female director and/or writer had a cast in which women accounted for forty percent of the speaking characters, but when the directors and writers were exclusively male, this percentage dropped down to thirty percent. This percentage dropped even further when it came to the position of an actress as either a protagonist or an antagonist: fifty percent of films with at least one female director and/or writer had a female protagonist against a mere thirteen percent when the directors and writers were exclusively male. When it came to the role of the antagonist, 29 percent of these roles were occupied by women when there was at least one female director and/or writer on staff, but this was only fifteen percent when these jobs were filled by just men (Lauzen 1-4).

Similar research regarding this subject was also conducted by the New York Film Academy in 2013. They researched the portrayal of women in film in the top 500 films between 2007 and 2012. Although fifty percent of all movie tickets are purchased by women, the percentage of females that actually make it into a film is significantly less, like we have seen in the research conducted by the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film. On top of this misbalance, the New York Film Academy's research also lead to some other interesting facts related to the subject: 28,8 percent of women in the top 500 films wore sexually revealing clothes, as opposed to seven percent of men. 26,2 percent of female actors get partially naked, but only 9,4 percent of the men do and about a third of all female speaking characters are shown in either sexually revealing attire or they are partially naked. The percentage of teenage females shown with some nudity has even increased by 32,5 percent between 2007 and 2012 (NY Film Academy, "Gender Inequality in Film: An Infographic").

So, in addition to the fact that the percentage of women in film is a lot lower compared to men, the way they are portrayed is also vastly different. And even if they

are portrayed equal to men within a film, they are then sometimes faced with the circumstance of getting criticised for taking on a strong role and not being feminine enough within it or, even worse, for overpowering their male counterpart. This happened to actress Charlize Theron after the release of *Mad Max: Fury Road* in 2015, according to an article in *The Guardian* written by Ben Child. Theron played Furiosa and even when just the trailer had been released for the film, her character was already criticised for "speaking too much" and for "barking orders at Mad Max". Because nobody gives orders to Mad Max, let alone a woman, according to (male) critic Aaron Clarey. Theron hit back by defending the film, calling it "an incredibly feminist action film" and by calling upon other filmmakers to "stop misrepresenting women" in post-apocalyptic films (Child, "Mad Max: Fury Road's Strong Women Won't Surprise True Genre Fans"). Whether that last statement is really a problem is something that will hopefully come forward within this thesis, but the case Theron does make is that there really is a lot of misrepresentation of women within film in general and that there is still a long way to go towards establishing equality.

A film like *Mad Max*, which can be categorised under genres like action and science fiction, is a production that writer Rikke Schubart (1966) deems part of the *male genres* of film. These films were for a long time dominated by men up until around the seventies. By that time more and more women started to become a part of these types of films. These male dominated productions consist, according to Schubart, of a range of genres: action films, science fiction films, westerns, war movies, martial arts films and revenge films (5). It seemed in the seventies that shootings guns and wielding swords was no longer something just for men, but although this time signified the arrival of more women within these genres, one may wonder whether or not these genres stopped being male. The earlier referenced numbers from the studies regarding the position of women in film can also support this question, because what these make evident is that there is still a very apparent gap between men and women in the cinematic world. The reason I want to focus on the *male genres* within this, is that I want to question the morals and proclaimed equality that comes forth in these kinds of productions. Yes, the women pick up the guns and swords and fight, but how different are these films really when it comes to the representation of gender equality?

Within this thesis, this representation of women within these so-called *male genres* of film is what the focus will be on. The research will be conducted with the support of literature by authors that have had a significant voice within this field like Laura Mulvey (i.e. "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema"), Mary Ann Doane (i.e. "The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address") and Teresa de Lauretis (i.e. *Alice Doesn't*). Other resources for this thesis will be previous studies regarding the subject like those referenced at the beginning of this introduction and I also plan to conduct my own

analyses of the female (super) hero, with the use of the analysing method narratology[1], within several case studies, which I will name further on in this introduction. The main research question to support this research will be: How does the way the female hero is represented within the male genres of film influence to what extent the female spectator is able to identify with her?

To answer this question, the thesis will be divided into three chapters before a possible conclusion can be formulated. Each chapter will be devoted to one particular element of the subject, which is the representation of women in the male genres of film. As part of this, the first chapter will be focussing on establishing the (theoretical) field. The chapter will contain a further look into feminism and stereotyping, two subjects that influence society's view on what is deemed "normal", before moving on to the position of women within film and how this has or has not changed throughout the history of cinema. How has gender role stereotyping influenced the portrayal of women in film? Which role does the female character usually fulfil within film? And how have previous attempts at making films more suitable for the female spectator taken shape? These and other questions will hopefully be answered within this first chapter. Important literary scholars here will be, amongst others, Laura Mulvey, Claire Johnston and Mary Ann Doane.

The second chapter will take a closer look at the female superhero and will move more towards a focus on case studies rather than literature. As part of this chapter and the next, I have decided to make a distinction between the female superhero and the (reluctant) female hero (the anti-hero). The reason for this is that the portrayal of the two, what motivates them and how they function within a narrative is vastly different from one another. Therefore, within the second chapter, the focus will be on the female superhero, often coming forth from comic books or video games. This genre has been incredibly popular over the past decade, but is mostly dominated by men. This is especially noticeable due to the fact that whereas most male superheroes have had their own films, the female ones have not. The way they are portrayed is also something of interest here as this too is different from their male counterparts. It raises the question whether or not the presence of the female superhero is actually a step forward or if it might be a step back in the fight for equality. The female superhero is often dressed up as a pin-up girl and seems to mainly be presented as a sexual object for the male audience and the characters within the film to look at, rather than to actually set a step forward in establishing the female hero within film. Therefore, within this chapter, I want to take a closer look at the position of women within the superhero genre of film and determine how truly significant their appearance is in regards to achieving gender

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[1] The method of narratology that I will use in this thesis will be executed in the way it is described in the book *Film Narratology* (2006) by Peter Verstraten.

equality in Hollywood and on what level the female spectator is able to identify with these characters. Main case studies to support my argument here will be the characters of Wonder Woman, Black Widow (*The Avengers*), and Mystique (*X-Men*).

For the third chapter I want to move the focus towards films revolving around a female hero who is more like an anti-hero. This is the type of hero that is reluctant to be one, but forced into the position due to circumstance. They are generally more relatable for the (female) audience due to the fact that they never set out to be heroes and come from simple backgrounds. The female anti-hero has become quite popular over the past years and seems to signify an important shift within film and the positioning of women within the field. An entire franchise no longer has to rely on a male hero as a female one can now carry the story as well. Within this chapter I want to try and establish what this has meant for the position of women within the male genres of film and see if these films have been able to rid themselves of the constant pressure of the male gaze, giving female audiences something to finally properly identify with. Main case studies here will be the characters of Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games*) and Tris Prior (*Divergent*), who are both female protagonists fronting major franchises that have signified a change within the cinematic world, making the adventure/sci-fi genre no longer only for men. To support my argument within this chapter I will also take a look at the Netflix series *Jessica Jones* that is showing a similar trend: a strong female lead within an otherwise male genre.

1. Women in Film

Feminism

The strive for equality between men and women has developed into a continuous debate that never seems to come to a proper conclusion. In literature regarding the subject, a vast array of books and articles on feminism make it evident that although in every day society there is not always as much attention for the fight for gender equality, it is still very much happening.[2] The core meaning of the term feminism, according to feminist theorists Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones, is that those who are "feminists refuse to accept that inequalities between women and men are natural and inevitable" (1). Jackson and Jones also state that feminists insist that all forms of inequality between men and women should be questioned in order to break free from a world that has previously, for the most part, been dominated by men (Jackson 1).

Although feminism is something that has been around for a long time in one form or another - organised activities for women's rights began in the United States in the mid-1800s (Ryan 1) - it was not until the late 1960s, early 1970s that it began to develop into what it is now. This period of time has been marked as the "second wave of feminism" and it signifies a time in which the subject entered contemporary debates and became the subject of theories within academic writing (Hollows 3). However, this time also marked a moment in which feminism became a very varied subject. Before this shift, feminism was easier to define, but as this second wave hit and the movement became more active, their views started to change constantly and within this there also developed a lot of diversity "through a constant process of debate, critique and reflection," according to Jackson and Jones (3). This was most significant between various continents or even just countries, as each had their own feminist ideas (Jackson 3). Even within different groups of activists within one country there could be a lot of different ideas regarding the subject and how it ought to be approached. Feminism became scattered and difficult to define in one central argument with its multiple facets and various approaches as to how they could achieve their goals (Ryan 1).

Still, the central goal within feminism remained to be the desire for equality between men and women. However, the title 'feminist' got tainted over time and a lot of women no longer wanted to have anything to do with it due to the strong prejudice and stereotype that started to go along with the word. This change in perception of the word happened somewhere in the 1990s, according to feminist theorist Angela McRobbie. The second wave of feminism was dwindling during that time and women started to distance themselves from the movement. Being a feminist became unpopular; partially due to the

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[2] A key writer regarding feminism is Angela McRobbie. She has been at the core of feminist writing for several decades with books like *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) and several articles published in magazines like *Feminist Media Studies*.

media labelling it as old-fashioned (McRobbie 255-258) and also because of the general image that had developed regarding feminism. Actress Emma Watson addressed this issue in her speech at the United Nations Headquarters in 2014 for the introduction of the HeForShe Campaign[3]. She began her argument by accentuating the official meaning of feminism, "the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities", before continuing on to the general stereotype that has become what the term is most known for: feminists are women who express opinions that are "too strong, too aggressive, isolating, anti-men and unattractive" (Watson, "He for She"). When you put these categorisations next to what the word feminist - someone who refuses to accept the inequality between men and women - actually means, you quickly realise how distanced they are from one another. Still, they have become so stuck together that being a feminist is not something all women aspire to be anymore.

(Gender Role) Stereotyping

Although feminism started as a positive movement towards equality, it became tainted by the stereotypes that were applied to it and turned into something most women were uncomfortable to be associated with. This possibly derives from the notion that, as described in the book *Stereotypes & Stereotyping* (1996), once a stereotype exists, the pressure on the group it affects to defy the stereotype becomes so significant that in the end they usually prove it to be right rather than not. Trying to defy a stereotype works often counterproductive and is therefore more often avoided to get involved with rather than attempted to fight (Macrae 13-14). Once a stereotype exists, it is hard to shake it and even more so, we often start to act in a way that does everything possible to avoid it being applied to us.

On the complete opposite side of this is that some groups, mostly women, actually sometimes emphasize stereotypes by agreeing with them or acting according to them consciously (Inzlicht 162). Whereas ethnic groups will often deny the stereotypes that are applied to them, significant groups of women actually attest to the general stereotype that exists of them. Partially this is caused by whether or not the stereotyped group also has positive aspects within their stereotype as opposed to merely negative ones. An example given in the book *Stereotype Threat: Theory, Process, and Application* (2012) by Michael Inzlicht and Toni Schmader emphasizes this by showing the difference in stereotyping women as opposed to ethnic groups. The stereotype of ethnic groups (Asian, Muslim, Black, Hispanic, et cetera) is by default almost always negative. There are rarely any positive aspects to be found within these stereotypes. These people are often portrayed as incapable and lazy amongst other things and nobody within these

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[3] HeForShe is a solidarity campaign for gender equality that was initiated by UN Women. Its main focus is to encourage men to take action against inequality faced by women.

groups will therefore support the stereotype. Instead, they focus on defying the stereotype rather than endorsing the statements made about them. However, with women, the stereotype is not all negative. Aside from often negatively being labelled as incompetent, women are also considered to be very warm and nurturing, which is seen as a positive trait. And as opposed to those affected by ethnic stereotypes, some women actually endorse the negative stereotype regarding their gender: they label themselves as "emotional, talkative and unintelligent" (Inzlicht 162). In a study it was even shown that, despite being math majors themselves, twenty-four percent of the women questioned, somewhat agreed with the stereotype that men are better at math than women. So, whereas ethnic groups would never self-stereotype, it appears as if some women seem fine with it. They possibly do this to use the stereotype as something to hide behind, but subconsciously they are also condemning themselves to a lesser position compared to men (Inzlicht 162).

Furthermore, stereotyping is also often used to either put a group off of something or to attract them. With this Inzlicht and Schmader gave an example of stereotyping used in adverts and how this affects the choices of the viewer: when women watch an advert for a conference that is very stereotypical and "gender-imbalanced", they will less likely feel the urge to attend that conference compared to men or other women who watched a similar video that was balanced out equally without any stereotyping (Inzlicht 161). Subconsciously a lot of women let themselves be influenced by stereotypes, leading them to make different choices than they perhaps would have, had there been more of a balance.

When it comes to this stereotyping according to gender, it can all be filed under the term *gender role stereotyping*. Within this, certain emotions, capabilities, trades or professions are judged as either being feminine or masculine. For instance, being strong or good at building things is seen as masculine, whereas showing emotion, taking care of the children or being a nurse are seen as feminine. These gender role stereotypes are carried out throughout our society, for the most part due to how they get spread by the media. It is a binary system that puts each gender in a corner and offers little room for flexibility. It is even suggested that gender role stereotyping in the media is partially responsible for young women's negative view on themselves: "increased viewing of television can increase stereotyping and there has also been found evidence that television might be related to more sexist views of women's role in society" (Thompson 652). I do believe that some people are easier affected by the use of stereotypes than others, but especially young women, and possibly also men, can be influenced by the way the media portrays them, making them feel like they need to act and look a certain way. Film too plays an important role within this, as it too uses (gender role) stereotyping throughout its genres, influencing, consciously or not, its audiences.

This gender role stereotyping within film is fed to us from an early age, starting with animations. Young children take in a lot from what they see in both animated television series and films. Children have a tendency to imitate same-gender characters from animations, so there is an importance to how these characters are portrayed. In an article regarding gender roles in animated cartoons, researchers Teresa Thompson and Eugenia Zerbinos state that "young children cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality", so the way characters get portrayed in animations will be translated by them as truth and therefore consequently be adapted to real life. Although there is a shift happening, in the past (1970s – 1980s) most animated series were focused on boys since they would never watch shows focused on girls, but girls were generally fine with watching animated series with a male protagonist. Within these series, there were only a few female characters (ratio of three to one) and whenever they appeared it was either as a girl that needed to be saved, a mother taking care of the housework or as a character that was dumb and caused trouble. The male characters were strong, smart and would save the day (Thompson 652-654). This same type of gender role stereotyping often also comes forward within films for adults. Art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) argued for the early years of cinema that this form of stereotyping was mostly done for practical reasons. Audiences had trouble deciphering what was on the screen and by using stereotypes, this was made easier (Johnston 184), but even if this is the case, this does not support any foundation for why these same stereotypes still appear in films made well after this period of time.

Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema"
As stated in the introduction, both on and off screen, men take up far more of the film industry than women do and this is likely intertwined with the focus on the male viewer when producing a film. In Laura Mulvey's (1941) influential article "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema" (1975) she speaks a lot about this focus on the male within film, referring regularly to Freud's psychoanalytical theories on this subject, which is referred to as *phallocentrism* (the focus on and domination by men). As part of this, Mulvey refers to *the castration theory* in which the woman signifies the threat of castration and she raises her child "into the signifier of her own desire to possess a penis" (Mulvey 6-7). To put it simply, *the castration theory* seems to mostly explain the fear that men have of losing their masculinity. Anything that can threaten this will be kept at a distance and generally this threat appears in the shape of a woman, who signifies everything that is not masculine. Freud described this as a narcissistic side of man, as the man is so focused on preserving his highly valued penis that anything else is less important (Chanter 54). This focus by them is meant to maintain their dominant position.

The core of Mulvey's article is about the different pleasures that can be derived from cinema and watching a film. One of those is *scopophilia*, which is the circumstance in which the concept of *looking* in itself is something that pleasure can be derived from, together with being looked at. Freud defined this as one of the key instincts of sexuality that can function independently from erotogenic zones. Although cinema does not function from this erotic basis, the concept of seeing, and the curiosity we have to see things, are at the very core of visiting a movie theatre. Within this, Mulvey dissects two ways of looking at a film (an image): voyeuristic and narcissistic (8).

The voyeuristic look comes forth from the way we watch a film in the cinema. From a dark area in which we are separated from one another, we watch a world that is unaware of us viewing them. This creates a sense of distance, giving us the feeling that we are separated from that world and therefore looking in, emphasizing the voyeuristic aspect of viewing a film. This voyeuristic look can be divided into three separate forms within the film: the look of the camera during filming, the look of the audience viewing the film and the look of the characters towards one another (Mulvey 9 & 18).

The narcissistic look is signified by the way we identify with the characters on screen. Although the ego can also temporarily disappear during the viewing of a film by getting absorbed into the story, it can also come back very quickly once the viewer starts to recognise oneself in the "stars" of the film and begin to identify with them. Aside from the ego of the "stars" growing by being in the film (i.e. through gaining a celebrity status), the viewer who identifies with them also expands his ego because of the likeness he encounters (Mulvey 9 & 18). This way of looking can be referenced back to the theory of the *mirror stage* by psychoanalytic Jacques Lacan (1901). The *mirror stage* is a phase that children go through when they are between six to eighteen months old. Within this stage, when they see themselves reflected in either a mirror or something else, they start to recognise themselves in this reflection, but without fully comprehending yet that the reflection is exactly like they are. During this stage they assume their physical abilities to be better than they are in reality, leading to a sense that the reflection seems to physically be much more capable than they truly are themselves. So, there is a feeling of familiarity with the reflection, but this image is overestimated (Baudry 45). This is similar to when we identify ourselves with the heroes of a film, as this often leads to us thinking more highly of ourselves than is perhaps realistic.

Although these two ways of looking, voyeuristic and narcissistic, come together within film, they are also quite different from one another in approach. The voyeuristic way of looking comes forth from the pleasure of looking and by "using another person as an object of sexual stimulation", whereas with the narcissistic look it is more about the ego that comes forth from identifying oneself with the image that is seen. The first comes forth from sexual instincts and the second from the ego. However, both are connected to

the notion of *desire*. This has the ability to transcend the instinctual and the imagination, but in the end, for man, it always comes back to what they fear, which is *the castration complex*: although man likes to look at the woman, she also has something threatening over her that resides in her femininity (Mulvey 10).

Despite this supposed threat that women seem to have over the male viewer, the looking at women is very important, especially within cinema. Mulvey speaks of a sexual imbalance in this, in which the pleasure of looking is split between active, which is male, and passive, female. Here the male gaze actively projects its phantasies onto the female form that is styled accordingly to this. Women are often put in the role of being looked at and displayed, with their appearance made up in such a way that it has a strong visual and erotic impact on the male heterosexual viewer. Mulvey calls this *to-be-looked-at-ness*. The woman is displayed as a sexual object, as a spectacle (Mulvey 11).

According to feminist film theorist Claire Johnston (1940-1987), women in classic narrative cinema were for the most part seen as tokens and nothing more. She adds that within the male-dominated cinema, which is filled with sexist ideology, the woman is presented in a fashion that represents how she would ideally be viewed by men (Johnston 185). Mulvey states that this is done to avert from the threat that women represent in the form of castration and the pain and suffering that comes along with this. To veer away from this the woman is portrayed as a sexual object or portrayed in such a way within the narrative that any threatening aspect she might have is diminished, often by a sadistic storyline in which the male protagonist takes control over the female character to neutralise any possible power she could have (Mulvey 13-14). This has led to a lack of differentiation in female characters in film, whereas for men the possibilities are far greater (Johnston 184).

The Position of Women in a Medium Focused on Men
Going by the theories in Mulvey's article, we could conclude that cinema is mostly made for men, but that is not the case according to author Teresa De Lauretis (1938). She states that cinema also addresses women, but the different ways of how this is executed are not obvious and this is what is important. Cinema is more tailored for men, but tries to do this in such a way that women will still come to see the productions as well (De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 15). Possible ways of doing this could be through the narrative or by having a male protagonist that is charming and attractive for the female viewer. However, the representation of women on screen is vastly different from men: the dominant cinema portrays women in a particular social and natural order and sets them up in certain positions of meaning. They become represented as the negative side of sexual differentiation, as a spectacle (De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 15), like Mulvey too mentioned.

As cinema developed, the stereotyping of men did too and changed throughout time. This was not the case for women, as they remained unchanged through time in the way they were presented. Only the fashion in which they were dressed changed, but the characters they portrayed barely did (Johnston 184). This is what compiles the basis for the critique on the position of women within cinema. Women comprise half of the world, but in cinema they are suddenly less significant, only suitable for certain roles, as something for men to be looked at, but that does not suit the reality of the way the world is divided.

In film women are there to be looked at, either by their fellow characters in the film or by the male viewer, preferably both and as part of the narrative so the erotic element she brings does not distract from the story. The male protagonist is not meant to add this erotic element, as he represents the viewer, "the bearer of the look" as Mulvey calls him, and offers a character for this viewer to identify with like with the *mirror stage*: the viewers recognise themselves in the male character, but this character is better than they are. It represents the image of how they would like to be (Mulvey 12-13). This identification with the male character is supported by the use of the camera and by the way the film is edited. For instance, the camera can slowly glide across the body of a female character when she enters a scene. This accentuates her looks and body, consequently accentuating any possible sexualised and erotic aspects, turning her into the spectacle. By doing this, the way the viewer looks at the film and its characters is guided and it decides with which characters we identify ourselves as spectators.

For women this is different when viewing (Hollywood) films, which are generally made for the male viewer. Mary Ann Doane describes two ways in which a woman can view these films, which in her eyes make her into a hermaphrodite: a narcissistic identification with the female character as a spectacle, which is often sexual, or a 'transvestite' identification with the male protagonist. "The female spectator is thus imaged by its text as having a mixed sexual body" (Doane, *The 'Woman's Film'* 295). When buying a ticket for the cinema, the female spectator has to deny her sex as within the film there will be no images for her (Doane, *Woman's Stake* 22). This somewhat opposes the statement made by De Lauretis in regards to this, as she does seem to believe that there are aspects in films added to attract the female viewer, therefore not forcing her to deny her sex completely (De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 15).

Filmmaker Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)[4] was one of the early directors to make films with a female protagonist and therefore formed an interesting example for both Mulvey and Johnston in their articles, albeit from different viewpoints. Both agree that Sternberg strips away the male protagonist in his films and focuses on a female lead

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[4] Josef von Sternberg was an Austrian-American film director who quickly gained interest by the likes of Charlie Chaplin for his work, but is even more known for launching Marlene Dietrich's career.

instead, often Marlene Dietrich. As part of this, Mulvey argues that the male lead within these films becomes one with the audience, instead of the hero with which they identify themselves, and the actress is still mainly there to be (erotically) objectified (Mulvey 14-15). However, Johnston interprets Sternberg's way of portraying the female lead as covering up her threat as a feminine object (castration theory) and making her more masculine by dressing her in clothing that is more manly or having her speak in a very low voice. By covering up her femininity with something masculine, in Freud's theory, the woman ceases to be a threat (Johnston 186). Both Mulvey and Johnston therefore point at how Sternberg covers up the threat of the woman, despite having a female lead, but they each define different antics on how this is achieved.

The Two Waves of Female Film
In the 1940's a genre called the 'Woman's Film' developed, which we could possibly call a very early version of the 'chick flick'[5] from nowadays, but there is a long history in between. Mary Ann Doane (1952) has written an article regarding this "genre" as it was an early step towards developing a different position for women within film. However, the way this was done was far from ideal, as these films could not really be assigned to one particular genre, ranging from musicals to horror. The only common element they shared was the fact that they were meant for female audiences (and were written off by the male film critic) (Doane, *The 'Woman's Film'* 284). Also, when reading of the Women's Film, one may question as to how friendly they actually were towards women as opposed to the reigning Hollywood film that focused on the male gaze. The Woman's Film often had a narrative that assumed for there to be a compatibility between the concept of the female fantasy and of persecution, often brought to effect by either the husband, family or lover. These films also almost always contained a deviation from both mental and physical health by the female protagonist, which would often result in the investigation of the "female condition", which was generally linked to masochism, hysteria, neurosis and paranoia (Doane, *The 'Woman's Film'* 285). So, with the Woman's Film, the portrayal of women went from erotic to mentally unstable, which may be more interesting for female audiences, but seems far from right in the grand scheme of the positioning of women within film. However, Doane states at the end of her article that despite the questionable portrayal of women within these films, the presence of them was still important as it forced Hollywood to shift its focus a little bit more from men to women (Doane, *The 'Woman's Film'* 296).

In the 1970s, along with the women's movement, a new wave of female films materialised as part of the fight for equality that was firing up during that time. Two

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[5] The 'chick flick' is a common nickname for films that are focused on a female audience and told from a female perspective. Regular themes in these films are love and heartbreak.

types of film came from this that functioned quite differently from another. The first type was more within the documentary genre of film (i.e. *Janie's Janie* (1972) by Geri Ashur). It was all about registering the movement that was happening and was used to document this for reasons like political activism, to raise consciousness of the problems at hand, self-expression and to discover the "positive image" of women. The second type of film was more about the aesthetics and the cinematic apparatus and using the medium as a social technology to try and provide an alternative for the established ways of Hollywood cinema (i.e. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* (1975) by Chantal Akerman or *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen) (De Lauretis, *Aesthetic and Feminist Theory* 154-155).

The main problem that seemed to develop with both these movements from the 1940s and 1970s that portray themselves as offering films for women, is that they seem to go in a complete opposite direction. They are trying too hard to veer away from the male influence by either shutting them out all together or in a way, like with the Woman's Film that makes it debatable as to whether or not the portrayal of women has actually improved. Although in all of these films women were no longer used as a form of spectacle and as a sexual object, they were transformed into characters that were mentally unstable, like Doane stated in her article on the subject of the 'Woman's Film', which I mentioned before.

The main issue for me with both these types of films, the feminist film and the 'Woman's Film', and with the classic Hollywood films is that none of them aim at equality. It seems to be more about one or the other, the domination of either men or women. Those proclaiming themselves to be feminist filmmakers are often doing this in such a way that it is not about equality, but about pushing women forward. However, feminism should be about equal opportunities and treatment without looking at gender. These films do not contribute to that by making themselves all about women. True equality would be a film in which both men and women play equal parts, are both just as much present and take on a similar amount of lines in the script.

Kenneth MacKinnon also addresses this problem of there often being used too extreme opinions within this subject, from both the classic Hollywood filmmakers who have men in dominant roles and the feminist filmmakers on the opposite. MacKinnon does attest to the fact that there is a problem within Hollywood, but he questions the extremity of the stance by Mulvey on the subject of the love story. In her *visual pleasures* article she judges the falling in love of a woman with a man as him taking possession of her. She becomes his property and therefore the property of the audience who identifies with the male protagonist (Mulvey 14). MacKinnon finds it surprising that this diminishing of love by Mulvey has never been questioned, as her article has been of such great influence within film theory and because the love story is something that

comes forward in almost every type of film, whether it is a romantic film or a war film. And what MacKinnon finds especially interesting here is that although Mulvey regularly refers to Freud in her arguments, in this case she does not. Freud also links love to sexuality, but finds it to be different from a mere interaction between male-female/subject-object. It softens the sexual aim of the relationship and cannot be deemed completely the same as man merely taking possession of the woman. What is also interesting is that the addition of love to a narrative somewhat feminises the male protagonist, but not in a way that makes the female character gain power over him. He is still depicted as physically superior, but in a slightly more vulnerable way (MacKinnon 130). So, although there is some truth to Mulvey's argument regarding the love story, her stance is extreme and could be neutralised a little, especially when we take Freud's, one of her main influencers, analysis of the subject into account. However, even with the love story, despite the sexual aim being softened, it remains true that the male element is in control and the stereotyping between men and women in that sense remains intact, albeit in a less objectified way.

The Rise of the Female Hero in Film
That there is a clear problem within the cinematic world, and especially Hollywood, is clear though and not just in the time of early cinema, which feminist film scholars most often refer to. As was shown in the introduction with the research done by the New York Film Academy regarding the top five hundred films between 2007 and 2012, the position of women within film is still highly questionable compared to men. And aside from there being far less women than men, the way they are portrayed is also something to be noted. Four times more female characters wear sexually revealing clothes as opposed to male characters and three times more female characters get (partially) naked than male characters. Compare this to the fact that there are far less women in film than men and the difference between each becomes even more troubling (NY Film Academy, "Gender Inequality in Film: An Infographic").

In the past decades, the roles portrayed by women have indeed shifted. They are not just there anymore as a sexual object or as the damsel in distress. Although, even this could possibly be debated as we will see in the next chapters. However, we do see more women in what used to generally be seen as 'male roles'. Violence used to be something that was only used by men and women were most often just on the receiving end of it. However, since the late 1970s there have been the occasional female action characters, defying the gender stereotype, with many film theorists seeing Sigourney Weaver's character Lt. Ripley from the film *Alien* (1979) as the first one. This film and its success opened the door for more female action characters like we have seen in its sequels and in productions like *Terminator* (1985)*, Lara Croft* (2001) and *Kill Bill* (2003).

Suddenly we began to see female characters engage in hand-to-hand combat or wield swords and shoot guns, activities that used to be exclusively for male (action) heroes (Gilpatric 734). However, although the male genres are becoming more accessible for female characters, we may wonder whether or not things have really changed. Are the female characters in these films similar to the male ones in how they are presented? How big of a part do the female characters play compared to their male counterparts? And can we really put the stereotypes regarding women and their portrayal as a spectacle behind us? Has through the arrival of the female (super)hero in the male genres of film the way women are portrayed actually changed? These are the things I want to look further into within the next two chapters, because although at the surface there may be a change happening in which women are becoming a bigger part of the male genres of film, one may wonder whether things are truly changing. An important element regarding this is also the way the actions of the female characters are judged. The use of violence is generally deemed appropriate for men to show their dominance, but women are discouraged from displaying it as they are supposed to be nurturing, caring and emotional. Furthermore, as Mulvey too stated in her *visual pleasures* article, woman are seen as passive and should remain that way. On the other hand, men would be punished if they displayed this same passivity (Meyer 64-65).

Viewers also hold on to these gender norms more than we would imagine when watching a film, especially when there is a shift happening within this. In a qualitative study conducted by Doug Meyer, twenty-two subjects were asked to view the film *Girls Town* (1996) in which the three main female characters conduct a series of violent acts against men who have done them and their friends wrong. After the film, the subjects were asked to write down what they liked or disliked most about their favourite characters. What came forward in this was that the respondents praised the characters for any stereotypical feminine characteristics, but condemned them for using violence or portraying some other masculine trades (Meyer 70). This is also interesting to relate back to the article mentioned in the introduction regarding Charlize Theron's character in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) and how she was condemned by some male viewers for ordering around the male protagonist and not being feminine enough in the portrayal of her character (Child, "Mad Max: Fury Road's Strong Women Won't Surprise True Genre Fans").

This portrayal of female action heroes and whether or not they are truly defying stereotypes or merely re-defining them is what the next chapters will focus on, but what has become clear for now is that defying stereotypes and breaking free from the portrayal of women as a spectacle and the focus on their visual representation, as described by Mulvey, within cinema is a difficult task. This is especially the case when

there remains such a large gap in the employment of each gender, the roles they play and the amount of money they are paid.

2. The Female Superhero

As we saw in the first chapter, the position of female protagonists within film has mostly been subjected to the power of men and the male gaze. Although there have been some changes throughout the decades regarding this, we can conclude from the studies mentioned in the first chapter that even now in the twenty-first century there is still a long way to go to achieve full gender-equality within the cinematic world. Within this second chapter I want to analyse the position of female protagonists in the first of two categories: the next chapter will focus on the female anti-hero, but this chapter will concentrate on the female superhero and how she finds her place within the male dominated genre of superhero films. Within the chapter I will look at how she is portrayed within these films both stylistically and socially, how she is focalised [6] (externally or internally, or both) and, lastly, how she functions within the narrative: does she function as a narrator? Have a say in the course of action as an actor[7]? Or do the male characters dominate her? The female protagonists I will focus on regarding this will be Wonder Woman (as played by Gal Gadot in *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), directed by Zack Snyder), Mystique (as played by Jennifer Lawrence in the last three instalments of *The X-Men* (2011, 2014, 2016), first one directed by Matthew Vaugn and the last two by Bryan Singer) and Black Widow (as played by Scarlett Johansson in *The Avengers* (2012, 2015), both directed by Joss Whedon).

The Superhero Genre

After the attacks of September 11, 2001 a massive increase in superhero films developed as had happened in the past during and after social events like the depression, the rise of fascism, World War II and the Cold War (Stabile 86-87). These surges within the genre are a response to feelings of helplessness and fear amongst the people and seem to offer them a form of hope to cling to in uncertain times (Hagley 120). Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison focused on the case of the arrival of the Avengers after September 11 in one of their articles and how they functioned in the aftermath: "In the long days following America's wounding, the country witnessed the manifestation of its pain, desire for revenge, struggles with its principles, and thirst for the use of its awesome military power in several heroic cinematic experiences from *Thor* to *X-Men: First Class* to *Iron Man* and *Captain America*." (120) These films did not only offer hope, but also gave way for other feelings to be represented, like revenge. But as Hagley and Harrison also state, they were also a chance to show different sides of the power America had: Iron Man represents the military force and a way to depersonalise war with his technology,

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[6] Within narratology, focalisation is about who tells the story, who is looking and who interprets events (Verstraten 46).
[7] Within narratology, an actor is someone who either sets events in motion or is the one primarily affected by an event (Verstraten 37).

whereas Captain America represents traditional notions of patriotism and authority, coming forth from a period in time where the enemy was clear. Each of them represents a way of thinking that has potentially led America into trouble (relying on technology within a war and therefore killing a lot of innocents or thinking the enemy is clear and easily defined, not doubting orders from above) and the moral of *The Avengers* is that not until these opposing characters inch closer to the ideas of the other, will they succeed in fighting the evil that threatens them (Hagley 121).

Most of all though, stories about superheroes represent people's desire for saviours, for there to be men and women that are stronger than most and therefore able to save the world from some kind of apocalypse. In result, the narratives of these films are based on scenarios regarding the (often) male "heroes' unlimited ability to protect a silent and largely feminized humanity from that which threatens it", as Carol Stabile (1960) puts it in her article regarding superheroes and sexism (87-88). Although superheroes may now be more ethnically and racially diverse, the idea of a woman taking over this role is seen as damaging the fundamental core of what the superhero is about according to those holding on to conventional gender roles stereotypes (Stabile 87). The superhero is first and foremost a man who is there to protect someone and this someone is invariably female or at least feminized (weak): Superman saves Lois Lane, Spiderman saves Mary Jane Watson and Thor saves Jane Foster, to name a few. Although some may argue there are exceptions in this regard, Stabile argues that eventually every superhero narrative ends up recycling sexist stereotypes (87-88). Whether or not that is true, we will try to determine within this chapter.

The superhero genre, both in comic books and cinema, is dominated by DC Comics on the one side (their films are distributed under the flag of Warner Bros.[8]) and Marvel on the other (they are distributed by Disney[9]). Both brands have been criticised for their severe lack of female superheroes and for not producing any films revolving around them. These critiques have been taken into account by Warner Bros, who is now gearing up to release a film about Wonder Woman in 2017 and is developing plans for a female super villain film fronted by *Suicide Squad*'s Margot Robbie (McMillan, "Why Harley Quinn and DC Women Could Be Warner Bros.' Secret Weapon"). However, Marvel seems to not be as eager to do this, as a film that was slated for 2017 revolving around a female superhero has been pushed back and the studio has been avoiding the making of a film focused on Black Widow, the only female superhero within *The Avengers* and also the only one within this team without a solo film. The critique on Marvel even soared to new heights in May 2016 when the producer of *Iron Man 3* (2013), Shane Black,

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[8] Founded in 1923 by the four brothers Warner, the film studio is now one of the largest worldwide and part of the Time Warner Company, based in Burbank, CA. DC Comics is also part of Time Warner, which is why films based on its comics are distributed by Warner Bros.
[9] Walt Disney Studios was founded in 1923 by Walt Disney and has grown into one of the largest film studios worldwide. They bought Marvel Studios in 2009 and have since distributed all films based on Marvel comics.

revealed in an interview with Uproxx Magazine that he had planned on supplying that film with a female antagonist. This idea was shot down by studio executives as a toy version of this character would not sell as well compared to one of a male antagonist. On top of this, Black was also forced to make the parts of some of the female actresses that were in the film smaller, so their roles would become less significant (Ryan, "Why A Female 'Iron Man 3' Villain's Gender Changed").

However, although barely any female protagonists/antagonists front a superhero film due to how marketable they are to studio executives, this does not mean there are none. They have a place within the comic books and since all of these films are based on those stories, the female superheroes do often receive a place within the narratives of the films fronted by men. Conveniently though, their powers tend to be significantly less than those of the male characters (Stabile 89). For this thesis, as I have mentioned, I have selected three of these female superheroes to examine more closely in order to determine the position and representation of them amongst this world otherwise dominated by men.

Wonder Woman - Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice

Wonder Woman is the female superhero with the longest on screen history as she already found her way to television between 1975 and 1979.[10] However, it was not until 2016 that the heroine actually managed to make it into a film, appearing alongside Batman and Superman. Her first film in which she will have the lead is slated for release in 2017 and this is unique within the superhero/comic book genre of film, as mentioned previously in this chapter.

The first thing that becomes clear when actress Gal Gadot appears as Wonder Woman in *Batman vs. Superman* is that although she is shown as very feminine and beautiful, she is not overpowered by her strong male counterparts. She is referred to as "beautiful" by Bruce Wayne at one point within the film, but this is said as an excuse to justify keeping an eye on her, because the way she is looked at by both him and Clark Kent is not in an objectified way. Their way of looking at her is more guided by their distrust of her, seemingly unsure of whether she is on their side or not. They also seem mostly mesmerised and impressed by her skills rather than her looks. Her objectification comes forth from external focalisation. By moving the camera slowly across her body, starting at her feet and then moving upwards when she first enters the film, the emphasis is put on the character's looks and how the male characters in the room view her. As spectators, we are first confronted with her body/looks before we get to know Wonder Woman as a character. On top of this, the first two times we see her, she is

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[10] During the late 1970s, Lynda Carter starred as Wonder Woman in the television series for four years. In 2011 television makers tried to bring the show back, but despite a pilot being made, it never received any screen time.

shown in very revealing dresses whilst she is still presented within the narrative as Diana Prince. Especially compared to other characters within these scenes, she is dressed in a much more provocative way than anyone else. This is possibly done to take away from the threat she forms as a woman towards men, like mentioned in the first chapter in reference to Laura Mulvey and the castration theory. The revealing attire of Wonder Woman continues in her superhero costume, possibly once again with the underlying intention of adding a layer of sexuality to her in order to mask the threat she forms. This becomes especially clear once you see her amongst the other main characters: both Batman and Superman are in fully covering costumes and even Lois Lane is well covered up, not sexualised like Wonder Woman since Lane is the damsel in distress rather than the warrior.

However, although the character of Wonder Woman is very sexualised clothing wise, what is very interesting is that in every camera shot she is in with Batman and/or Superman, she is placed in front of them, making her appear powerful. When we first meet her whilst it is still unknown who she is, the character of Bruce Wayne (Batman) only appears behind her. Later, when she finally appears as Wonder Woman, she even saves Batman by jumping in front of him and protecting him from the antagonist as the final fight approaches. A moment later she stands in front of both Batman and Superman as the finale commences, during which the male protagonists ask each other if they know where she comes from and where her allegiance lies. By placing her in front of her male counterparts throughout the film Wonder Woman takes on a powerful position towards them, as opposed to the character of Lois Lane who is generally placed in lower positions compared to them (sitting down, lying down, et cetera) or next to them, but not in front. There is a scene between Lane and Clark Kent (Superman) where she is in the bath and whereas he is standing, focalised externally from behind her from a lower position and therefore seemingly powerful, she is focalised by both him and externally from above, making her appear to be in a weaker position. A similar moment happens when Lane tries to protect Superman from Batman. It is all focalised externally, but from Batman's position within the scene, which is above them, seemingly more powerful as he is winning the fight. In each scene Lane appears in, she is either put behind another character or in a position that is lower, emphasising her vulnerability.

Another clear difference is that Wonder Woman is also not submitted to the decisions of the male characters and decides her own course of action. It even seems at times like she is almost taking pleasure in fighting the powerful antagonist, as during the final fight she appears to be laughing throughout, whereas Batman and Superman are struggling. It makes her appear powerful and perhaps even stronger than the male superheroes as she enjoys the tough fight. Despite her revealing attire to perhaps tone down the threat she poses to men by revealing an erotic layer to her character, the way

she is portrayed otherwise does everything to oppose this and actually transforms her into an embodiment of a strong and powerful woman.

Mystique - The X-Men

This character is more difficult to assess, as her main power is that she can change form. However, she does have a particular human form aside from her natural mutant appearance. Still, for this analysis I want to focus on her natural form as a mutant, as that is what she truly looks like. Most obvious here is that she is practically naked, with only some scales placed strategically across her body to hide her modesty, but otherwise leaving little to the imagination of the viewer.

Initially, Mystique is portrayed as feeling embarrassed about her natural form and she tends to cover it up with either clothes or by changing into a human form. During this time, she is viewed as more of a sister by most characters within the film, in particular by Charles Xavier, whom she grew up with. She has been kept in a dependent position by him throughout her life, relying on him to look out for her, but it is not until she meets Erik Lensherr that her character becomes more powerful and with that also more sexualised as she stops constantly wearing clothes to cover up her blue form. Xavier, who is like a brother to her, immediately tells her to cover up when she appears in her blue form, but Lensherr tells her she is only attractive to him when she appears like that. When Mystique appears in her natural, mutant form she is much stronger than when she is hiding herself, as she does not have to use energy to make herself look a certain way. An interesting conclusion that could be drawn from this is that when she is stronger in her mutant form, she is also a lot more sexualised. This seems similar to the portraying of Wonder Woman, who is also given a more sexualised look to diminish the threat she forms to men when she is in her superhero attire. This can be related back to Freud's castration theory as mentioned by Mulvey. To avoid the woman becoming too much of a threat to men, she is sexualised. This distracts from the idea that she represents castration and instead feeds a feeling of desire within men.

However, as opposed to Wonder Woman, Mystique does not take in such a strong position amongst her male counterparts. She lets her path be decided by either Xavier or by Lensherr and it never seems like she is making her choices independently. She tends to follow whoever is the most dominant man in her life, taking in a position either next to him or behind him. This is also visible in how she is placed in scenes. She is never in front of the dominant male actors, but always either next to them or behind them. The strength she may have as a mutant is therefore always somewhat diminished by her submission to others in combination with her sexualised appearance.

Interestingly, in the following film, *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014), Mystique does venture out on her own, but taking on the role of actor does not bode well for her.

When setting out on a path of her own, she risks the lives of her entire species and, further more, almost gets herself killed until she eventually abides by the wishes of Xavier once again like she did before. This element within the narrative is also addressed by Molly Haskell in her article "To Have and Have Not: The Paradox of the Female Star" (1993). When women take on an independent position within the story, they tend to be a lot less free compared to men in the same position and they run a much larger risk of either getting hurt or killed until they go back into their conventional gender role (Haskell 409). Teresa De Lauretis also refers to this, partially in relation to the film *Vertigo* (1958) by Alfred Hitchcock: "women must be seduced into femininity and be remade again and again as woman". When a woman is given a position within a film that allows her to have some form of power, this needs to be resolved, as put bluntly by De Lauretis when still referring to Hitchcock, by either "massive destruction or the territorialisation of women" (De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 155). We can see this with Mystique in *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, but in the previous *X-Men* trilogy a similar situation occurred with the character of Jean Grey. At some point along the narrative, she became so immensely powerful that she was eventually obliterated and wiped from the face of the earth as she was seen as too much of a danger. Mystique survived because she decided to start abiding by Xavier's wishes again, but Jean Grey did not comply and this eventually led to her death. Other women in superhero films that endanger themselves and others when (briefly) taking on the role of actor are, for instance, Lois Lane, who regularly needs to be saved by Superman whenever she tries to undertake dangerous missions on her own, or Mary-Jane Watson, who requires the same help from Spiderman. A lot of the time when women venture out on their own within superhero films, they usually end up putting themselves in harms way until they are eventually saved by their male counterparts or start complying to their wishes once again.

Having a woman in a powerful position within the narrative of a film therefore often gives a false sense of equality. Although for a while it may seem as if the female character is in power and not influenced by her male counterparts, she is eventually punished for taking on a dominant role and forced to go back into a more classical one, controlled once again by men. This is also why a lot of feminist critics are not always convinced by women taking on powerful roles within films, as in the end it may give a distorted image of the woman's true position within the narrative (Haskell 409).

Black Widow - The Avengers
In 2012 *The Avengers* was released by Marvel and became to highest grossing film based on a comic book. The Avengers are a team of superheroes that unite to fight whatever evil threatens the planet. This team consists only of men, aside from Black Widow who is played by Scarlett Johansson. Her character, real name Natasha Romanoff, has appeared

as a sidekick in several of the male characters' solo features (i.e. Iron Man and Captain America), but is yet to receive her own film.

As the only female member of The Avengers, Romanoff clearly utilises her female qualities, using her sexuality and femininity to throw off the enemy before striking. This is a different approach compared to Wonder Woman and Mystique. Although they also have very sexualised looks, they do not tend to put this to use, whereas Romanoff uses it to her advantage regularly. At the beginning of *The Avengers* we find Romanoff tied to a chair by Russian mobsters. By playing dumb and by wearing a sexy dress, she throws them off and gets them to say what she wants them to as they have a feeling of false power over her. They tell her everything she wants to know, assuming she is just a dumb woman that is easily killed. Once she has the information she wants, she breaks free and fights her opponents before picking up her heels, in true female fashion, and leaving. In another scene she does something similar to the main antagonist Loki. By pretending to be hurt by his insults and threats and pretending to cry, she gets him to confess his true intentions as to why he is there. The moment he does this, her facial expression changes from hurt to someone who is in control and you can see the worry appear on Loki's face very clearly. He let himself be misled by her femininity, thinking he could use it to his advantage, but she actually turns it back on him.

Within the film she is also the one send to talk to Bruce Banner (The Hulk) and the one to talk to Hawkeye once he is released from the spell he was under. She is basically the one that has to have the difficult conversations. This is rather stereotypical, because what it comes down to is that her femininity and sexuality are used to calm down the male characters and persuade them to do what is wanted of them. She is also the one displaying care and warmth when someone is hurt or in trouble and she approaches some characters from a certain emotion, which are other attributes generally appointed to women within the stereotype. The main focalisation regarding her is external, but partially also determined by those she manipulates. As a viewer you judge how she comes across, but the men she is placed with in scenes fuel this. You view her from their point of view, but since they are also still in the shot, the focalisation is external. The way she is focalised however differs as she switches between helpless and powerful, going from being dependent on others to becoming an actor. This mainly comes forth in the scenes as described before where she uses her femininity to gain power over her enemies. These are also the main situations in which she acts alone. When she is within the Avengers team, she is more subjected to the orders she receives from her male teammates, especially their leader: Nick Fury.

Although Romanoff is a very powerful character with confidence and a large skillset when it comes to the art of fighting, she is clearly set aside from her male counterparts. She is the one displaying emotions most clearly, showing warmth and care

and the one using her sexuality to get things done. This is vastly different from her male counterparts as none of them approach things in a similar way. Furthermore, her powers do not even come close to those of the male heroes, confirming the statement made by Stabile that the female heroine's powers are significantly less impressive than those of male heroes. She even requires protection by Captain America during the final fight when all the other Avengers can fend for themselves. Add to that the fact that she is also the only superhero within the film dressed in a rather sexual way (a tight black cat suit is her superhero attire, with her slim waist and large chest clearly accentuated) and we can conclude that a lot of gender role stereotypes are confirmed once again within a film. Her feminine aspects are accentuated to gloss over the masculine aspects in her fighting skills, keeping her from being a threat to men according to the castration theory, like we also saw with Wonder Woman and Mystique.

Feminism and Female Superheroes

Male heroes can have broken teeth, scars and be dressed like bums as they do not have to "look good" to be a hero. Women on the other hand need to have certain qualifications in order to be a hero, according to Rikke Schubart in her book *Super Bitches and Action Babes* (2007). To be a female hero in a man's world, like that of superhero and action films, means to be young and beautiful or at least appear that way. Women entering the world of the "males genres" of film in the seventies was seen as a mighty step forward in gender equality by some, but it definitely did not mean this for everyone. Postfeminists saw the appearance of women in male roles as a step forward, but feminist critics did not. They did not see women being women within these roles, but they saw women acting like men, except with a body of a pin-up girl to distract the viewer from this, often enhanced by (digital) manipulation or plastic surgery. To these feminist critics, the appearance of characters like Lara Croft was a step backwards as the only feminine thing about her was her body. Otherwise, she talked, acted and was like a man (Schubart 5-7).

In an article by Hillary Pennell and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz regarding female (super)heroes, it is stated that U.S. research has indicated that women in American action films are often exploited, as the focus regarding their characters is on their sexuality and they are not offered any complexity within the film's narrative. Women are only offered a narrow range of roles, and typically these are focused on their sex appeal: "Women are often hyper sexualized with unrealistically small waists, unusually large chests, and unattainable hourglass figures (Pennell 212)." However, this is not just done to women in superhero films, but usually comes forward with female characters in most films and therefore the question is whether it is better (or worse) to have a sexualised female victim or a sexualised female superhero. Pennell and Behm-Morawitz use

Mystique as an example here, distinguishing her empowering characteristics: "She is physically strong, athletic, proficient, confident, and intelligent, characteristics that are counter-stereotypical for female characters". They also argue that her sex appeal could be viewed as showing disdain for traditional female modesty, but later also state that studies have suggested that the sexualisation of a character like Mystique leads to reinforcing traditional gender roles rather than challenging them (212). Women feel empowered by the powers that a superhero like Mystique has, but they feel limited when it comes to identifying with her completely due to her sexualised appearance (Pennell 212). The reason for this is that, according to Pennell and Behm-Morawitz, "the sexualisation of these female characters may supersede the empowering attributes and produce stereotypical gender related perceptions" (212). The sexual appearance diminishes the powerful characteristics she has otherwise. Interestingly enough, as revealing as her look is in her mutant form, Mystique only utilises the benefits of a sexualised appearance when she is in a human form. Then she uses appearances to get things done, but this does not happen in her mutant form. In my opinion, when she appears in her mutant form, which is very revealing, it is a way of being proud of herself and showing disdain for traditional female modesty, like Pennell and Behm-Morawitz argued. She used to cover herself up in her mutant form, but by shedding the layers of clothes, she actually seems to embrace herself above all else. However, what likely limits the viewer from properly identifying with her is this idea of modesty that a lot of people still have. Some feminists will appreciate her move to appear without clothes in her mutant form, but more conventional female viewers will not as they likely view her look to mainly be there for men as a form of spectacle.

This is also what has come forward when analysing her character within the films *X-Men: First Class* (2011) and *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014). What is also apparent within these films is her reliance on the male dominant characters. Although she may appear as a powerful character, when you look further you soon realise how much she depends on her male counterparts to determine her path. Even more so, when she does stray from this, she almost gets herself killed and risks wiping out her entire species until she goes back to letting herself be guided by Xavier. Only when she abides by her gender role is she safe, therefore her empowering role as a female superhero becomes a lot less significant. Her actions where she goes out on her own are also based upon emotion (she is angry about her friends having been killed), which is often seen as a stereotypical trade for women. Therefore, as strong and empowering as the character of Mystique may come across, she eventually conforms to her gender role. She may not necessarily be a victim or a damsel in distress, but her sexualised appearance, her acting on emotions and her conforming to the wishes of the men in her life mean she barely deviates from traditional gender norms.

And this is something that is apparent with many female superheroes. Black Widow too conforms to the traditional gender norms in various ways by dressing very sexually as opposed to her male teammates, by following orders given by men and by utilising her feminine qualities (i.e. looks, warmth, care, emotion) to get things done.

Of the three female superheroes I have analysed, the one that appears most independent from the male characters is Wonder Woman. She overpowers her male counterparts and is not influenced by their opinions and choices. Wonder Woman choses her own path, but as opposed to when Mystique does this, this does not lead to her getting hurt or killed. She actually thrives when following her own path. The only way her power is diminished is similar to what happens with her fellow female superheroes: they wear very sexualised costumes to accentuate their beauty and femininity, therefore turning themselves into more of a spectacle, especially when you put them next to their fully clothed male counterparts.

How this affects the female viewer and any possibility for identification, I will discuss further in the next chapter in relation to the female anti-heroes that will be addressed there.

3. The Female Anti-Hero

What we can conclude from the previous chapter is that, although the female superhero has been important in some respects, there is still a barrier in place that prevents the female spectator from identifying with her. The image the female superhero represents remains unattainable due to her, often very sexualised, appearance. This transforms her into a spectacle for the male viewer and distances her from the female spectator. This is why this third chapter will focus on the female anti-hero and try to determine whether or not this type of hero is more recognisable for the female spectator as someone to identify with or if they are just more of the same when it comes to female protagonists in film. Since we are navigating this subject within the male genres of film (i.e. action, science fiction, et cetera), the female anti-hero is the best alternative next to the superhero, as within the narrative she functions differently.

Superhero vs. Anti-Hero

The definition of an anti-hero according to the online Oxford dictionary is: "a central character in a story, film, or drama who lacks conventional heroic attributes" (Oxford Dictionaries, "anti-hero"). Anti-heroes are usually more like regular folk who happen to end up in a situation in which they are forced to become heroes, usually as a way of protecting either themselves or their loved ones. They take on this role reluctantly; not really wanting to be the one everyone looks to for help. This is what makes the anti-hero different from the superheroes of the previous chapter: those superheroes are driven by a greater good like saving the world or protecting a city, but the anti-hero is initially not interested in any of this.

Another interesting difference between the superhero genre and that of the anti-hero is the time it is set in. Whereas the superhero narratives are generally set in either current (i.e. *Iron Man*, *Thor*, *The Avengers*) or past times (i.e. the latest *X-Men* trilogy and the first *Captain America* film), the two anti-hero film examples I will use within this chapter are set in a dystopian future. These futures are part of our world, but they have been altered through time in a dreadful way. This desolation has often been brought about by governments wanting too much power, by scientist's desire to control nature, et cetera. Within these narratives we find out how the world ends up when human kind goes too far with trying to control either people or nature.

A second difference between the superhero films and the anti-hero ones is that the former are based on comic books, whereas the latter are often based on literature. An interesting exception here is the Netflix series *Jessica Jones,* which will function as an

example for the female anti-hero category next to the two films[11]. Originally, Jessica Jones is another Marvel comic book superhero, but for the series her look has been altered in such a way that she has completely separated herself visually from the comic book version of her. It is unique in that sense, as we will see further on in this chapter.

Aside from the *Jessica Jones* series, this chapter will also focus on two female anti-heroes that each fronted a film series over the past five years and who have set a new precedent in film and helped re-define women's position within the cinematic landscape. Each of these film series has been based on a series of books that also have been incredibly successful. The two female (anti-)heroes fronting the films are Katniss Everdeen (played by Jennifer Lawrence in *The Hunger Games* series (2012-2015), directed by Gary Ross and Francis Lawrence) and Tris Prior (played by Shailene Woodley in the *Divergent* series (2014-2017), directed by Neil Burger, Robert Schwentke and Lee Toland Krieger).

Identification

As mentioned in the first chapter when referring to Mary Ann Doane, the female spectator is often seen as having to transform herself into a hermaphrodite when viewing a film. When seeking identification with characters in a film, it is either a narcissistic identification with the female character as a spectacle, which is often sexual, or a 'transvestite' identification with the male protagonist (Doane, *The 'Woman's Film'* 295). Generally, the female spectator is forced to deny her sex upon entering the movie theatre and this feeling has remained with the arrival of the female superhero, as was described in the previous chapter.

However, Teresa De Lauretis, in her book *Alice Doesn't* (1984), questions how black and white the identification process really is, especially for the female spectator. She argues that "to identify, in short, is to be actively involved as subject in a process, a series of relations". She then argues that cinematic identification derives from two elements: the narrative and the visual (De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 141). However, especially in film, the visual element is very important and should, in my opinion, not be put too easily on a same level as the narrative. Film is primarily a visual medium. You see first before engaging yourself with the story. This is why the way the female hero looks is important in the identification process. She can do all the right things within the narrative that will make her relatable for the female spectator, but as Pennell and Behm-Morawitz argued, the female spectator feels limited when identifying with the female

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[11] Series like *Jessica Jones* have been argued by film critic Vincent Canby to also be called "megamovies", because although the story is spread out across various episodes, the narrative is continuous as if it were like a very long film. No episode stands alone and you require viewing them all in order to follow the story properly (Canby, "From the Humble Mini-Series Comes the Magnificent Megamovie").

superhero completely due to her sexualised look, which is often accentuated by a skin tight suit (or lack thereof in the case of Mystique), a tiny waist and large breasts (212).

Within the identification process, author Kaja Silverman (1947) defines two different ways of identifying: heteropathic and idiopathic. These ways of identifying could be related back to the *mirror stage* by Lacan as described in the first chapter. With heteropathic identification "the subject identifies at a distance from his or her proprioceptive self." The heteropath remains aware of a distance between him or herself in regard to the other. On the opposite of this, idiopathic identification results in a "total eclipse and absorption of another self by one's own," (Silverman 23) which is described by author Mica Nava as leaning towards an almost "cannibalistic consumption of the love object", lacking in any "acknowledgement of difference" (Nava 72). From a distance, the heteropath understands the feelings and the situations of the characters on screen, but the idiopath seems to take over the position of the other, causing the other to disappear. The heteropath adjusts him or herself according to the other, whereas the idiopath takes over completely, dissolving the other (Silverman 24). Looking back at Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema", the identification styles heteropathic and idiopathic seem reminiscent of the two types of looks Mulvey mentioned: voyeuristic and narcissistic. The first is more from a distance, like with the heteropathic identification and the latter is about likeness to the object, as with the idiopathic identification.

When viewing these two types of identification as described by Silverman, it is perhaps easier to conclude that the cinematic spectator is more a heteropath than an idiopath. This is also how philosopher Henri Wallon interprets the spectator when referenced by Silverman (90). With the spectator in a cinema, or perhaps even at home, there remains a clear distance between the self and the object. The viewer is able to identify with the characters on screen, empathising with them, but there is no true possibility of absorbing the object and becoming it, as an idiopath would. This is different for the artist that plays the character that the spectator sees on the screen. Silverman herewith refers to filmmaker Sergej Eisenstein as he has spoken about how the "method actor becomes the part he or she plays" (91). Here, the character is absorbed by the artist and they become one.

However, there could also be an argument made for how the viewer could also be an idiopath, because as Silverman also describes, the idiopath is able to imagine themself in the position of the other. She compares it to a form of identification that most of us will recognise: that moment in which we extend our sympathies to another person in a less fortunate position as we can imagine ourselves in the other's place. "I can imagine *myself* in his (or her) place" (Silverman 25). We are able to imagine what it is like to go through something and therefore put ourselves in the other's shoes for a

moment, which is comparable to what the method actor does when taking on a character.

To me, whether a spectator in the cinema is more a heteropath or an idiopath seems to rely mostly on whether or not they can truly imagine what it is like to be that character or if they just relate to them at a distance. For instance with the superheroes, as a viewer you understand their actions and will admire their strength and capabilities, but since they are superheroes it is difficult to truly relate to them and to imagine yourself in their position. In this case the viewer will sooner take on a form of heteropathic identification. However, with the anti-hero, as we will see further on in this chapter, it is easier to put yourself in their shoes as their actions come forth from a more relatable place, like wanting to protect a sister, parents or even themselves. In this case, idiopathic identification will take place more often with the viewer.

Femininity vs. Masculinity
Still, these forms of identification leave the question open as to whether or not the female spectator truly becomes like a hermaphrodite when identifying with masculinity, as stated by Doane. Not necessarily, according to De Lauretis who refers to Freud in regard to the identification process of the female spectator. He has stated that with women, there is always a side to them that is more masculine and a side that is more feminine. Throughout a woman's life the dominance of each of these sides shifts. According to him, masculinity is most dominant with little girls, but this is replaced with femininity once this "sets in" and a woman's body changes. However, this replacement of masculinity with femininity does not mean the masculine aspect of the woman has disappeared. Freud argues that throughout one's life there are continuous changes happening, which regularly lead to masculinity some times coming forward a little bit more again (De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 142). De Lauretis continues on with this argument by also addressing the *Oedipus stage*. This theory is about the moment in life, usually between the ages of three and five, in which children begin to identify with the parent of the same sex (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Oedipus Complex"). This can likely be referred back to the moment that Freud mentions regarding the take-over of femininity in a woman's life.

What De Lauretis seems to mainly want to argue by referring to Freud is that "femininity and masculinity are never fully attained or fully relinquished". In the lives of some women there can even be a continuous trade-off between femininity and masculinity taking the upper hand: "The two terms, femininity and masculinity, do not refer so much to qualities or states of being inherent in a person, as to positions which she occupies in relation to desire. They are terms of identification (De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 142)." Taking this into account, it becomes interesting to try and analyse to what

extent Doane was right with the female spectator being forced into a genderless position. Is this less the case when we assume that masculinity is more prominent within the life of the female spectator? In a way we could possibly argue 'yes' here, because if masculinity is more present, which has mostly to do with the identification process, we could argue that this would make it easier for said woman to identify with the male protagonist. However, the presence of both femininity and masculinity is probably also what makes it more difficult to identify with the average female superhero and her over-sexualised outfits. Although some female spectators might enjoy the sight of the female superhero as a spectacle, in a similar fashion to the straight male spectator, there remains a barrier that allows identification. However, some feminists possibly prefer this barrier, as this means that the average female spectator does not see herself as merely a spectacle, but as more than that.

Molly Haskell also makes an important point in regard to this entire subject, and partially also hereby debunking what Doane has said regarding the male protagonist only being there for identification and the female star for spectacle. Haskell points out that although the male protagonist is most often not portrayed in a sexualised/erotic way, this does not mean that the female spectator does not take notice of his good looks: "The breath taking beauty of such male pin-ups as Gary Cooper, Laurence Olivier, and Robert Redford guarantees that in any of their movies we will more likely be looking at them than at their female co-stars" (Haskell, 406). And this is a very valid point, because as women, we can probably all recognise this when viewing male focused films. Especially in the past two decades, the male protagonists in action or science-fiction films have been very appealing to the ladies. When referring back to the last chapter about the female superhero, most women will attest to the fact that when viewing *The Avengers* they enjoyed the sight of actors such as Chris Evans and Chris Hemsworth. Just because their characters are not focalised in a similar fashion as most female superheroes, does not mean that the female spectator does not enjoy the sight before her on screen. This does, however, mean that the identification process for women therefore becomes more difficult, because if the female spectator views the male characters in a similar fashion as the female characters, we lose that aspect of identification. This is where the true conundrum lies: either the female spectator has to become genderless when viewing a film, or she loses her ability to identify with the characters on screen, if we were to go by Doane's theory. However, when taking Silverman's two identification styles into account, there are still possibilities for identification, even if this is made more difficult by sexually portrayed characters. Heteropathic identification is still possible as the spectator can identify from a distance, separated from their bodily self, with the actions of the superhero. This does mean that idiopathic identification is more difficult to obtain when

viewing the female superhero, obstructing in some way the female spectator from being completely absorbed in the film and, specifically, its characters

This last element is why, especially for the female spectator, the arrival of the female anti-hero has been so important. The female spectator, especially within the male genres of film, which have been the focus of this thesis, has almost always had to adjust herself to the male spectator and what he wants. Whenever a film is more female oriented, men often lose interest, but the female anti-hero productions that I will address in this chapter prove that there is more of a balance possible. To illustrate this argument, I will address the three before-mentioned female anti-heroes that have had a big influence on the cinematic landscape over the past five years: Jessica Jones, Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games*) and Tris Prior (*Divergent*).

Jessica Jones

Although my focus within this thesis is primarily on films, it felt necessary to add this particular character to the research. The Netflix series *Jessica Jones*, fronted by Krysten Ritter, was released on November 20, 2015 and immediately became a hit with both male and female viewers of the streaming service. What is interesting about this series and its female protagonist is the fact that the character comes from a Marvel comic book, just like Black Widow, but you can barely see the resemblance. The creator of the *Jessica Jones* series, who happens to be a woman, has clearly put aside the skimpy clothes and the general appearance of the character as a pin-up girl when creating the series. They even mock the original outfit in one episode when Jones' best friend Trish Walker holds it up for her as an idea for a "superhero outfit", claiming that all "superheroes wear costumes". Jones' response is clear: "The only place anybody is wearing that is trick-or-treating or as part of some kinky role-playing scenario." Instead of the skin-tight outfit she wears jeans with a shirt and a leather jacket and whereas the comic book version has a very large chest and a tiny waist, the series version suits the look of the average woman a lot better.

This is what makes this series an important exception with the translation of comic book characters to screen. Although some are already slightly toned down (Gal Gadot stated she had gotten quite a bit of criticism once cast as Wonder Woman, because according to some her breasts were too small), this is the first one to completely put the stereotype to the side. Although the story and her powers remain intact, she, as a person, becomes more relatable. She is also the primary actor within the narrative, deciding her own course of action. This actually gets amplified within the narrative as the plot revolves around her no longer being subjected to the mind control of the male antagonist: Kilgrave. He has the power of mind control and has used this against her in the past, even forcing her to use her own powers to kill. However, since then she has

somehow become immune to his powers. She has become the only person to withstand his powers and no matter how hard Kilgrave tries to reverse this, she remains in control of her own mind and actions. The series starts with her living in fear as she remembers how he controlled her, but as the story progresses and she comes to realise she has become immune to Kilgrave's mind-control, you start to see her become more confident and realise how powerful she actually is.

This evolving of her power is also transferred to the screen through focalisation. Especially when Kilgrave is the focaliser in scenes with Jones, whether they are actually together or if he is watching from a distance, you sense his wavering strength in regard to her as the series progresses. He goes from being the powerful character to the one being frustrated and obsessed with making Jones once again succumb to his powers. His way of looking at her transfers from a feeling of power and some form of love to one of desperation, confirming the feelings of Jones that she is gaining the upper hand. Most focalisation is external throughout the series though. Although the story is told from Jones' perspective, the spectator is looking in and not experiencing the story through a character directly.

Because of Jones' outfit, her not being overly sexualised and her gaining the upper hand in the narrative, she becomes someone the female spectator can identify with. They are no longer prevented from doing so through unattainable looks. By the character looking like an ordinary person with no fancy costume or a pin-up girl body, she becomes a character the female spectator can identify with. Especially as she gains the upper hand in the story, defying another cinematic rule where female characters get hurt or killed if they do not comply with the male protagonist, she becomes someone to look up to, someone that women will want to be like and that is an important difference when compared to characters mentioned in the previous chapter. The ability to identify with Jessica Jones is not prevented by inhuman barriers, because although we may not have her powers, the female spectator can relate to her struggle to come out from under the influence of a bad man. It is not about the greater good or saving the planet, but about taking control of ones own life again and, super powers or not, that is incredibly relatable to many viewers.

Katniss Everdeen - The Hunger Games
In 2014 Samantha Ellis, author of the book *How To Be A Heroine*, wrote an article for the website of *The Guardian* about Katniss Everdeen, calling the release in 2008 of the first book she stars in "a relief". "For the previous five years, since Buffy the Vampire Slayer had ended in a blaze of female empowerment, the girl most YA (Young Adult) readers seemed most interested in was Twilight's mopey, whiny Bella Swan." Ellis deemed Katniss to be Buffy's heir: "A fighter, a killer, a survivor, she fights boys, and even

rescues boys. She hunts, she gathers, she climbs trees. She's canny and resilient. She refuses to marry either of the gorgeous boys who love her" (Ellis, "Why The Hunger Games' Killer Katniss is a Great Female Role Model"). Ellis puts into words very well what a relief the arrival of Katniss Everdeen was for the (young) female reader and spectator. It was Twilight's Bella Swan who had been the most significant female character in the years before the release of the first film of *The Hunger Games* in early 2012. However, Bella cannot really be deemed a female hero as most of the story revolves around her giving up everything for a man. This is far from being feminist and definitely also not heroic. We could therefore definitely state that female audiences longed for strong female characters to arrive on the scene again. Actress Shailene Woodley, whose character Tris Prior from *Divergent* will be analysed next, actually criticised the character Bella in an interview: "She falls in love with this guy and the second he leaves her, her life is over and she's going to kill herself! What message are we sending to young people? This is not going to help the world evolve" (Stedman, "Shailene Woodley Blasts 'Twilight' as 'Unhealthy, Toxic Relationship'"). And she is right, in my opinion. *Twilight* does anything but empower women and show them they can get by on their own. It actually emphasises women's dependence on men and this does not seem to belong in the twenty-first century. However, whereas Bella was the one following love in *Twilight*, it is the boys who follow their hearts in *The Hunger Games* as it seems like Katniss barely feels a thing, or at least not allows herself to.

The focalisation within *The Hunger Games* series, and especially the first film, is an interesting aspect. It is done in three ways: from Katniss' perspective, from a perspective that is not character bound, and from a third perspective that is external, overseeing the story. The focalisation through Katniss is important as the books on which the story is based are also told from her perspective. This focalisation is done in such a way that with *shot-reverse shot* you get a shot of her and then a shot of whichever thing she is looking at. This does not happen with the other characters and this is what shows that the story is primarily told from her perspective. Whenever there is a part of the narrative that does not involve her, there is only external focalisation. With Katniss, as a viewer, you regularly take on her vision when seeing the world. This is emphasized by the way the camera is used, which is not stable in these moments, but truly moves in a way as if it is that particular character. This is what makes you, as a viewer, become invested in Katniss' life, because you are focalising the narrative, for the most part, through her. The focalisation by someone from outside the narrative, like they are part of the crowd or following the main characters around, adds to this. The image here too moves like a person and is not steady at all, making the spectator become more absorbed in the experience of the film.

Aside from the story being told, for the most part within the film, from Katniss' perspective, she is also the main actor. The way the story progresses really comes forward from the choices she makes. She decides to protect her sister and volunteer. She defies The Capitol for the first time by giving Rue a funeral and saluting her district and therefore igniting the first form of protests by the people. She then defies The Capitol again by instigating committing suicide together with Peeta, after which the game makers feel obligated to make them both victors. All of these actions in the first film lead to the beginning of the rebellion and turning her into public enemy number one for the president.

Katniss lets her choices be guided by her emotions. She is purely there to protect her sister, herself and anyone else she may care for. She feels uncomfortable with taking part in the glamorous side of things as all she is focused on is surviving. You can see that in how she dresses, which is simple and all about comfort rather than looks, and in how uncomfortable she is when she has to wear dresses and appeal to the hearts of the audience. Katniss feels that by dressing up and showing emotion, she will look weak and that becomes most apparent when Peeta proclaims to the audience that he is in love with Katniss. After this interview she almost chokes him and pushes him into a wall proclaiming he "made her look weak". Haymitch, their advisor, then takes her away, saying all Peeta did was do her a favour by making her look "desirable". According to him she needed that in order to be able to survive the games. The Capitol is all about looks and celebrity, but she does not know how to be a part of that and neither does she want to.

What is interesting about Haymitch's statement though is that he is basically saying that unless she embraces her femininity and utilises this, she does not stand a chance at winning no matter how skilled or tough she is. At home Katniss had kind of taken on the role of the 'man of the house' since her father had died, providing food and money for her mother and sister to keep them alive. Her masculine side surfaced more, pushing her femininity away, but within the games she has to balance this out again in order to stand a better chance at winning. And that is what happens. She looks after the little girl Rue in a motherly fashion, supplying her with food and a safe place, and Katniss allows herself to feel for Peeta as the end of the games inches closer. Each time she embraces a part of her femininity more, she comes closer to getting out of the games alive. Allowing her emotions to surface actually makes her stronger.

All of these aspects are what make Katniss Everdeen into the (anti-)hero so many female spectators longed for. She knows how to provide and protect herself and her loved ones by being able to hunt with bow and arrow, but she is also still able to care and this makes her into a true feminist hero in film. She eventually embraces her femininity without it becoming a weakness. She does the saving, but also recognises she

needs help every once in a while. And also, there is no focus on her looks. Yes, she is a pretty woman, but this is not accentuated, not even by her male co-stars. There are no lingering looks across her body, emphasizing certain parts of her. Both her male counterparts, Gale and Peeta, look at her with love, but with this it is more about her character rather than her looks and that is what makes her a hero to aspire to be for many women. She is attractive because of her desire to protect the ones she loves and her need for survival and the audience can understand this. The spectator can connect with her character and see in her someone to look up to as Katniss shows that it is not so much about how you look, but more about what you do.

Tris Prior - Divergent

The *Divergent* series takes place, like *The Hunger Games*, in a dystopian future. In this case this future is set in the city of Chicago and the people living there have been told that they are lucky to be alive and to be able to live there as a war has destroyed most of the world outside of their walls. What is interesting here, as well as with *The Hunger Games,* is that this destruction has happened by the hands of humanity. In the case of *Divergent* this has happened because scientists tried to take control of humanity's genes. People's desire to control the way someone was born and with which genes caused for many defects within the human race, eventually leading to war and a partial destruction of mankind. *Divergent* has therefore somewhat presented itself as a critique on people's desire to influence how someone is born, just like *The Hunger Games* criticises reality television by showing us an extreme version of it. The stories each criticise the way things have been developing in modern times, warning us of what could happen if we keep going the way we are.

In *Divergent* the world has been divided into five factions and each child, once they turn sixteen, has to choose one to live in. They can choose to stay with their family in the faction they have grown up in or they can choose to switch to another faction. To help with making this choice, each candidate is submitted to a test to see where he or she would fit in best. When the female protagonist, Tris Prior, takes this test it turns out there is not just one faction she belongs in, but multiple ones. This makes her divergent and therefore a threat to the system, because people like her have free will and that frightens those that hold power over the city.

In a way we can compare Tris to Jessica Jones, as they both have the power to withstand the control of those who are most powerful within the narrative. The difference is that Tris has no idea of this at first. She realises she is different, but does not realise how threatening this is to some. She also does not come across as very threatening in any way to anyone, especially once she arrives at her new district: Dauntless. "I am the weakest one here," she says to one of her friends after the first day of training and after

taking a beating by one of her fellow initiates. The next day her instructor Four says the same: "You're weak. You have no muscle." In every way during the first half of the film she is made to look weak, vulnerable and like she does not have a chance in the world to make it. However, her persistence is what makes her into a character that female spectators will want to identify with. No matter how many times Tris is knocked down, she always picks herself back up and tries again until she succeeds. As the story is told from her perspective, you empathise with this even more, because you feel her struggle and want to root for her.

The focalisation of the story is for the most part external, but there are small moments where you experience the story through Tris' eyes. An example of this is her fight with fellow initiate Peter, one of the antagonists in the narrative. By the end of the fight Tris is down on the floor and we see an external shot of her looking up after which it changes to a reverse-shot of her seeing Four leave the arena. This shot is focalised internally as it is blurred to define the state she is in due to the beating she is taking. We then switch back to an external shot of her turning her head back towards Peter who is motioned by another instructor, Eric, to finish her off. The external shot goes from Peter looking at Eric for confirmation to Eric motioning for him to finish the fight and then we return to an internal focalisation point with Tris looking up at Peter and we see his foot coming at us, knowing that the foot will actually hit Tris in the face as the screen goes black.

Tris is the unlikely hero within *Divergent*, because at first all of the odds are stacked up against her. She fights for what she wants though and people will like that about her, because generally the underdog is always the one people root for. Audiences tend to favour the unlikely hero, because they give you hope and perhaps even believe that anyone could be like that character if they want it enough. Due to her ability to resist control by the government, she is most suited to lead people to freedom, but this is not how she grows into her role of hero. At first all she wants is to save her family and friends and she has no desire to lead anything. She just wants a quiet life with the ones she loves, but due to circumstance, like with Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, Tris is forced to take on a leading role and help free the people from being controlled by the government.

As said, the narrative is told from Tris' perspective completely. We do not see any scenes in which she does not appear in this first film of the series. She is the main actor, deciding how the story develops. Her choices lead her to Dauntless, to her remaining within the faction by defying Eric's orders, to her letting Four into her life (and as we learn in the second film, he stayed at Dauntless for her) and eventually taking action against the government in order to try and save her family and former faction Abnegation. Each development in the film is caused by her choices and actions.

Clothes wise it is interesting to see that Tris is more feminine whilst in her old faction where she wears (conventional) dresses, but becomes more masculine once she enters Dauntless. From then on she wears black jeans with boots and a black top. She gets tattoos and embraces her new lifestyle. She transforms from a weak little girl into a well-trained fighter, but without losing that which makes her identifiable for the viewer: she has empathy, as taught by her previous faction, she protects others and she fights for herself to stay alive.

Identifying With the Anti-Hero
Jeanine Basinger wrote the following on the female hero between the 1930s and 1960s: "When a male genre is feminised, it allows women a chance for freedom and heroism but also maintains a status quo in which the women themselves cannot, for example, win the war, only wait for the men to win it for them (Basinger 447)." At the time, any possible female hero was always put back in her place and forced to let the men get the actual job done as she had to retreat back to her "proper" gender role. These days, as Schubart argues, this has shifted a little bit with the female heroes. They do the things male heroes do, but whereas they often have no social bonds and obligations (Schubart 10), the female hero does. She can be a mother and have people she loves, whilst still being the hero. However, the female hero is more often brought down, traumatised, tortured and killed compared to her male equivalent (Schubart 11-12).

Jessica Jones is traumatised by the mind-control that has been inflicted on her by Kilgrave, making her weak with fear for a long time as she struggles to maintain her composure. Katniss Everdeen exits the games with a posttraumatic stress disorder, unable to sleep through the night or shoot her bow and arrow like she used to, each time seeing visions of those she killed. Tris Prior watched her parents get murdered as they attempted to protect her just because she was different from all the others. Each and every one of these female heroes went through something horrific, but eventually that is what fuels them seeking vengeance and also what makes them willing to become actual heroes.

Each of these heroes does not set out to become one. They all start from a position of self-preservation and, in the case of Katniss and Tris, care for their families. Whilst doing so, in particular Katniss and Tris, they become unwilling leaders of the rebellions against the dictatorial government that have taken over their worlds. Unlike the superheroes from the previous chapter, we can see that none of the anti-heroes assume they are someone that could make a difference or save the world. They do not set out to be heroes and that is what makes them more relatable for the female spectator. Although Jones may have some powers, Katniss and Tris do not and this makes them unlikely heroes who people can relate to. Everyone understands the desire

to protect oneself or to protect loved ones and as a viewer, you admire their strength and resilience. And although as a female spectator you also admire this in the female superhero, the anti-hero becomes easier to identify with because they are not presented as a spectacle. Their looks are not accentuated by camera's trailing across their bodies or by them wearing tight outfits. They are comfortable above all and when they are not, it shows clearly like with Katniss in the few dresses she is forced to wear.

Due to this, idiopathic identification is easier with the anti-hero as opposed to the superhero, as stated before in this chapter in reference to the two styles of identification by Kaja Silverman. With the anti-hero, it is for the female spectator easier to place themselves in their position. As a viewer you understand a desire to protect yourself and your family and loved ones. It is easier to imagine what you would do in a similar position, which therefore bridges the gap between the spectator and the object. As a spectator it is less difficult to discover a likeness to the anti-hero, which is also something we can relate back to the narcissistic look of Mulvey's theory. This makes identification, especially on a deeper (idiopathic) level, easier for the female spectator as opposed to when seeing the female superheroes from the previous chapter.

An important point to make here is that all of these productions mentioned in this chapter have either been created or written by a woman[12], lamenting the facts from the studies that I mentioned in the introduction. Once there is at least one female director or writer on board with a production, there is a fifty percent chance that the protagonist is female, which we can see with these films. *The X-Men* series had one female writer, which is probably why Mystique received a relatively larger role within those films, as opposed to Black Widow in *The Avengers* and Wonder Woman in *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice*.

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[12] With *Jessica Jones*, the creator and main writer of the series is a woman and both *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* are based on books written by women. These authors were also actively involved with writing the screenplay.

Conclusion

This thesis commenced with one central research questions, which was: How does the way the female hero is represented within the male genres of film influence to what extent the female spectator is able to identify with her?

The male genres of film have been defined in the introduction as the genres that have been dominated by men in the past, like action films, science fiction films, westerns, war movies, martial arts films and revenge films. Women have been taking over more within these films, but one may wonder whether or not with this they truly transgressed from their previous position as a spectacle within film, as something to be looked at by their male counterparts and the male spectator. When it comes to the female superhero, we unfortunately have to conclude that she did not break away from being a spectacle for the male viewer. This finds its roots in the comic books from which she (and the male superheroes) derives and although they are often somewhat toned down from their comic book equivalent, the female superhero is still very sexualised, which is especially clear when you place them next to the male superheroes who are well covered up. The tight, revealing outfits of the female superhero leave little to the imagination and therefore form a barrier to becoming a character that the female spectator can identify with. The image they represent is unattainable for the female spectator and no matter how inspiring the female superhero may be in other respects, this emphasis on their looks leaves them in a position of confirming their negative gender role stereotypes rather than defying them. They are also usually not the actor within the narrative, but are led by men when deciding a course of action as otherwise they run more of a risk of getting hurt or killed (Haskell 409). These elements lead to there being more of a distance between the female spectator and the female superhero. This distance triggers a more voyeuristic look, rather than a narcissistic one as the female viewer will have trouble finding the likeness between her and the character on screen (Mulvey 9 & 18). The female superhero remains a spectacle due to her sexualised looks and this often leads to any identification with her by the female spectator being more superficial, like with heteropathic identification as described by Kaja Silverman in her book *The Threshold of the Visible World* (1996) (90). The spectator understands the actions by the female superhero, but due to her looks and (special) abilities, the spectator is never quite able to place herself in the hero's shoes.

With female anti-heroes this is different. With them the emphasis is not on their looks and they also do not set out to be heroes. Their actions come forth from a desire to protect themselves and their loved ones, which is something almost anyone can identify with and admire. They thrive on a balance between masculinity and femininity in their character and this is also why for a male viewer they are interesting as characters and not just as spectacles like the female superhero. The female anti-hero, as opposed to her

superhero counterpart, does function as the actor within the narrative. What she does and what happens to her is decisive for how the story progresses, which is also why she is the main focaliser. The story is experienced from her perspective, as we saw with the case studies from chapter three. Because of this and due to the anti-hero's actions coming forth from a place that is more recognisable (Silverman 25), the style of identification with these characters is different from the identification style with the female superhero. Here, idiopathic identification is more relevant as the course of action by the anti-hero is more relatable: Katniss wants to protect her sister, Tris tries to save her parents and seeks revenge after their deaths and Jessica finds her strength again after being in an abusive relationship. Although they all turn into (reluctant) heroes, they come from a place that is relatable for the female spectator.

What is also interesting, especially with the female anti-hero, but partially also with the female superhero, is that they all embrace the positive aspects of the female stereotype (i.e. warmth, nurturing, et cetera). Black Widow uses it to her advantage to get what she wants, but you also see with Katniss and Tris that when they embrace their positive feminine trades, they actually become stronger. Femininity is not really seen as weakness, but more as strength amongst female heroes. So, although the female superheroes are still confirming the negative stereotypical trades in film that women have received over time by sexualising their looks, these characters and the female anti-heroes actually also confirm the positive stereotypical trades of women in film, but in a way that does not make them appear weak. They, for the most part, do not require men to keep them safe or need to necessarily find love, but they can still care for others and show emotion. The modern day female hero within the male genres of film shows that women can be tough and fight like men, but they can also have a family, loved ones and friends without appearing weak and requiring someone to protect them.

What I want to conclude with here is that when it comes to the ability of the female spectator to identify with the female hero, it appears to be most important that the hero looks like a regular person and acts in a way that is recognisable and relatable. When you look around on the street, you generally do not see women running around in skimpy outfits whilst they use their super powers to save the world (except for maybe when you are at Comic Con). However, a female hero that dresses like most of us women would and who acts from a desire to save themselves and their loved ones above anything else, is someone who is easier to understand. This makes them, consequently, easier to identify with and therefore, to me, it seems that the more the female hero becomes like everyone else, the more the female spectator will identify with her, even if she does live in a dystopian future.

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