



A Qualitative Analysis of Female Protagonists in Popular Science Fiction Cinema, From 2010 to 2019

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This thesis is submitted to Dundalk Institute of Technology
for the award of PhD

July 2021

School of Informatics and Creative Arts
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Acknowledgements

I would like to profusely thank my supervisors, Dr Ingrid Lewis and Dr Eamonn Crudden for their tireless efforts and guidance in helping me shape this research. Their dedication to my research, and their support throughout this process was invaluable. They have devoted so much time and effort in supporting me and I am extremely grateful for their involvement.

I would also like to make special mention of two of my previous supervisors, Dr Zélie Asava and Dr Caroline O’Sullivan. Dr Asava’s modules in my undergraduate years inspired me to follow this path and her initial role as my primary supervisor during the Masters phase of this research helped me immeasurably. Dr O’Sullivan, who took over as supervisor during a particularly tumultuous year for me, championed me and inspired me to remain focused.

I am grateful to DkIT and the research office for their financial support which made this research possible. I am also thankful to the department of Creative Arts, Media and Music, my home for the last number of years. In particular Dr Adele Commins, the head of the department and Dr Gerard McKiernan, the head of the School of Informatics and Creative Arts.

I wish to also thank Prof Diane Negra who conducted my Masters transfer examination. Her feedback and encouragement motivated me and invigorated my love of Film Studies.

My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, John and Mary, both teachers who instilled the idea of “life-long learning” in me. Their passion for their vocations and immense kindness towards others have been some of the biggest inspirations for me. Finally, Gordon, my husband, who always knows what to say and whose support and patience I could not have done this without.

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Abstract

A Qualitative Analysis of Female Protagonists in Popular Science Fiction Cinema, From

2010 to 2019

Maria Horan

This thesis investigates the representation of female protagonists in the top grossing science fiction films worldwide over the course of a decade, 2010 to 2019. While there has been an emphasis on the lack of female representation in cinema in quantitative terms, this research aims at addressing a dearth in the knowledge by focusing qualitatively on the representations being created. The research determines whether these female protagonists are objectified in line with historical trends in mainstream cinema and whether any progress has been made in terms of shifting representations. It questions representations of femininity, agency, and diversity by investigating the portrayals found in the corpus of films.

Through textual analysis, incorporating elements of discourse analysis, thirty-one films are analysed. The research determines that women's representations within the genre largely uphold patriarchal ideals. In most cases this tendency reflects cultural anxieties relating to shifting definitions of gender and identity and results in stereotypical representations of femininity. The majority of female protagonists also remain objectified on-screen with the "male gaze" still present in this contemporary corpus of films. However, the research also acknowledges a positive shift occurring, with a number of exceptions to this general rule. Women's representations are sometimes positively linked to STEM subjects and concentrated efforts have been made to create progressive representations in some instances. These alternative representations are often linked to an increase in the number of key female crew members involved in the film production process, most notably as directors and/or writers. This research claims that while mainstream cinema continues to offer stereotypical patriarchal hegemonic representations of women, when women's voices are privileged and they appear in key production roles more progressive representations tend to occur.

Chapter One – Introduction

The tendency to marginalise women in film and reduce them to one dimensional characters despite the fact that they represent half the human race has been highlighted and discussed by film theorists repeatedly.

The anomaly that women are the majority of the human race, half of its brains, half of its procreative power, most of its nurturing power, and yet are its servants and romantic slaves was brought home with peculiar force in the Hollywood film. (Haskell 1987, p.3)

Though written in the 1980s, Haskell's (1987) observation remains relevant today. Women remain underrepresented on every front in Hollywood and in the broader film industry. Gender equality has become a prominent popular discourse with movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp becoming part of our shared lexicon. In a more local context, in Ireland, the #WakingTheFeminists movement emerged as a response to the Abbey Theatre's 2015 "Waking The Nation" programme. A mere one out of ten of the plays which the Abbey had planned on producing in 2015 was written by a woman. This sparked outrage and inspired a gender equality movement. When the issue was investigated further it transpired that gender inequality was present in most areas of theatre production in Ireland (Donohue et al. 2017).

These findings inspired an analysis of the Irish film industry where unsurprisingly similar results were discovered. Women remain underrepresented as protagonists, writers and directors in the industry (Liddy 2020). Furthermore, Barton (2019, p.18) argues that when women do appear at the centre of narratives: "Films that actually foreground female subjectivities in a complex, thought-provoking manner are few and far between". While a substantial body of extant writing and research interrogates similar gender disparities internationally from a

quantitative standpoint (EWA Network 2016; Hunt and Ramon 2020), qualitative research into the types of representations of women being presented on-screen over the last decade is relatively scarce. This research attempts to at least partially address this dearth in knowledge by focusing on the science fiction genre over the course of an entire decade.

This research aims to qualitatively analyse representations of female protagonists in the most commercially successful cinematic genre worldwide: science fiction. Six out of the top ten grossing films of all time worldwide can be classified as science fiction.¹ This highlights the genre's popularity and global reach. The research objectives include analysing the dominant representations of women in science fiction, investigating whether female protagonists are objectified on-screen and specifying the manner in which female violence is portrayed. The research also sets out to investigate how the interconnections of race and sexuality are represented in dominant cinematic narratives.

The research questions interrogated within this thesis are as follows:

1. Are women objectified in contemporary science fiction cinema, in line with historical theorisations of women's objectification on screen?
2. How are violent women portrayed in contemporary science fiction cinema?
3. Is Creed's (1993) "monstrous feminine" imagery present in the corpus of films of concern and in what ways is it portrayed?
4. An emergence of the female cyborg in contemporary cinematic texts has been identified, how is this figure portrayed?

¹ According to boxofficemojo.com, the top ten grossing films of all time worldwide include: *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo brothers 2019), *Avatar* (Cameron 2009), *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens* (Abrams 2015), *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo brothers 2018), *Jurassic World* (Trevorrow 2015) and *The Avengers* (Whedon 2012).

5. Are there any shifting trends or patterns emerging from the corpus of films of concern?

Drawing on extant film studies, conducting close readings of the texts and utilising my own critical voice these questions are investigated within chapters Four to Eight.

On a personal level, as an undergraduate film student I experienced issues of gender inequality. I was the only female director in my year group to lead a final year film. At the time, it was also the only script for a final year film written by a female student. I found this to be a curious phenomenon, not unique to our year group, and I wanted to understand on a deeper level why women in the film industry seem to be consistently relegated to producer roles and rarely feature in key creative roles. This disparity motivated my journey into researching the issue of gender inequality in the film industry. I identify as a feminist and I find the lack of female protagonists, particularly female protagonists of colour in mainstream cinema to be troublesome. I believe that the monopolisation of protagonist roles that are available to women by heterosexual white females is evidence of a broader and insidious societal problem. I wanted, as a result, to embark on a research project in an area that I believed was of utmost importance and believed that this could potentially expose clear evidence of inequalities in the most globally popular films.

While there have been recent attempts by the film industry to address gender imbalances, especially from Hollywood with high profile female led films like *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017) and *Captain Marvel* (Boden and Fleck 2019), these films remain in the minority. The year 2020, before the onset of the global Coronavirus pandemic, was set to see the exhibition of even more female led films: *Birds of Prey* and *The Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley*

Quinn (Yan 2020), *Black Widow* (Shortland 2020), *Wonder Woman 1984* (Jenkins 2021), *Mulan* (Caro 2020) and the latest iteration of the James Bond series (including the first ever black female 00 agent) *No Time to Die* (Fukunaga 2020). It is worth noting that all of these films, with the exception of *No Time to Die*, feature female directors.

This wave of female led films may create the impression that positive progress has been made in terms of female representation but a pragmatic contextualisation of the popular discourses which circulated around *Wonder Woman* (2017), for example, reveals a troubling scenario. While the film received positive media attention for its strong female lead and for being one of the first superhero films to focus on a female protagonist, in actual fact 2017 saw a decrease in the number of female led science fiction films as compared to 2016.

Furthermore, the pattern of female directors being restricted to primarily directing female-led films is somewhat troublesome. While women remain in the minority of directors, there is a history of their successfully directing big-budget male led films. However, examining the superhero genre, for example, reveals a stark disparity between the genders in these terms. Focusing on one studio, Marvel, reveals that twenty-three films were produced by the studio since 2008. Of these films only one featured a female co-director, *Captain Marvel*. In addition to this, only two featured female co-screenwriters: *Captain Marvel* and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn 2014). It is arguable that, to date, the appearance of female led films with women directors and writers represent token gestures, and that real change has yet to occur. It is beyond the scope of this research to systematically detail the gender breakdowns of the crews responsible for the films with which this research is concerned. However, the gender of the key

creative personnel responsible for the films within the corpus of films of concern here is something that the research is cognisant of throughout.

The societal importance of cinematic representations cannot be overstated. The issues of gender disparity in the film industry, which have emerged in both academic and popular discourses in recent years, point towards the imperative of bringing under close scrutiny extant representations of women and the concepts of femininity which they embody. Lewis and Sever Globan (2020, p.130) highlight the importance of filmic representations in the creation of meaning: “Films, and media, in general, play a significant role in shaping the value system within a culture, defining the canons of femininity, morality and beauty”. Thus, an analysis of representations of women spanning the decade, 2010 to 2019, may reveal the nature of the understandings of femininity that have been created and circulated in that period.

Objectification remains an issue in relation to female representation, however, it has shifted slightly in certain cases with secondary female characters often being more strongly subject to objectification in comparison to the more empowered main female protagonists. Representations of violence carried out by women remain troublesome, as they tend to perpetuate stereotypical ideas of femininity and portray violence as primarily the purview of men. Interesting shifts have also occurred in representations of the “monstrous feminine” with some positive associations in particular being attached to the “archaic mother” archetype (Creed 1993). An unprecedented proliferation of female cyborg characters has emerged in the genre since 2010 reflecting another shift in the understanding of gender identities, and the construction of femininity in particular. The most important shifts are found in the

representation of young women as empowered and the emerging trend of strong female protagonists being associated with STEM subjects.

It is worth noting at this point that gender, under the remit of this research, is understood as a set of binary notions as defined by a hegemonic, patriarchal society: femininity/masculinity, and not as a set of categories to differentiate between the sexes: woman/man. Pluretti et al. (2015, pp.392-393) describe the manner in which gender functions to underpin hegemonic norms:

Gender and sexuality provide a set of acceptable attributes and behaviours, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, for men and women. However, cultural institutions have placed gender and sexuality in a hierarchy, favouring masculinity over femininity and heterosexuality over homosexuality.

The thesis takes the position that gender is socially constructed and artificial, and that the representations of stereotypical representations of gender is regressive.

Chapter Two presents a review of relevant literature. This chapter is split into various sections. Section 2.2. presents an overview of the literature on gender representation and science fiction. Section 2.3. is split into a series of sub-sections which correspond to and inform the various findings chapters. These sub-sections review bodies of literature concerned with violence and objectification on-screen, Creed's (1993) "monstrous feminine", and literature on cyborg feminism. Section 2.4. examines literature which deals with issues of racial diversity on-screen. Section 2.5. reviews literature concerned with the shifting representations of women in twenty-first century cinema. Finally, section 2.6. reviews relevant literature that deals with gender representation in the corpus of films of specific relevance to this research.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological approach taken by this research. It begins by explaining how the specific corpus of films of concern to this research was chosen. It also provides a rationale for science fiction as a genre being chosen as a focus of study. The chapter also discusses the manner in which this research, through building on textual analysis, seeks to identify the contemporary societal anxieties reflected in the chosen corpus of films.

The methodological discussion also explains how science fiction has been defined for the purposes of this research and how the corpus of films of concern was delineated by drawing on this definition. The discussion also provides a clear rationale for how films with a female protagonist were identified. Finally, the methodological discussion provides a rationale for the use of poststructuralist textual analysis as a mode of investigation and explains the manner in which elements of discourse analysis are woven into the research approach.

Chapter Four examines a subset of films within the chosen corpus that demonstrate stereotypical objectification of their female protagonists. This objectification is identified through a process of analysing film language, mise-en-scène and costuming in relation to the female protagonists while drawing on extant theories relating to the subject of objectification. The chapter also interrogates the representations of secondary female characters. This interrogation is conducted in order to investigate the hypothesis that representations of women tend to regress when it comes to secondary or background characters. This hypothesis is also tested through a comparative analysis of the character of Wonder Woman as she appears in two different texts: as a female protagonist exploring her origins in *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017); and as a secondary character as part of a team in *Justice League* (Snyder 2017).

An analysis of the representations of violent women in the corpus of films is conducted in Chapter Five. As science fiction most commonly overlaps with the action genre, representations of violent women are abundant within the corpus of texts of concern to this research. This chapter identifies various paradigms of female violence that are found within the research's dataset. Female violence is analysed in terms of the variety of paradigms through which it is explained in these texts: as a response to a traumatic event or childhood memory, as a nurturing response predicated on stereotypical ideals of femininity, or as a result of the influence of men who are responsible for training and guiding violent women. Finally, the chapter identifies the fact that when these paradigms are absent, female characters who display violence tend to be denied a feminine appearance, and instead are given typically masculine looks.

Chapter Six applies Creed's (1993) "monstrous feminine" framework to the corpus of texts. This is done with the aim of determining whether representations of femininity appear monstrous in the corpus of films relevant to this research, with an emphasis placed on films that can be categorised as containing generic elements of horror. The chapter utilises five of Creed's (1993) archetypes: "the witch", "the archaic mother", "the monstrous womb", "woman as possessed monster", and the "*femme castratrice*". The analysis presented in the chapter acknowledges that these stereotypical tropes uncovered by Creed's (1993) work are visibly sustained in contemporary science fiction cinema and thus continue to underpin regressive ideas about femininity and womanhood, perpetuating the idea of woman as "other". The chapter also uncovers some shifts with regard to representations of the "archaic mother" where she is represented as a more positive hopeful figure.

A comprehensive analysis of the proliferation of female cyborg characters that have emerged in science fiction cinema since 2010 is presented in Chapter Seven. Through drawing on theorisations of cyborg feminism, the chapter demonstrates the manner in which opportunities to represent these female cyborgs in a positive, progressive manner are completely missed by the film texts. Instead the female cyborg becomes a regressive, objectified figure, with stereotypical attributes applied to its characterisations. The chapter begins by clearly defining what is meant by a “cyborg” for the purposes of the research. This definition in turn justifies the choice of cinematic characters for analysis. The chapter then reviews extant literature on cyborg feminism - displaying its potential as a liberatory framework from which new and progressive definitions of “woman” can be extrapolated. This is followed by an overview of historic examples of the cinematic cyborg and a review of extant literature on cyborg characters. The analysis of the cyborgs in the corpus of texts of relevance to this research begins with an exploration of which, if any, boundaries are transgressed by their representations in terms of race, gender or sexuality. The chapter, after demonstrating the systematic objectification of these female characters over the course of the decade, concludes with a discussion of issues of agency with regard to cyborg characters.

The process of analysing the relevant corpus of films concludes in Chapter Eight on a somewhat hopeful note. The chapter analyses characters that can be read as progressive, positive female representations. It focuses on a subsection of texts from the relevant corpus of films that feature young adult female protagonists. The chapter argues that positive representations are more common when it comes to these younger protagonists. The chapter also demonstrates that the majority of films featuring such protagonists tend to feature women in key production roles, as writers or directors, and that deliberate efforts have been made to

portray the characters as empowering. The chapter also highlights the manner in which positive representations of women, as is the case generally with the representations of young adult female protagonists, tend to associate them with STEM subjects. It is argued that such representations may assist in addressing a global crisis with regard to gender equality within STEM disciplines.

The concluding chapter, Chapter Nine, summarises the findings of the research and offers suggestions for further research. It discusses the findings in more detail, highlighting the contemporary anxieties that exist alongside and inform the corpus of films. The chapter also specifies the particular contribution made by this research and the manner in which it addresses a gap in the literature on representations of women in science fiction.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

Situated within the field of Feminist Film Studies this research conducts a comprehensive textual analysis of the chosen corpus of films while incorporating some elements of discourse analysis. Elements of feminist film theory and gender theory inform and shape the research. The literature reviewed in this chapter reflects these diverse areas of study and assists in providing a solid basis from which to conduct the research.

The first section of the literature, 2.2., review focuses on relevant work dealing with gender representation in the science fiction genre. The second section of the literature review aims to map out changing representations of femininity within science fiction cinema. This provides a baseline from which to determine if the representations of these characters are shifting in contemporary iterations of science fiction cinema. There is, in terms of film analysis, a clear lack of comprehensive, contemporary work on this subject and this research seeks to address this dearth of knowledge. This section is divided into three parts to map established trends within in the genre. Section 2.3.1 deals with representations of violence and the objectification of women on-screen, while section 2.3.2 maps literature that engages with Creed's theorisation of the (1993) "monstrous feminine" and section 2.3.3 reviews literature relevant to cyborg feminism. Section 2.4 focuses on racial diversity in science fiction cinema. Section 2.5 then examines literature dealing with shifting representations of women on-screen in twenty-first century cinema, in order to determine if these are relevant to the science fiction genre. Finally,

section 2.6 specifically focuses on and discusses extant literature on gender representation in relation to the chosen corpus of films.

Operating within the field of media theory, it is necessary to note that wider discourses and societal issues that relate to the historical period in which films are made are often at play in specific texts. It is the contention of this research that texts created over the past decade should reflect contemporary social issues. One would expect to notice a significant increase, not only in female representation which has been a part of the public discourse for years, but also, an increase in representation in terms of diversity and race. An investigation of these issues as part of this literature review provides evidence with regard to these issues and informs the overall discourse analysis element of the research.

It is important to note at this point that the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) is utilised while conducting a critical analysis of the chosen corpus of films. The concept of intersectionality, a key element of third wave feminism, was first introduced by critic Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Intersectional theory examines the manner in which intersecting social identities contribute to structures of oppression and inequality. An intersectional approach demands that issues of race, class, and disability are taken into consideration when defining “womanhood”. This critical perspective is applied during textual analysis.

2.2. An Overview of Gender Representation in Science Fiction

There is a notable lack of contemporary academic writing on the specific subject of female representation and science fiction cinema. Kuhn (1990) posits that the general lack of

theorisation of science fiction cinema reflects the difficulty of defining these films as belonging to a single genre. This reinforces Neale's (2000, p.45) theorisation of genre as being "multi-generic" in nature. This is the case for all of the films included in the corpus of this research. In terms of genre, they tend to overlap with other genres, most often with the action or horror genre.² This perhaps marks a shift in the current decade with science fiction films having previously overlapped more commonly with horror and fantasy:

It (science fiction) overlaps with other types of films, notably horror and fantasy; and efforts to draw lines of demarcation between science fiction and its neighbouring genres have proved on the whole unsatisfactory. (Kuhn 1990, p.1)

This explanation, however, does not explain the dearth of academic knowledge with respect to contemporary science fiction cinema and female representation in particular.

Kuhn (1990) suggests that understanding the "cultural instrumentality" of a film is perhaps more important than defining it as existing within any given genre. The "cultural instrumentality" of a film refers to the manner in which a film interacts in terms of social practises and intertextually with other media, films and genres. Kuhn (1990, p10) identifies five modes of cultural instrumentality through which it is useful to analyse science fiction films:

There is a notion that the overt contents of science fiction films are reflections of social trends and attitudes of the time, mirroring the preoccupations of the historical moment in which the films were made. In this reflectionist model, films are treated as, in a sense, sociological evidence. Secondly, there is the idea that science fiction films relate to the social order through the mediation of ideologies, society's representations of itself in and for itself...Third is the view that films voice cultural repressions in 'unconscious' textual processes...A fourth cultural instrumentality concerns what science fiction films do to and

² Examples include *The Force Awakens* (Abrams 2015): Science fiction/Action hybrid, *Jupiter Ascending* (Wachowskis 2015): Science fiction/Action hybrid, *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015): Science fiction/Action hybrid, *Lucy* (Besson 2014): Science fiction/Action hybrid, *Prometheus* (Scott 2012): Science fiction/Horror, *Alien: Covenant* (Scott 2017): Science fiction/Horror.

for their spectators – the sorts of pleasures they evoke and the fantasies they activate. Finally, there is the view that science fiction films are actively involved in a whole network of intertexts, of cultural meanings and social discourses. (Kuhn, 1990, p.10)

Thus, cultural instrumentality is a concept that is applied throughout this research in attempting to determine what shifting anxieties or notions of women are reflected in the contemporary corpus of texts. As argued by Kuhn (1990) the modes of cultural instrumentality applied in textual analysis often overlap and include multimodal methods of analysis. The most prominent mode applied throughout this research is the “reflectionist model”. This is based on the contention that the texts analysed reflect social anxieties and concerns present in the decade of their production.

Kuhn (1990) identifies various patterns and themes within the science fiction genre, including that of science and technology versus human nature. This theme is relevant to certain films in the dataset of this study:

The genre’s long-standing preoccupation with narratives involving masculine mastery over nature and creation currently manifests itself in stories involving the ‘birthing’ of human substitutes by corporations rather than by the Frankenstein/mad scientist villains of earlier films. The old science fiction opposition of human and non-human is also transformed when boundaries between the one and other become blurred, and the human body itself is constituted as other or potentially monstrous: it is no longer assumed that human beings are superior to humanoid machines or alien creatures. (Kuhn 1990, p.8)

The concern with the transgression of boundaries implicitly draws on Creed’s (1993) work on the “monstrous feminine” where boundaries are blurred, often between the human and the non-human. When utilised in combination with Creed’s (1993) work, Kuhn’s (1990) “cultural instrumentality” provides a lens through which the science fiction films in this study are analysed.

Science fiction as a genre, has always posed questions about humanity's position in the universe. The role of humanity in relation to potential global disasters, space travel, the evolution of society and the evolution of technology are all relevant and important topics that merge with everyday life. Kuhn (1990, p.16) discusses how a film's themes often encapsulate, both politically and socially, the times in which it was made as opposed to the time in which the film is set:

The disguise referred to here is the genre itself, the very codes and conventions which assert that a science fiction film is nothing more than fantasy. But under the cloak of fantasy, issues of actuality may be addressed all the more directly. In this reflectionist criticism, the issues dealt with in films resolve themselves into two types...films are seen either as mirroring attitudes, trends and changes in society (social preoccupations) or as expressing the collective psyche of an era (social psychological preoccupation).

Thus, it is probable that science fiction films are the most relevant to exploring the issues listed above and to reflecting issues pertinent to public discourse and concern more generally.³ Kuhn's (1990) contention is explored during the process of discourse analysis where broader issues concerning feminism as a movement (sexism, misogyny and the rising social movements that address these issues) are considered in the context of contemporary science fiction films with female protagonists.

It is now pertinent to discuss the work of theorists who specifically analyse issues of gender and science fiction cinema. This is an ongoing concern of the Film Studies community. Kuhn (1990), Kavanagh (1990), Newton (1990), Sobchack (1991), Attebery (2002), Cornea (2007), Kac-Vergne (2018) and Tidwell and Barclay (2019) are among those theorists who investigate

³ Dystopian futuristic films like *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015), *The Hunger Games* trilogy (Ross and Lawrence 2012-2015) and *After Earth* (Shyamalan 2013) have an environmental message. Films like *Ex-Machina* (Garland 2014), *Her* (Jonze 2013) and *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders 2017) pose moral questions regarding technology and human evolution.

issues of gender in the context of science fiction cinema. However, these theorists tend to focus on specific film texts in isolation, thus ignoring broader issues that may be at play in the genre.

Two of the newer iterations of the *Alien* franchise are included in the corpus of films dealt with by this research. Thus, it is necessary to refer to the extant literature on the original trilogy. Unsurprisingly the film *Alien* (Scott 1979) has been discussed thoroughly in terms of gender by feminist film scholars. A female lead in an action film was uncommon for the time and it is widely known that Scott wrote the film's characters to have interchangeable genders. Both Kavanagh (1990) and Newton (1990) focus on *Alien* (Scott 1979) for their analysis of gender. Kavanagh (1990) regards the character of Ripley as an example of positive strong female representation (Kavanagh 1990). By contrast, Newton (1990) takes issue with her nurturing side (she saves the cat, Jones, at the risk to her life). Creed (1993) argues that the female alien embodies that which is "abject" and that it is in the feminine that abjection is displayed.

Kavanagh's (1990) Marxist influenced essay *Feminism, Humanism and Science in Alien* explores the female protagonist Ripley's representation in detail. When discussing her decision to deny entry to the sick officer in accordance with quarantine protocols he observes that:

This refusal speaks from the theoretically antihumanist grounds of correct scientific procedure, assumption of legitimate authority, willingness to sacrifice friend's loved ones, the individual, on the basis of rational definition of possible consequences. Her stand implicitly marks humanism as irrelevant. (Kavanagh 1990, p.74)

His reference to "antihumanist grounds" reflects his Marxist approach to this text. Kavanagh (1990) considers class as a more prominent marker of difference than gender in *Alien*. He considers the categories male/female as non-existent; "there is no such thing as man; there are specific men and women, distributed as differentially functioning agents into specific *classes*,

with *class* standing as the significant category of an effective theory of social transformation” (1990, p.73). One key element of *Alien* solidifies Kavanagh’s (1990) insight: the ability of the male characters to birth the alien offspring negates any biological sexual difference. In addition, the choice to forefront Ripley as the main protagonist erases traditional gendered differences on-screen.

Newton (1990), on the other hand, reads *Alien* as articulating two contemporary anxieties/issues. One theme she considers present, similar to Kavanagh’s Marxist reading, is that of the “company man”, anxieties relating to late capitalism and the increased utilisation of technology. The second theme she considers present in *Alien* is the ideological trope that middle-class women are positioned to save humanity from the excesses of technology:

White middle class women, once integrated into the world of work, will somehow save us from its worst excesses and specifically from its dehumanization. This fantasy has roots in nineteenth-century ideologies about middle class women, ideologies which maintained that women, as outsiders to the world of early capitalist competition, retained a moral purity which might redeem it. (Newton 1990, p.83)

While Newton (1990) considers this text as reflective of feminist utopian ideals of the erasure of gender, she simultaneously worries that male anxieties about these very issues are present and managed within the text. She considers it significant that, although the domestic work is never depicted as being under one gender’s purview, the main computer who takes care of the crew is called “Mother”. Newton (1990) argues that anxieties around gender roles are appeased through the representation of the android Ash: a white middle-class man. His constant undermining of Ripley throughout the narrative, the fact that he is mother’s “favourite”, and the climatic violent scene featuring a simulation of Ripley’s rape by “shov(ing) a rolled up girlie magazine down her throat” solidifies this interpretation for Newton (1990, p.85): “Ash

is a covert emblem both of men dehumanized by their work and of men dehumanized by their rage at women”.

Continuing with analyses that focus on the *Alien* series, Penley (1991) argues that in contrast to classic Hollywood cinema where gender differences are resolved, science fiction tends to interrogate issues of difference in more depth. She argues that issues of difference are displaced from men/women onto human/non-human in science fiction cinema. She (1990) recognises an important shift in the sequel to *Alien*, *Aliens* (Cameron 1986). Despite the film continuing in the vein of the first iteration of the franchise where markers of sexual difference were largely absent, Ripley’s character develops a strong maternal instinct: “Ripley is marked by a difference that is automatically taken to be a sign of femininity” (Penley 1991, p.73).

Kavanagh (1990), Newton’s (1990), and Penley’s (1991) work is further considered when analysing the two most recent films in the *Alien* (Scott 1979-2017) franchise throughout this research.

In a similar vein to Newton (1990), Sobchack (1991), referencing male anxieties and patriarchal crisis in the 1970s and 1980s, argues that science fiction resolves issues more than other genres of the time. She draws on science fiction narratives which feature the family structure as a key element. She argues that this theme is reflective of “crisis experienced by American bourgeois patriarchy since the late 1960s, and the related disintegration and transfiguration of the ‘traditional’ American bourgeois family” (1991, pp.3-4). Sobchack (1991, p.13) considers science fiction as the genre which most readily resolves these crises in its narrative structures: “in a reunion of patriarchy and paternity that is as ingenious as it is also

ingenuous”. She discusses the disparity between the father figure in the horror genre of the 1970s and 1980s and the father figure in science fiction cinema of the same era. She considers the father figure present in the science fiction genre as ultimately returning to the family to save the family in comparison to the horror genre where he returns to destroy it.

Likewise, Cornea (2007, p.115) considers science fiction narratives of the 1970s and 1980s as reflecting patriarchal crises: “the 1970s the breakdown of the family unit became a cause for concern: the divorce rate was on the rise, along with the number of single-parent families”. She (2007) identifies the 1980s as an era in science fiction cinema featuring what she calls “cyborg films”. These big budget Hollywood blockbuster films all featured male cyborgs and she examines the representations of masculinity present in the body of such films: “Drawing upon the conventions of the action genre, the cyborg films mentioned above presented the viewer with exaggerated visions of masculine subjectivity” (Cornea, 2007, p.120). These insights are considered in Chapter Seven where the same theory is applied to representations of femininity, where it discusses how femininity is exaggerated in representations of female cyborgs.

While the cyborg characters were mostly male, Cornea (2007, p.121), draws on the female characters within these narratives arguing that they were present as a backlash response to the feminist movements of the 1970s:

the binary opposition of masculine/feminine was often foregrounded in the extreme masculine aggression visited upon the female in early renditions of the mainstream cyborg film. It is therefore easy to read these films as part of the hostile response to the rise of feminism in 1970s and the changing role of women in society. In a wider sense, they can also be seen as part of an aggressive conservative backlash against the now feminised countercultural movements and politics of the previous decades.

Cornea (2007) also draws on the objectified male body in these narratives and suggests that they represent a masculinity in crisis while simultaneously attempting to shift the gaze onto male bodies, thus problematising traditional gender ideologies. She furthers this argument by suggesting that in attempting to break down one set of binary oppositions (human/non-human) the hyper masculine male cyborg controversially ends up upholding traditional gender binaries: “because the cyborg is defined by a breakdown in the boundaries between self/other, the hyper-masculinity on display becomes a hysterical attempt to recuperate the traditional distinctions that this figure threatens to erode” (Cornea 2007, p.125). These arguments presented by Cornea (2007) are taken into consideration during Chapter Seven, in particular when considering Kuhn’s (1990) cultural instrumentality; does the feminised cyborg uphold traditional gender binaries or transgress them?

Cornea (2007) also notes a shift in the representation of women as protagonists on-screen in science fiction cinema from the late 1970s to the 1990s. She draws on feminist film theories from Doane (1990), Clover (1992), and Creed (1993), in order to read relevant cinematic texts from this period. She recognises the same shift in the *Alien* franchise as Penley does (1991), where markers of gender difference appear in later iterations: “where *Alien* destabilised both sex and gender norms, *Aliens* reinstated differences based upon sex, even as the boundaries of traditional gendered roles were extended” (Cornea 2007, p.152). She considers the 1990s science fiction films as marking the difference between the male and female characters through their highlighting of the physical strength of the female and the mental strength of the male:

cyber-thrillers commonly sport an array of cyborgian characterisations, the heroic qualities of the male heroes become more closely associated with the mind, whereas the skills associated with our female heroes remain more firmly located in their bodies. (2007, p.166)

This is expanded on in Chapter Seven, considering contemporary representations of male cyborgs in comparison to female cyborgs. The chapter examines the contrasting representations of these gendered cyborgs investigating whether their skills are linked to their gender in the manner Cornea (2007) describes.

When questioning the larger social anxieties present in the corpus of films of concern to this research Ruppertsberg's (1990) work is important. He examines science fiction narratives that feature alien invasions and what he terms the "messiah figure". When discussing *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (Wise 1951) Ruppertsberg (1990, p.32) notes that:

It reflected a general public concern over the same historical circumstances that have influenced more recent science fiction films: the fear that civilisation has run amok and is about to destroy itself, the individual's consequent despair and sense of unimportance, the inability to find coherent meaning in the modern world. The alien messiah serves to resolve these problems, at least imaginatively, to replace despair with hope and purpose, to provide resolution in a world where solution seems impossible.

He believes the alien figures present in these types of text are messiah type figures as they represent races with superior technologies and cultures that make them appear divine to humanity.

Ruppertsberg (1990) discusses the original *Star Wars* trilogy in terms of this messiah theory and describes how the messiah figure is a human in these instances.⁴ This motif is continued in *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens* (Abrams 2016) with the battle between good and evil: the light side and the dark side. *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017) also utilises this theme with Diana who hails from the mythical Themyscira, an island full of Amazon warriors who

⁴Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope (Lucas 1977), Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back (Kershner 1980) and Star Wars: Episode VI - Return of the Jedi (Marquand 1983).

are far superior to humankind. Diana's "divine" nature and her superiority to humans is a recurrent theme throughout the film during which she ultimately saves humanity. Ruppertsberg (1990) briefly touches on darker incarnations of this messiah figure using examples from *War of the Worlds* (Haskin 1953) *Alien* (Scott 1979) and *Aliens* (Cameron 1986). Of the films in the dataset of concern to this study, this theme can be clearly identified in *Jupiter Ascending* (Wachowskis 2016), *Prometheus* (Scott 2012), *The Host* (Niccol 2013) and *Alien Covenant* (Scott 2017). Ruppertsberg's (1990) work provides invaluable concepts relevant to conducting critical analyses of these films. Drawing on his work and Cornea's (2007) reveals a possible reading of the male cyborg characters in the newer *Alien* franchise- one which links their dark "messiah" characterisation with deeper philosophical crisis involving the male (cyborg) mind.

Considering theorisations of the "look" of these cyborg characters is also necessary in Chapter Seven, and beyond, considering questions of androgyny and gender in representations of female protagonists. Bergstrom (1991) discusses androgyny in science fiction and the trope of applying androgynous features to androids, most often to female androids. She discusses two 1982 films with a focus on female androgyny in the course of her analysis: *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) and *Liquid Sky* (Tsukerman 1982). She argues that "The standard use of female identity to reinforce male (dominant, institutional) identity is no longer a regular pattern of narrative development" (Bergstrom 1991, p.36). She sees another dimension as having been added to the disturbance of gender categories, that being the human/non-human binary. She suggests that androgyny can indicate more sexuality as it encompasses both masculine and feminine appeal however it can also indicate the eradication of sexuality completely:

Where the basic fact of identity as a human is suspect and subject to transformation into its opposite, the representation of sexual identity carries a potentially heightened significance,

because it can be used as the primary marker of difference in a world otherwise beyond our norms. (Bergstrom 1991, p.35)

She also argues that stories surrounding female androgyny are usually parables of castration, and thus primarily stories of male sexual identity.

The arguments that Bergstrom (1991) makes about androgyny and androids are considered when analysing contemporary cyborg texts in Chapter Seven. Her work provides an interesting contribution to the discourse analysis element of this research, which suggests that anxieties surrounding gender are still very much present in contemporary science fiction cinema. These contemporary cyborg texts would suggest, contrary to Bergstrom's arguments from the 1990s, that a move has been made back to an emphasis on stereotypical femininity, thus reinforcing notions of traditional masculinity.

Building on the work of Hebdige's (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Bergstrom (1991) also interestingly discusses fashion style as a form of resistance. This is important as science fiction cinema often tends to be highly stylised:

The adoption of anti-social styles by youth subcultures doesn't resolve political problems directly, but Hebdige argues that it proves a form of expression for ideological conflict. Style functions as indirect communication. (Bergstrom 1991, p.49)

Bergstrom (1991) argues that within science fiction texts, style now represents conformity, offering a mode of representation to communities who feel they are marginalised by aligning them into subgroups. She regards it as façade, allowing participants to conform while still believing themselves to be "outsiders":

Style no longer represents revolt. But because it once said something within a community, this style can act as a façade, allowing its participants to believe they are outsiders while attempting to win the rewards of mainstream approval. (Bergstrom 1991, p.51)

She regards this failure to adopt style as a form of revolt by the characters in *Liquid Sky* as a representation of their powerlessness in the face of commodification (ibid.).

Gibson (2018, p.2), in contrast, argues the cultural importance of fashion and costume in film: “fashion challenge(s) cultural norms and create(s) empowerment strategies for individuals and groups advocating for transformation and change”. He regards representation of non-conformity through fashion, as actually representing rebellion, in comparison to Bergstrom (1991) who considers it as part of the process of conforming. It is necessary to consider both arguments during analysis of the texts, however, Gibson’s (2018) argument is more compelling and, considering some of the textual examples in the corpus, more relevant to the analysis conducted in the finding’s chapters. It is through the fashion and style of texts like *Star Wars*, *Bumblebee*, *Mad Max: Fury Road* that the act of rebellion and non-conformity are represented. Furthermore, as argued in relation to the use of uniforms (*Star Trek*; *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets*), this same act is used to convey conformity in certain texts also.

Attebery (2002) explores questions of gender and genre in science fiction. In contrast to Lefanu (1988), Attebery (2002, p.6) considers science fiction to have originally been a male dominated genre, only changing with the emergence of female writers in the 1950s. He explores gender and science fiction in particular, in a niche mode of analysis. Though he attempts to remain open minded with regard to definitions of gender he nonetheless posits: “Gender is a way of assigning social and psychological meaning to sexual difference, insofar as that difference is perceived in form, appearance, sexual function, and expressive behaviour” (Attebery 2002, p.2). By associating it with a socially created system of meaning we can see how gender is

constructed. Attebery (2002, p.3) continues discussing this notion of the constructed nature of gender and how it results from a socially learned process:

The gender code is vastly more pervasive than that of SF. Like language, it is something we start learning the day we are born. Its rules and processes become part of the structure of consciousness, so that we find it difficult to think consciously about it. It is rooted in biology but shaped by culture to such a degree that it is impossible to untwist the thread and say which strands are inborn and which are acquired and arbitrary. There is no “natural gender” any more than there is a natural language.

This suggestion that language is not natural, but rather a learned process is a relevant insight.

These works will prove useful when mapping trends and changes in female representation in science fiction cinema.

Telotte (1990) argues that social anxieties often present themselves in film by being played out upon female bodies. He views *Metropolis* (Lang 1927) as a warning about the destructive power of technology, believing the robot, Maria, to be a symbol of this destructiveness. Telotte (1990) analyses *Metropolis* through a Baudrillardian lens, believing that the robot Maria, like technology more generally, misdirects men through her seductiveness. This equates women’s sexuality with danger which is a trope of the femme fatale and potentially troubling. This is relevant to Chapter Seven and the textual analysis of *Ex Machina* when the same argument is made in relation to Ava and her representation.

Merrick’s (2012) more contemporary argument that contemporary science fiction sometimes contains positive representations of women as scientists is of relevance here. She argues that such representations have the potential to create real world effects by inspiring young women to turn to science and engineering careers. She notes that such positive representations are more commonly found in science fiction literature as compared to filmic texts:

Media role models have seen a marked improvement in the last few decades, with capable female scientists becoming more common in both film and television, yet many of these images are compromised by their continued reliance on stereotypes of normative femininity... Yet fiction, and in particular the genre of science fiction (SF) is more likely to provide non-stereotypical images of female scientists. (Merrick 2012, p.746)

Arguments presented in Chapter Eight echo Merrick's contention here, drawing on analysis of characters that can be read in more progressive terms.

Kac-Vergne (2018, p.117) argues that women have typically been relegated to secondary characters in science fiction cinema, often cast in passive supporting roles to the male protagonists:

Female supporting characters are included not to drive the action but to vindicate the male heroes' masculinity or hyper-masculinity. Female supporting characters are repositioned as 'bearers of the look', as in the 1980s.

The majority of the films that Kac-Vergne (2018) discusses are from the twentieth century. The small number of twenty-first century films which are discussed are all from the first decade of the century. This highlights the need for more contemporary research into gender, in particular femininity, and science fiction.

Tidwell and Barclay (2019) examine science fiction literature and films, through an ecocritical feminist lens. They respond to Braidotti's (2017, p.14) call for "posthuman feminist theory to work toward multiple transversal alliances across communities". They examine instances where science fiction intersects with environmental concerns arguing that science fiction often poses questions about nature. Their work is similar to Brereton's (2005) ecological critique of modern cinema, which calls for textual analyses of the genre to centre more ecological readings. He considers science fiction to be the genre where these concerns are most often explored and represented. Brereton (2005, p.186) traces the evolution of such themes in science

fiction cinema from the 1950s ecological fears of nuclear war to the 1980s where a “more complex, pessimistic and nihilistic vision of the future” is presented. Brereton’s (2005, p.197) insights on cyborg characters are particularly relevant to Chapter Seven of this thesis:

the utopian possibilities for a new form of ‘post human’ agency has become an important measure for an eco-textual analysis and the cyborg in particular provides a focus for such exposition.

These eco-feminist critiques are considered when concluding Chapter Seven and considering what potential social and cultural anxieties are being played out in cyborg narratives. As compared to the 1990s when the topic was dealt with exhaustively, contemporary academic literature on gender and science fiction is relatively lacking. This section has clearly identified a dearth in contemporary research relating to gender and science fiction. This is perhaps due to the timely nature of this research, with more theorisations published from the first decade of the twenty-first century than the second.

2.3. Key Trends in the Cinematic Representation of Women in the Science Fiction Genre

The following section is divided into three separate parts in order to provide a comprehensive overview of the literature reviewed and to describe how it relates to this research. Section (2.3.1.) reviews literature on violent women on-screen and on female objectification. As theorisations of the objectification of women on-screen often overlap with theorisations of violent women on-screen it is logical for these two subjects to be dealt with together. Section (2.3.2.) briefly examines interpretations of Creed’s (1993) “monstrous feminine”. Creed’s (1993) formulation is expanded on more thoroughly in Chapter Six as it provides a basis in that

chapter from which to analyse contemporary science fiction cinema. Section (2.3.3.) focuses on literature relating to cyborg feminism and the female cyborg in particular.

2.3.1. Violence and the Objectification of Women on-screen

The objectification of women on-screen is an issue that has been a central concern of feminist film theory since Mulvey's (1975) seminal work on the male gaze. Schubart (2007) is a scholar of postfeminism who analyses the objectification of violent women. Brown (2011; 2015) analyses the objectification of female action heroes.

Various scholars have focused on female representation within a specific genre. Science fiction, as a genre, is often a hybrid of other genres. Neale (2000, p.45), a scholar whose work often focuses on genre, has argued that the concept of genre within the field of Film Studies should be expanded to include a multitude of categories because most films are multi-generic. The films within the remit of this study all utilise multi-generic conventions and codifications and it is important to recognise this fact. The most common generic crossover found within the chosen corpus of films is a crossover with the action genre and as such, it is necessary to trace the evolution of female representation within this genre.⁵ Four scholars that focus on female representation and objectification within the action genre are: McCaughey and King (2001), Schubart (2007), and Brown (2011). The focus of these scholarly works reinforces the

⁵ Out of the thirty-one films in the corpus of this research - nine can clearly be described as action/science fiction crossovers.

contention that objectification and women's violence are categories that often overlap in Film Studies.

Schubart (2007) is a scholar of postfeminism. In *Super Bitches and Action Babes* she identifies an emergent trend of numerous female action heroes across film and television outputs and claims: "strong women now exist in a range of media from comics, computer games and television shows to films, role playing games and action dolls" (Schubart 2007, p.17).

Postfeminism, as Schubart (2007, p.16) defines it is: "Where feminism has a specific political and social aim (equality), postfeminism is more an attitude towards culture and gender". In Film Studies, Postfeminist film studies is a set of theories, based on the assumption that feminism has achieved the goal of gender equality and celebrates women for embracing various retrogressive themes that would be concerning when examined through a feminist lens. Various scholars have investigated the shortcomings of postfeminism. Two such scholars are Negra and Tasker (2007). In their publication entitled *Interrogating Postfeminism* (2007) they highlight the exclusions found at the core of postfeminism and argue that it should be understood as a cultural turn which draws primarily on the lived experience of middle-class women:

(A) limited vision of gender equality as both achieved and yet still unsatisfactory underlines the class, age, and racial exclusions that define postfeminism and its characteristic assumption that the themes, pleasures, values, and lifestyles with which it is associated are somehow universally shared and, perhaps more significant, universally accessible. (Negra and Tasker 2007, p.2)

Negra and Tasker (2007) critically analyse various representations of women found within contemporary popular media to evidence their claim that postfeminism undermines feminist concerns. This is done in their view by commodifying a new version of "woman" under a

postfeminist rhetoric. They discuss the challenge postfeminism poses to feminist media studies as “a discipline often characterized by an interest in reading popular culture against the grain” (2007, p.5). This is a relevant point when considering Schubart’s (2007) work on the female action hero. Reading against the grain allows for the possibility of producing progressive readings of these representations.

Schubart (2007) traces the development of the female hero in the action genre from 1970 to 2006 and analyses the various representations found within this period. She identifies five archetypes within these representations: “the dominatrix, the Amazon, the daughter, the mother, and the rape-avenger” (Schubart 2007, p.12). These archetypal categorisations are utilised within the textual analysis portion of this research and are discussed in more detail in the finding’s chapters of this thesis, in particular in Chapter Four. Schubart’s (2007) work provides an insight into the history of the female action hero from 1970 to 2006 and drawing on her work allows to situate this contemporary research in the context of broader theorisations of the objectification of women on-screen.

In mapping the emergence of the female action hero, Schubart (2007, p.14) claims that interpretations of this character can go “both ways”. In discussing the duality of the female hero, she describes action heroines as “in-between”: composed of a mixture of feminine traits and masculine traits (Schubart 2007, p.14). This duality creates a clear divide in opinion between feminists and postfeminists. On the one hand the objectification of the female action hero on-screen is emblematic of Mulvey’s (1975) “male gaze”: “From a feminist perspective, she is a victim of patriarchy” (Schubart 2007, p.14). On the other hand, she can be read as occupying male spaces and being a progressive symbol of agency: “From a postfeminist

perspective, she represents female agency” (ibid.). As described by Negra and Tasker (2007), this reading goes against the grain in such a manner as to positively interpret such representations. Schubart (2007, pp.11-12) discusses the complexities arising from the insertion of the female action hero into what are often inserted considered “male” genres:

(T)he figure I set out to find is a woman who enters a man’s world and plays the hero in ‘male’ genres: action films, adventure films, martial arts films, war films, science fiction films, all genres with male heroes, male audiences, and male producers...As gender changes, everything in the plot changes...Archotyping the hero both absorbs and adjusts to social change, allowing her agency as well as limiting her action.

It is necessary to take into account various analyses of female representations in cinema written by feminist theorists whose political commitments contrast with Schubart’s postfeminist readings. Brown (2011; 2015) is one such scholar. Like Schubart, he recognises the proliferation of the female action hero in recent years: “In contemporary Western society the action heroine is everywhere” (Brown 2011, p.5). In the same vein as Schubart (2007), he addresses the fact that this action hero can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways:

Her ambiguous nature means she can represent many different things to many different people. It also means she can become the poster-girl for whichever cultural fantasies and/or fears are currently in vogue. The action heroine is a lightning rod for public debate because she is such an in-your-face challenge to basic cultural assumptions about gender roles in real life and in fantasy. The action heroine has also become a much-debated figure among cultural, media, and gender critics because she both problematizes and reinforces some of the most basic tenets of Film Studies and gender portrayal. (Brown 2011, pp.6-7)

Brown (2011) considers the fact that the female action hero has become an active character, in contrast to the passive roles women traditionally held in classic cinema. However, he also considers how the female action hero, in contrast to the male action hero, has an emphasis placed on her sexuality and beauty arguing that: “the action heroine perpetuates the ideal of female beauty and sexuality that has always been the primary cultural value of women in our society” (Brown 2011, p.7). Though Brown recognises the dual nature of the female action hero in the same way that Schubart (2007) does, he argues that her primary function is to be

fetishised and, in this way, his reading of the action hero differs from that of Schubart. His work is considered in more detail in Chapter Four and Chapter Five when conducting textual analyses of the representations of female protagonists within the corpus of films of relevance to this research. Brown's (2011) analysis of eroticised iconography within the action genre is also further drawn upon in Chapter Four.

McCaughey and King in *Reel Knockouts* (2001) trace the evolution of violent women in cinema. Like Schubart (2007) and Brown (2011; 2015) they recognise the multi-faceted nature of the female hero. They explore the range of ways in which the violent nature of women on-screen can be interpreted. In doing so, they draw on images of such women on-screen to:

question assumptions about gender, violence, pleasure and fantasy. They [questions on violent women] will allow film theorists to question models of female passivity and narrative closure. They also will help cultural historians and social scientists question assumptions about the development of political community among oppressed peoples. (McCaughey and King 2001, p.3)

McCaughey and King (2001) identify trends in the appearance of violent women on-screen in terms of how they correlate with racial and class issues. They trace the development of representations of women as violent through the Blaxploitation movies and rape revenge features of the 1970s, to the widespread use of guns by women in films in the 1980s. They cite *Alien* (Scott 1979) and *The Terminator* (Cameron 1984) as marking the introduction of women as protagonists in big budget science fiction films (McCaughey and King 2001, p.4). In terms of discourse analysis, it is necessary to attend to the manner in which class and race issues are reflected by the genre.

Many cultural changes have spawned mean women in movies. Late-twentieth-century trends include the health and fitness movement that made one's body a symbol of one's overall fitness as a citizen (witness the influence of Arnold Schwarzenegger); the student antirape movement that...sparked a nationwide conversation about gender, violence, and power; and on a broader economic scale, the movement of middle-class white women back into the paid labor force. (McCaughey and King 2001, pp.4-5)

Films in the dataset of this study that explicitly deal with violence and issues of class include *The Hunger Games* franchise (Ross and Lawrence 2012-2015), the *Divergent Series* (Burger and Schwentke 2014 – 2016), and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015). The critical analyses of these films presented in Chapter Four further consider and draw on the insights of McCaughey and King (2001).

In contrast to these qualitative works, a quantitative study examines “violent female action characters” in cinema from 1991 to 2005 (Gilpatric 2010). The findings of Gilpatric’s (2010, p.734) study demonstrate that:

58.6% of VFACs were portrayed in a submissive role to the male hero in the film, and 42% were romantically linked to him. The average VFAC was young, white, highly educated, and unmarried. VFACs engaged in masculine types of violence yet retained feminine stereotypes due to their submissive role and romantic involvement with a dominant male hero character. The findings suggest continued gender stereotypes set within a violent framework of contemporary American cinema.

This provides a solid background from which to investigate whether representations of violent women on-screen have shifted since 2005, five years before the period of relevance to this study begins.

The manner in which representations of femininity are intrinsically linked to the objectification of female characters is explored by theorists Sherman (2011) and Brook (2011). Both argue that the appropriation of femininity by female characters functions to justify the objectification of female characters. “The prize of being awarded the title of ‘most beautiful’ invites women to compete with each other and presents objectification as the ultimate feminine reward” (Brook 2011, p.233). Similarly, Sherman (2011, p.82) argues that “Traditional and neoliberal

femininity require that women objectify themselves”. This is an interesting perspective and provides an evaluation of femininity that places the onus on women themselves as the producer of objectification. This is a notion that is further considered in Chapter Four, which interrogates the alignment of femininity with consumerist values and ideals.

Other discourses on female objectification on-screen focus on the “feminist complaint that graphic depiction of victimization objectifies the victim and can operate pornographically” (Stringer 2011, p.276). This notion was first explored by Clover (1992) whose work focuses on representations of women as victims in the horror genre. Significantly, Brown (2015, p.30) argues that depictions of the torture of males on-screen differ in their representations to the torture of females: “while the torture of action heroes strives to offset or negate the sexualisation of the male body, the torture of action heroines risks eroticizing the victimised female body”. Brown (ibid.) regards this as a result of the consistent objectification of women across various media: “because women are already so heavily coded as sexual objects in the media and subjected to the male gaze...female torture scenes can be understood to be more overtly sexualised”. A torture scene occurs in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and read through Brown’s (ibid.) critique presents a troubling interpretation, particularly when the final film in the trilogy is taken into consideration and the two characters involved in the torture scene share a romantic moment. However, the marked efforts to present a strong female Jedi, in line with Luke’s characterisation in the early trilogy, result in an alternative reading here, one which places Rey’s character in the same situation Luke found himself in – being tortured with Jedi mind tricks.

2.3.2. Revisiting the “Monstrous Feminine”

It is necessary at this point to briefly map the literature that supports the use of the “monstrous feminine” as a framework from which to analyse contemporary film as such a framework is significantly utilised in Chapter Six.

Creed’s (1993) “monstrous feminine” analyses representations of women and abstract femininity in film texts from the 1980s and 1990s. She develops seven distinct categories of “monstrous feminine” that she considers to be present in horror films and some crossovers of the science fiction genre. These categories are (i) the witch, (ii) the archaic mother, (iii) the monstrous womb, (iv) the vampire, (v) the possessed body, (vi) the monstrous mother, and (vii) the *femme castratrice*. These seven categories are described in detail in Chapter Six.

Creed’s (1993) work is psychoanalytical, drawing on the principles of Freud’s *unheimlich*, or uncanny. The uncanny refers to that which is familiar yet unsettling. Creed (1993, p.53) draws on Freud’s three main states of the uncanny. These are (i) the notion of a double (*doppelganger*), (ii) castration anxieties, and (iii) a feeling associated with a familiar/unfamiliar place.

Since Creed’s (1993) initial writings the “monstrous feminine” has been applied as a framework throughout Film Studies. A variety of scholars have utilised her framework as a prism through which to analyse certain topics or genres. Examples of such utilisations include explorations of the “monstrous feminine” in Asian cinematic narratives (Seet 2009; Wee 2010),

of gender representation and abjection in *The Shining* (Kubrick 1980) (Kilker 2006), and of the “monstrous feminine” in young adult fiction (Pulliam 2014).

The case for the “monstrous feminine” as a relevant and topical mode of analysis is bolstered by Chare et al. (2019), who have interviewed Creed in addition to re-examining her theories in the context of the new millennium.

Creed’s (1993) “monstrous feminine” framework has been utilised across a variety of cinematic genres, as Chare et al. (2019) point out. As this research is primarily concerned with science fiction it is worth noting that Creed (1993) dedicates a large portion of her analysis to *Alien* (Scott 1979), a crossover of the horror/science fiction genres. In her analysis of *Alien* she argues that the archaic mother figure is present throughout the text. This is achieved through various reworkings of Freud’s primal scene in the film, suggesting the archaic mother’s presence. Her application of Freud’s theories to the science fiction genre is not necessarily original, with Dervin (1980, p.97) having preceded her writings with an analysis of how integral the primal scene is to the science fiction genre:

Ever since George Méliès *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and Otto Rippert’s *Homunculus* (1916), science fiction film has spun around the dual themes of other worlds and other beings... While ranging from proximate planets to distant galaxies, from the depths of the ocean to the inner universe of the human body, such explorations presume two settings: one familiar and reliable, another mysterious and unpredictable.

This demonstrates that some of the founding principles of Creed’s (1993) analysis have already been discussed by Dervin. He is cognisant of the evocation of the uncanny within the genre, the juxtapositioning of a familiar place with that which is unfamiliar. He considers space travel as a metaphor for the discovery of self. He also implicitly references the monstrous mother

when he refers to science fiction's tendency to feature "sexual unions between human and beasts" (Dervin 1980, p.98).

2.3.3. Cyborg Feminism and Posthuman Otherness

Some film theorists utilise cyborg feminism as a prism through which to analyse contemporary media. Cyborg feminism is a strand of feminism that originates with Haraway's (1985) seminal essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" and is centrally concerned with the intersections of feminism and technology:

The central metaphor in cyborg feminism is the cyborg, a creature both human and machine whose existence simultaneously relies on and redefines the relationship between humans and technology. (Melzer 2006, p.22)

Haraway's (1985) original manifesto utilises the metaphor of a cyborg to argue that freedom from oppression may be found in the embrace of technology. In an essay which was later adapted into a book, she claims that we are all "chimeras" and hybrids of machine and man as a result of humanity's changing relationship with technology (Haraway 1991, p.4). The utilisation of the cinematic female cyborg is doubly ironic as film texts themselves are technologically constructed: "In film this technological construction occurs at the level of both the material production of the film itself and within in the narrative" (Kirkup et al. 2000, p.93). This section explores literature on cyborg feminism, posthumanism and analyses of historical iterations of the cinematic female cyborg.

Melzer (2006) discusses the value of the science fiction genre and its narratives to the discipline of feminist studies. This research agrees with her consideration that the relationship between

feminist studies and science fiction is a dialogic one, where both areas conceptualise issues of difference, globalisation and technoscience (Melzer 2006, p.4). Melzer (2006) extrapolates definitions of “difference” in her work while cognisant of third wave feminist concerns. While she does not specifically mention intersectionality, she believes that “woman” as a category needs to be deconstructed from its binary definition: as defined in relation to “man”.

Melzer (2006) discusses the effects that postcolonial and poststructuralist theories have had on feminist discourse and the complexities around contemporary identity politics. She considers science fiction as a site which engages with both poststructuralism and postcolonial theories in its “narrative exploration of subjectivity”. She recognises how:

Science fiction critically explores the dimensions and implications of the two concepts of difference and contributes to the deconstruction of difference as ‘other’ to a stable identity by challenging boundaries between categories in which the separation of ‘self’ and ‘other’ rely. (Melzer 2006, p.18)

Of particular relevance to this research, specifically to the sections relating to female android and AI figures in contemporary science fiction cinema, is Melzer’s analysis of the “female cyborg”. She considers the female cyborg to be a metaphor that has emerged from the biotechnologies, capitalism and boundary dissolutions (Melzer 2006, p.8). Building upon Haraway’s definition of “technoscience” as the interrelations of capitalism, science and technology, Melzer (2006, p.21) argues that “the appropriation of technology developed within a patriarchal context becomes an act of resistance, and the female cyborg becomes a metaphor for a feminist identity with agency”. This speaks to the potential that female cinematic cyborgs possess, and this mode of analysis is appealing, considering the intersectional perspective taken during this research.

Melzer's theorisations of the female cyborg are utilised in Chapter Seven, which analyses female android and AI figures in contemporary science fiction cinema. Melzer (2006, p.24) applies cyborg feminism throughout her work, arguing that the combination of woman and technology in the cyborg figure may productively undermine power relations based on the dualistic nature of western thought:

The cyborg is conceptualised in science fiction: especially in feminist science fiction, it critically revisits the ideological opposition of human/machine, claiming a kinship that undermines Western dualistic power relations...The most basic dualism of Western thought, reason/nature, which historically has paired women with nature *and* with machines, has been criticised in numerous feminist work. This seeming contradiction is derived from the claim that both machines and nature are unable to reason, an inability also ascribed to women.

Drawing on cyborg feminism, she argues that it is in this breakdown of boundaries made possible by technology that enables the possibility of thinking and acting "beyond Western dualistic reasoning – including binary gender categories" (Melzer 2006, p.25).

On the contradictory and unresolved nature of the female cyborg figure as a literal figure in science fiction narratives Melzer (2006, p.1) argues: "within science fiction the controversial female cyborg challenges conventional ideas of gender, race and nation, often at the same time as she reinforces them". She acknowledges the limitations of Western cinematic narratives when it comes to representing such a figure. She argues that science fiction narratives tend to emphasise issues of otherness through race and class rather than work to transcend them:

Even though science fiction since the 1960s has increasingly engaged with issues of race and class many narratives insist on employing non-Western cultures as representing the ultimate 'other'. This practise perpetuates existing racist ideologies at the same time as it makes them invisible. (Melzer 2006, p.6)

This contradictory nature of the female cyborg is something explored in Chapter Seven. While, as a character she sometimes possesses agency, ultimately, she appears to uphold traditional

binary dualisms: her hyper-femininity often in contrast with more complicated representations of masculinity or even androgyny in some cases, *Blade Runner 2049*. Melzer (2006, p.110) argues this point further in relation to female representation in science fiction cinema:

Representations of women, together with technology's manifestations, incorporate displaced (patriarchal) cultural anxieties around issues of subjectivity, control and self-determinism—they represent the ultimate 'other', which simultaneously repulses and sparks desire of control.

This idea is very much present in a lot of the cyborg narratives with the theme of control over these female cyborg bodies emerging in these texts. Through her arguments with regard to the depiction of the other in the science fiction film, Melzer (2006) hints at the emerging theme of binary philosophical dualisms. This is a subject that Holland (1995) discusses in relation to the cyborg cinema of the 1990s. She considers cyborg cinema as a commenting on social ideologies regarding identity:

An implication of the cyborg film is that being human is anything but 'simply' a matter of appearance. In most cases a 'genuine' human mind is identified as the essential element of a human person. (Holland 1995, p.160)

Holland (1995) thus regards cyborg cinema as reinforcing traditional dualisms and as a result, serving to uphold patriarchal ideologies. The idea of stark binaries being utilised in the representation of cyborg characters is expanded on in Chapter Seven. Holland's (1995) identification of a "genuine human mind" as the essential element of a human is a trope often used to mark certain cyborg characters.

This point is also reflected in Balsamo's (1996) work on posthumanism and the female cyborg figure in particular. Balsamo (1996, p.32) recognises the potential that the cyborg character represents, in terms of the possibility of transcending traditional boundaries: "cyborg identity is predicated on transgressed boundaries". Drawing on posthuman and postmodern

theorisations Balsamo (1996, pp.29-30) argues that the status of the female body has not changed in the 1990s:

The female body hasn't been transformed at all, it is still constructed as the message-bearing and silent form of the unruly body, produced through the formation of the cultural imaginary...The female body continues to function as the sign of a gendered body opposed to a nonmarked (human) body that is said to be *now* (in late capitalism) subjugated to discursive systems of power and knowledge...female bodies continue to mark gender.

Here Balsamo (1996) refers to the disparate ways in which the male and female bodies are represented in media. She considers the sustained gendered portrayal of women as a response to a patriarchal male gender identity crisis. This idea is further explored in Chapter Seven, where it is posited that the representation of female cyborgs in the corpus of films is hyper-sexualised and hyper-femininised, marking them as 'other' to the human characters. Kirkup et al. (2000, p.4) also consider the female cyborg as a site that highlights the constructed nature of gender:

The deep construction of gender through the casing of male and female into oppositional and hierarchal categories in which the "female" is always the inferior is evident in many cultures but is especially strong in technoscientific culture.

Science fiction films are cultural sites where issues in relation to gender and science are represented: "the conceptual interrelationship between technoscience and gender is a defining representational characteristic of science fiction film texts" (Kirkup et al. 2000, p.90). Penley (1991) similarly considers science fiction cinematic texts as sites on which issues of difference are examined. Doane (1990, p.163) also identifies the tendency of science fiction cinematic narratives to uphold "conventional understandings of the feminine". These theorists identify this recurrent theme within the genre, and this theme has been found in the corpus of films of concern here, in particular in relation to the female cyborg characters who exist often as objectified tools, to displace any anxiety about changing notions of gender.

Nishime (2005), in a similar vein, argues that contemporary mixed-race representations of cinematic cyborgs displace issues of difference onto the cyborg characters. She considers there to be three distinct categories of cinematic cyborgs: “bad cyborgs, good cyborgs and mulatto cyborgs”:

The bad cyborg plays on xenophobic fears of mechanical domination, inviting the audience to recoil from the bodily invasion of machine into man...The films that feature good cyborgs radically destabilize the human/machine dichotomy. Their liberal humanist take on the cyborg presumes a self that is beyond the body...the mulatto cyborg, like the good cyborg, dismantles the boundaries between the organic and the inorganic. (Nishime 2005, p.37)

She reads cinematic cyborg narratives (e.g. *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982)) as allegorical tales of mixed-race identities. She argues that filmic cyborg characters are often a “parallel construction of mixed-race representations” (Nishime 2005, p.47). Contrary to Nishime (2005) who argues that the cyborg represents racial anxieties, Tomas (2000, p.21) consider the cyborg as a site of capitalist, technological anxiety existing within: “hostile, dystopic worlds governed by various kinds of renegade military/industrial or corporate activity”. Considering this debate, and the poststructuralist approach taken in analysis, these debates need to be considered when analysing the films at an individual level. Social and cultural anxieties are at play in the corpus of films, and the decade in which these were produced included prominent movements like Black Lives Matter, exposing racial inequalities. In America, where the majority of these films were produced, racist profiling and the killing of unarmed black men by the police was highlighted in these movements, which could be, in Tomas’s (2000) terms considered: “renegade military activity”. It seems these contemporary examples of cyborg narratives could potentially represent both Nishime (2005) and Tomas’s (2000) perspectives, issues of race alongside anxieties regarding military/industry and/or corporate activity.

Another area of concern to theorists with regard to cyborgs is that of the eroticisation of their technologically inscribed bodies. Scholars who investigate the eroticisation of cyborg characters include: Telotte (1990), Springer (1996), Cornea (2007), Melzer (2006), and Soukup (2009). Telotte (1990, pp.50-51) analyses the eroticisation of technology through the representation of a female cyborg in *Metropolis* (Lang 1927): “it describes the creation of the robot Maria, an image of the entwining of the natural and the mechanical and the embodiment of seduction in this film”. Springer (1996, p.1) defines techno-eroticism as “the intersection of technology and eroticism”. Cornea (2007, p.166) furthers this idea by arguing that female cyborg characters are more likely to be eroticised than male ones:

Cyber-thrillers commonly sport an array of cyborgian characterisations, the heroic qualities of the male heroes become more closely associated with the mind, whereas the skills associated with our female heroes remain more firmly located in their bodies.

Melzer (2006, p.119-120) in her analysis of the othering of female cyborgs argues that often this othering tends to highlight the female cyborg’s sexuality: “Her otherness enhances her sexual difference, as it does for other female cyborgs whose relationship with technology or alien contact lets their dangerous female sexuality go rampant”. Soukup (2009) argues that techno-scopophilia works to reinforce the eroticisation of technology by inscribing female characters with technological elements. These theorists identify this theme of the hyper-sexualisation of these characters and this is a prominent theme in contemporary examples of these figures. The contemporary female cyborg is often aligned with sexuality and in this way “located in their bodies” (Cornea 2007) whereas male cyborgs often explore more existential themes. As demonstrated in Chapter Seven also the pattern of eroticising these technologically inscribed female cyborgs is present in the corpus of films also (Soukup 2009). This is an area that does not appear to have changed.

The literature which has been reviewed in this section informs the analyses conducted in Chapter Seven and is expanded on there.

2.4. Racial Otherness in the Science Fiction Genre

The corpus of films of concern to this research is lacking in racial diversity as only two female protagonists out of thirty-three within it are women of colour. Women of colour are marginalised within the science fiction genre and indeed within most genres. They appear as background actors, or, when placed at the forefront of the action, their blackness tends to be disguised or covered.⁶ The constant hiding of blackness on-screen demonstrates the homogenous nature of film casting and reinforces the notion that there is no place on-screen for a person of colour. It is necessary to discuss the work of film theorists who are concerned with issues of race and gender in order to understand the lack of racial diversity within contemporary science fiction cinema. Theorists who focus on race and gender include hooks (1996), and Mafe (2018). Other theorists explore the idea of racial issues being implicitly present in science fiction narratives (Lavender 2011; Nama 2008; 2014).

hooks (1996) analyses similar issues of race and gender in the context of American cinema. Centrally concerned with the popular discourses created by representations of race, sex, and class, hooks (1996) investigates the dialogues surrounding these representations to discover

⁶ Zoe Saldana plays Gomorrah in the *Guardian of the Galaxy* (Gunn 2014 and 2017) franchise. Her character is a green alien and as such her blackness is not displayed. Saldana also played Neytiri in *Avatar* (Cameron 2009) where she appeared as a blue CGI alien. Again, her blackness is not on display. Lupita Nyong'o plays Maz Kanata, who is an orange CGI character, in the *Star Wars* (Abrams and Johnson 2015 – 2019) franchise.

whether they reinforce notions of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” or offer alternatives. Her work is drawn upon in detail in Chapter Seven when discussing racial diversity in contemporary cyborg cinema and issues of the raced voice in cinema.

Issues of race more broadly are analysed by Warner (2017). She argues that attempts at diversity have become somewhat artificial. She considers the proliferation of remakes of white narratives that feature black characters to be “plastic”. Her work argues for the need to centralise black voices in the roles of writing, directing etc. in order for authentic black narratives to be created and disseminated. It echoes claims from other theorists (Loreck 2016; Lewis 2017) that the creation of more positive representations of women on-screen requires women to be involved in all areas of production. These theorisations are considered in Chapter Eight which seeks to analyse representations of female protagonists that could be considered more progressive, and it is investigated whether women in key creative roles have an effect on this.

Looking at the issue of race specifically in the science fiction genre provides some interesting insights. Mafe (2018) discusses the specific issue of race in what she terms “the speculative genres”: science fiction and fantasy. She identifies a clear lack of black women on-screen within these genres. Mafe (2018) interrogates the issues of Eurocentrism and phallocentrism in cinema and television, calling for greater inclusion and diversity on-screen. This echoes the initial impetus for this research, concerned with the lack of female protagonists more generally in cinema. Considering how the vast majority of the female protagonists in the corpus of films of concern are white women, with only two being mixed-race females, highlights this issue.

Race and science fiction are explored by Lavender (2011) drawing on what he believes are racialised structures in American culture. He argues that attitudes towards race in American culture in turn shape science fiction narratives. Though he briefly discusses some science fiction film and television, his work focuses mainly on literature and thus is not immediately relevant to the textual analysis conducted in this thesis. Of more relevance to this research is Nama (2008) who specifically discusses science fiction film and race. In a similar manner to Nishime (2005), discussed in section 2.3.3. in terms of cyborg cinema, Nama (2008, p.2) considers racial issues to be implicitly present in contemporary science fiction cinema:

In spite of the overt omission of black representation and racial issues in SF cinema, I have found that both are present in numerous SF films. Albeit implicit—as structured absence, repressed or symbolic—blackness and race are often present in SF films as narrative subtext or implicit allegorical subject.

This echoes the work of cultural theorists who consider film texts as reflective of contemporary societal anxieties. Kuhn (1990) in particular argues that science fiction is the most competent genre at doing so. This echoes the sentiment in the above section regarding contemporary racial tensions, in particular in American society, that are possibly be at play in the corpus of films of concern, reflecting the Black Lives Matter movement and the focus on racial inequality in this decade.

The scholars discussed thus far have focused on black representation as their main subject of interrogation. It is also necessary to consult theorists who have dealt with Asian representation. While one female protagonist in the corpus of films is black, Asian females remain completely marginalised within the genre.⁷ Through a textual analysis of three science fiction films from

⁷ The UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report 2020 demonstrated that Asian representation in the top grossing theatrical films of 2019 was a mere 5% while black representation was 15.7%. White representation was 67.3%.

2012 to 2015, Nishime (2017) argues that dominant Hollywood narratives tend to “whitewash” Asian characters. She regards this as a response to anxieties relating to globalization and labour migration. Roh et al. (2015, p.2) echo Nishime’s contention arguing that science fiction “trac(es) persisting anxieties over the past three decades of a China-dominated future”. They describe “techno-Orientalism” as “the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo-or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse” (ibid.). The amount of literature on Asian representations in science fiction cinema is notably less expansive than the literature on black representation. This perhaps reflects the statistics on the stark lack of Asian characters across cinema more broadly.

The theorists discussed in this section have demonstrated the necessity for a critical race perspective to be taken when conducting textual analysis. The contention that race is sometimes implicitly present in science fiction texts (Nama 2008; Lavender 2011) is considered during discourse analysis. The possibility that these issues present themselves implicitly within the corpus of films concerned is also taken into consideration.

2.5. Shifting Representations of Women on-screen in Twenty-First Century Cinema

This section reviews a variety of academic material that considers representations of women on-screen as having shifted in the twenty-first century. Scholarly works on European and independent cinema are included in this section as they bolster the argument that Hollywood films tend to sustain patriarchal norms. A marked shift has occurred in European and independent cinema with an increased emphasis on female writers, directors and female led

narratives (Simone 2019). However, this shift is not reflected in mainstream cinema which includes the majority of films in the corpus of concern here as they can be classified as big budget global productions.⁸

One scholar that has identified a shift in the representations of women on-screen in European Holocaust cinema is Lewis (2017). Lewis recognises an increase in the number of female protagonists over the last few decades. She argues that this change, in part, reflects the changing social trends and change in attitudes regarding women that occurred over this period, including second wave feminism and the emergence of female directors and writers:

The films that achieve this idea of giving women a voice, not only cast women in the protagonist roles, but offer a radically different portrayal in terms of visual point of view, narrative voiceover, and the prioritisation of a female perspective on events. (Lewis 2017, p.3)

This argument is relevant to this research where films with female protagonists are the focus. The corpus of films here reflects this trend, with the films in the second-half of the decade featuring an increase of female protagonists in line with more women in key creative roles. It is necessary to read these films and consider, through textual analysis, whether these representations can be read as more progressive.

In the same vein as Lewis (2017), Waters (2016) argues that second wave feminism has been responsible for a shifting of representations of women in visual culture. Moreover, Loreck

⁸ Over the course of the current decade the number of female protagonists in popular science fiction cinema has fluctuated greatly. 2019 saw the most female led films of the decade with 36% of all science fiction films featuring a female protagonist. 2011 was the lowest with 0%. The period 2013 (12%) to 2016 (33%) saw a slight increase each year, however this began to decrease from 2016 to 2018 (17%)- Data taken from appendix A.

(2016, p.2) argues that independent films featuring violent women ask questions that Hollywood films fail to ask:

the fascination expressed in films like *Antichrist*, *Trouble Every Day*, *Baise-moi*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Monster* and *The Reader* suggests that the violent woman's implications for cultural ideas about femininity remain unresolved. Moreover, these films do not hail from the same filmic milieu as the exploitation, action and horror genres that commonly host the violent woman.

This is an interesting perspective and worth considering whether representation of violent women in the corpus of films of concern to this research could be in any way considered in Loreck's (2016) more transgressive terms. Loreck (2016, p.3) argues that Hollywood films sustain patriarchal ideals regarding femininity as inherently passive:

Films about female violence emerge in a cultural environment that is ambivalent regarding women's propensity for aggressive behaviour...the view that women are less inclined to violence than men remains culturally entrenched.

This, certainly, is a regressive trend, and aligning femininity with passivity is stereotypical and a trend that is sometimes present in the corpus of films of concern here, expanded on in Chapter Five. Contrastingly, Minowa et al. (2014) acknowledge that the violent woman has been present in media for decades. Through an analysis of art, advertising and film they argue that through a façade of empowerment, images of violent women in fact, perpetuate their objectification: "the male gaze inherent in current media imagery which, on the face of it, is about discourses of female empowerment and agency" (Minowa et al. 2014, p.219). They argue that through the principles of third wave feminism women become complicit in their own objectification and subjugation. This is quite a simplistic argument, without consideration for the manner in which these representations are read by female audiences. This, surely, would have more impact on whether they are empowering images or merely objectified regressive images.

Similarly, Funnell (2019) regards shifts in women's representations as reflecting feminist principles of the time in which they were produced. She traces the shifting representations of women as Bond villains throughout the decades since Bond's first cinematic appearance in *Dr No* (Young 1962). She argues that feminist discourses have influenced the representations of the female Bond villains throughout the various decades. As Funnell acknowledges, the most recent Bond films, from this decade, *Casino Royale* (Campbell 2006), *Quantum of Solace* (Forster 2008), *Skyfall* (Mendes 2012) and *Spectre* (2015), are lacking in female villain characters. This lack possibly represents a shift towards more passive representations of women in cinema more generally and upholds Loreck's (2016) contention that Hollywood cinema is reluctant to question or interrogate representations of violent women on a deeper level. Her insights are relevant to Chapter Five which considers violent female antagonists in the corpus of films of concern to the research but also highlights how rare these characters are within the genre.

While not as explicitly "antagonistic" as female villains it is worth considering representations of teenage femme fatales in contemporary cinema, considering the importance place on young adult protagonists in Chapter Eight. Farrimond (2016, p.78) recognises a shift in teenage femme fatale films and considers the fascination with these characters as having grown exponentially in the 1990s and 2000s, reflecting a growing interest in understanding teenage girls:

the media's growing interest in girls and girlhood...out of which context the teenage femme fatale emerges as a locus for debates about the ways in which teenage girls are understood by, and represented in, Western popular culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

This is an interesting insight and given the recognition by this research that these characters are prominent in the science fiction genre, a particularly relevant argument. Farrimond (2011, p.79) argues that the sexualisation of these teenage characters is troubling and prioritises issues of sexuality over the girls' safety:

the combination of sexuality, criminality, and youthful femininity is interpreted in a way that emphasizes the teenage girl's seductive danger, while playing down any concern for her personal wellbeing.

This research suggests this trend has either shifted in the second decade of the twenty-first century or that it has simply never been an issue within science fiction cinema specifically, with the characters analysed here possessing the possibility of being read as more empowering and progressive.

However, such emphasis on sexuality was traditionally more prominent in adult representations with Purse (2016) recognising a shift in the representation of female action heroes since the new millennium. She considers the grace and sexualisation of the most prominent female characters as reflective of dominant discourses on femininity: "attributes such as grace and fluidity are often associated with femininity in dominant discourses about gender" (Purse 2016, p.186). Furthermore, she argues that these representations exist alongside a dichotomous emerging new trend with regard to female protagonists:

this is a contemporary moment in which conflicting representational impulses are at work. Set in opposition to dominant, 'sanctioned' depictions of active femininity...are alternative images of the active woman that are developed, primarily, within films that hover on the margins of the mainstream. (Purse 2016, p.190)

The dichotomous representations that Purse (2016) references here are the opposing portrayals of female action heroines as either hyper-feminine or as "angry transgressors" unmarked by

stereotypical femininity. Lavin (2010, p.3), in a similar vein to Purse, recognises an emerging trend in terms of media discourses on violent women:

There's been a cultural turn since the 1990s: feminine aggression is now often celebrated. In cultural manifestations ranging from indie grrl rock to consumerist Spice Girl girl culture, from video-game action heroines to mainstream sports movies, from street activism to national political figures, there exists for the first time in the nation's history, albeit unevenly, a growing, heavily viewed array of positive representations of aggressive women.

Contrastingly, Meyer (2009), in an analysis of audience reception of female violence argues that audiences tend to praise female characters for their stereotypical feminine traits while condemning them for using violence. Various reviews are integrated into the analysis here to bolster the understanding of the contemporary representations of female protagonists; however, Meyer's (2009) sentiment does not emerge in these reviews, with the protagonists celebrated and embraced for their transgressive traits.

The theorists discussed in this section all recognise a shift in the cinematic representation of women since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This thesis questions whether this shift in representations is sustained in the decade under investigation.

What emerges from the scholarly texts reviewed in this section is that marked changes have occurred in recent European and independent cinema, while minor changes seem to have occurred in recent Hollywood films. The exceptions to this rule appear to be Hollywood texts featuring young adult protagonists. These films featuring younger protagonists consistently offer more progressive representations, a point expanded on in the proceeding section, 2.6., discussing the relevant texts.

2.6. Gendered Perspectives on the Chosen Corpus of Films

This section reviews literature and analyses of the specific filmic texts that this research is concerned with. It is important to note that, due to the recent release date of the films included in the corpus of this thesis (2010-2019), there are a limited number of peer-reviewed sources available on the topic.

Oliver (2016) maps a disturbing trend in the media of the proliferation of “creepshots” of women. This is a term used for pictures of women (usually unconscious) taken without their knowledge (Oliver 2016, p.5). She posits that beautiful women are utilised as trophies in the media, in film, in high-end fashion shoots and even in fraternities in America where pledges seeking to join fraternities are tasked with retrieving “creepshots” (ibid.). Oliver (2016, p.5) draws a link between the contemporary proliferation of these images in the media and campus rapes where girls are often unconscious:

Life imitates art, and vice versa. Thus, art often revolves around the objectification and assault of girls and women. Unfortunately, increasingly, life imitates pornography, particularly creepshot photographs of unsuspecting girls and women.

Oliver maps out a multitude of disturbing cases of the rape of women who were drugged or unconscious. She finds that these cases are more common on college campuses where “rape myths” – the idea that women are “asking for it” – are more prevalent than in the general population (Oliver 2016, p.6). Oliver links this social trend of violence towards young women with the representation of Katniss, the protagonist of *The Hunger Games* (Ross and Lawrence 2012-2015) trilogy:

Katniss’s adolescence is a spectacle displayed for the entertainment of the corrupt Capitol city. Katniss is a symbol for coming-of-age in a violent world recorded as entertainment, a world where the assault of girls and young women is taken for granted. Although Katniss

isn't sexually assaulted per se—unlike her filmic sister Beatrice “Tris” Prior (Shailene Woodley) in the Young Adult blockbuster *Divergent* (2014)—she is repeatedly abused, even by her boyfriend, who at one point tries to choke her. (Oliver 2016, p.15)

Oliver (2016, p.18) aims to explain these representations of women as both hunted and hunter concluding that:

images of teenage girls being repeatedly beaten and battered on-screen normalizes violence toward girls and women, including sexual violence. While these films feature tough girls who can fight off their attackers and protect themselves, they also contribute to our acceptance of assault.

The Hunger Games (Ross and Lawrence 2012-2015) and *Divergent* (Burger and Schwentke 2014-2016) series are included in the corpus of films analysed during the course of this research. The link, identified by Oliver (2016), between the representations of these female protagonists and the larger societal issue of sexual violence against young women is considered when analysing these series.

In a similar vein Karlyn (2018) identifies a link between the representations in *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017) and social issues of the time including the #MeToo social justice movement. She draws a comparison between the character Wonder Woman and Hillary Clinton, who lost in the 2016 American presidential election. Karlyn (2018) is particularly interested in women's responses to both the film text *Wonder Woman* and the defeat of Hillary Clinton. She focuses on the emotion felt by so many women on seeing representations of “unruly women” in the media and argues that women negotiated their own meanings from these images: “a woman who embraces and recodes them (misogynistic tropes) can tap into their potential to disrupt the existing social order”. Karlyn (2018, para. 5), further states that Wonder Woman became a figure of hope globally in 2017, in part as a result of her being the first female hero to be directed by a woman. She also argues that the male gaze was reverse engineered by Jenkins,

through the use of shot compositions and angles which privileged Wonder Woman's perspective. Reviews of the film considered during analysis also support Karlyn's (2018) argument, celebrating this female character as an empowering and progressive symbol. This argument is expanded on in Chapter Four.

In the same vein as Karlyn (2018), Blodgett and Salter (2018) focus on the audience reception of another high profile all-female film: *Ghostbusters* (Feig 2016). They examine the consequences of the vitriol directed at the announcement of a reboot of the franchise with an all-female cast. Drawing on a similar cultural analysis to that of Karlyn (2018), Blodgett and Salter (2018) attribute some of the hatred expressed towards *Ghostbusters* to the fact that its release coincided with the 2016 US presidential election. This is a clear example of Kuhn's (1990) description of a film's "cultural instrumentality", discussed above:

Ghostbusters achieved far greater cultural significance thanks to the timing of its release. The promotion and release cycle of *Ghostbusters* coincided with the 2016 election primary season, where an intense ideological battle grounded in race and gender was playing out and receiving international attention. This race featured two major battles of the sexes at both the primary and federal levels. (Blodgett and Salter 2018, p.134)

In particular Blodgett and Salter (2018) discuss the racist abuse directed at Leslie Jones, the only black cast member. As a result of their choosing to focus on social media and audience responses to *Ghostbusters* the authors neglect to fully analyse the representations present in the film, failing to acknowledge that Jones' character is presented as working class, the only character in the film without a college education. Her portrayal as the only Black character could be characterised as an example of what hooks terms "the transgressive imagery of the non-white 'other'" (hooks 1996, p.8). Jones's character is furthered "othered" on-screen by her career which is in stark contrast to the other three scientist characters who are also Caucasian.

This positions her in an oppositional role to the three scientists and works to separate the characters.

In addition to their in-depth analysis of *Ghostbusters* Blodgett and Salter (2018) also refer to the similar public anger directed towards *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Abrams 2015) when it was announced that a female protagonist would lead this rebooted series. They identify a trend within certain male audiences of films being rejected before release, based purely on the sex of the protagonist. Blodgett and Slater's (2018) article is considered when conducting textual analysis and is also drawn upon in the concluding chapter to this thesis. These phenomena, when taken into consideration alongside Karlyn's (2018) description of the audience reception of *Wonder Woman*, may be attributed to masculine anxiety in the current decade, considering the film reviews of these texts will assist in determining this theory.

Mayer (2017) investigates feminist science fiction films and presents a relevant and timely analysis of *Arrival* (Villeneuve 2016). Her analysis of the film's female protagonist Dr Banks concurs with a critical analysis conducted for this research which finds that Dr Banks is primarily positioned as a mother. Mayer (2017, p.32) argues that she is strongly defined by her biological function:

Louise is defined by maternity and the loss of a child as much as by her scientific and communications ability as a professor of languages. *Arrival* opens with Louise's voice-over relaying the birth, growth, and teenage death from cancer of her daughter Hannah, a complete "women's film" packed into the pre-credits of a genre blockbuster.

Importantly, Mayer (2017, p.32) discusses her concern regarding why a genre, science fiction, in which a feminist writer, Mary Shelley, created two of the most popular tropes: the monster/scientist in *Frankenstein* (Shelley 1818) and the "last man" dystopia (Shelley 1826),

still exhibits a lack of female protagonists. This concern echoes Lefanu's (1988) observation that women writers (e.g. C.L. Moore and Leigh Brackett who assumed gender neutral names) have contributed to the science fiction genre since the 1930s and 1940s when science fiction magazines were popular. Lefanu (1988, p.2) argues that to label science fiction as a "male territory" is unfair as:

It would be simplistic to assume that a lack of female characters in the science fiction of the time automatically excluded a female readership (just as the obverse, that female characters guarantee women's interest, is patently untrue).

These concerns with regard to women's contributions to science fiction being ignored or sidelined are drawn upon when discussing larger trends with regard to female representation within the science fiction genre.

Mayer (2017, p.33) references the 1990s as an era where "feminist genre films—inspired by Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" and riffing on emergent feminist cyberpunk—were...diverse". She suggests that *Arrival* while initially appearing to echo sentiments of this feminist era of science fiction films, in actuality, is often regressive in its themes. Mayer's (2017) analysis assists in bolstering arguments which are presented in Chapter Four relating to certain regressive connotations present in *Arrival*.

Numerous scholars have analysed *Ex Machina* (Garland 2014) and their work is drawn on in Chapter Seven which analyses contemporary iterations of the cinematic female cyborg. These scholars include Yeeh (2017), Nishime (2017), Di Minico (2017), and Constable (2018). Nishime's (2017) work examines *Ex Machina* as a response to the growing anxieties created by globalisation. She regards the Asian character, Kyoko, in the narrative as being a "sacrificial

lamb” (Nishime 2017, p.35). Nishime (ibid.) considers the white female character Ava’s freedom as being dependent on the destruction of Kyoko: “we see the dependency of white female empowerment on the disposition of Asian bodies”. This is something that this research considers accurate and relevant to the reading of this text and is expanded on in Chapter Seven in detail.

Yeeh (2017) takes a different approach in her analysis, interrogating *Ex Machina* from a gendered perspective. Yeeh (2017) also analyses *Her* (Jonze 2013), another cyborg text that is dealt with in Chapter Seven. She considers the sexualisation of female cyborgs on-screen as reflective of “societal anxieties surrounding male control over female agency” (Yeeh 2017, p.85). Yeeh (2017) also builds on Soukup’s (2009) concept of techno-scopophilia, discussed in section 2.3.3., to argue that contemporary representations of mechanical women have become a fetish.

Both Di Minico (2017) and Constable (2018) regard the constructed nature of gender as being a key theme of *Ex Machina*. This informs one of the key findings of Chapter Seven, which argues that the highlighting of the construction of gender is a trend that is occurring throughout contemporary cyborg cinema. Constable (2018, p.292) argues that the power dynamic between the three main characters in the *Ex Machina* is constantly in flux:

The power dynamics of the two-hander are thus complicated by the hierarchy of the trio. Like the geography of the room, the relations between the protagonists constantly shift. Doubling conveys both a plurality of incompatible roles and incommensurable narratives, raising the issue of deception and trustworthiness at the level of the characters themselves.

This point is contested in Chapter Seven, where it is argued that it is very clear from the opening scene of the film onwards who has power and is in control. The narrative climaxes with the power shifting once. The oppressed Ava becomes the oppressor.

Di Minico (2017) places more emphasis on the treatment of Kyoko, the secondary female cyborg character in the narrative, than Constable (2018). This is a pertinent prism from which to read the text as Kyoko's programmed silence and use as a literal slave (both sexually and domestically) is extremely troublesome. Di Minico (2017) also focuses on Ava's tendency to rely on stereotypically feminine traits in order to manipulate Caleb, something that is examined in detail in Chapter Seven.

In a similar manner to the theorists that focus on race in *Ex Machina*, Loreck (2018) examines *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders 2016), questioning the implications of the casting of Scarlett Johansson in the role of Major. She considers Johansson's casting as racially insensitive, with a white woman playing an Asian teenager. This sparked public debate at the time and considering the lack of racial diversity more broadly in the genre it is problematic. There are no Asian female protagonists in this corpus of films, and Asian's remain underrepresented on-screen. Furthermore, as expanded on in Chapter Seven, the connotations of an Asian brain being transplanted into a Caucasian body are troubling, and this could be read as a regressive, oppressive move.

Similarly, a special edition of the *Science Fiction Film and Television* journal published in 2018, focused on various performances by Scarlett Johansson within the science fiction genre. Three articles in particular are utilised in this research as they focus on texts that are included in the relevant corpus of films: *Lucy*, *Ghost in the Shell* and *Her*. Matthews (2018) and Stevens (2018) argue that representations of femininity within these texts ultimately underpin traditional stereotypical notions of gender difference. They regard the texts as problematic,

with the posthuman female characters usually disappearing, resulting in a return to patriarchal hierarchies. Shetley (2018), in contrast, regards the disembodied voice of Johansson in *Her* as a progressive choice, moving her character outside the purview of the “male gaze”. These contrasting readings are utilised in particular in Chapter Eight which focuses on cyborg characters.

Mitchell and Snyder (2019) examine *The Shape of Water* (del Toro 2017) through a prism of “narrative oppositionality” so as to describe how Elisa, the female protagonist, is given agency in the text.⁹ They build on recent Film Studies analyses to argue that voice-overs can “externalize the otherwise suppressed interiority of voiceless subjects” (Mitchell and Snyder 2019, p.151). They take issue with key scenes in the film which could be read as “a metaphor for women’s powerlessness under patriarchy” (ibid.). These scenes feature an emphasis on Elisa’s silence while simultaneously objectifying her. They argue that her ability to later sign “fuck you” to a colonel signifies her ability to adopt oppositional and alternative modes of communication.

Mitchell and Snyder (2019) further argue that the next-door neighbour character Giles’s ability to communicate with Elisa through sign language (he also provides the voice-over) serves to position him as translator. They argue that the relationship between the two is cognisant of intersectional concerns and represents an alternative representation to “the violence of able-bodied heteronormativity” (Mitchell and Snyder 2019, p.153). Their analysis fails to consider

⁹ They draw on the work of Ross Chambers (1991), who posits that socially imposed voicelessness offers an opportunity for alternative voicings of marginalised experience to work to achieve “shifts in [the domain of] desire”. This process may work to encourage investment in devalued lives (Mitchell and Snyder 2019, p.151).

this relationship from a gendered perspective: the powerful male communicating on behalf of the mute female. The fact that Giles delivers the voice-overs at the start and end of the film also reveals an inherent lack of progressivity in terms of gender.

Mitchell and Snyder (2019) also analyse the various boundary transgressions that occur in the text. They only dedicate one paragraph to this interesting subject and ignore Creed's (1993) theorisation of the monstrous womb and the manner in which it is represented in images of animal/human boundary transgressions. Thus, they once again fail to consider the gendered consequences of the representations present in *The Shape of Water*.

Broader theorisations that relate to the corpus of films in this research include discourses on superhero films, a genre that has gained a massive global following.¹⁰ Some of these texts are analysed in the finding's chapters of this thesis. Gray and Kaklamanidou (2011, p.1) attempt to uncover the reason behind this genre's success:

There are many potential theories as to why these films have become and remained so popular over the last decade, from desperate attempts for escape to an honest yearning for real- life heroes. One such theory is that the notion of the word 'hero' has evolved since the attacks of 9/11 and their subsequent fallout.

They consider superhero narratives as cathartic, hopeful texts that appease global audiences' growing anxieties in the new millennium:

Many superheroes serve as a hope- inspiring figure, an image of someone (like Batman) who can pull the endangered individual from the dark abyss. Superhero films promote the ideas of peace, safety and freedom and seek to restore the planet to a nostalgic harmony. (Gray and Kaklamanidou, 2011, p3)

¹⁰ Three out of the top ten grossing films of all time worldwide are Marvel Cinematic Universe superhero films: *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo Brothers 2019), *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo Brothers 2018), and *The Avengers* (Whedon 2012).

Thus, their readings are in line with Karlyn (2018) who argues that *Wonder Woman* represented hope for women after a period of collective anxiety following the electoral defeat of a potential American female president. This reflects the potential enjoyment and catharsis that can be felt by audiences through these superhero narratives.

Brown (2015) identifies a shifting trend in female teenage filmic narratives. He considers certain representations of these teenage girls to be portrayals of revolutionary figures, arguing that they have more in common with Joan of Arc than with contemporary action heroines:

These young heroines are permitted to be strong, smart, resourceful, and violent in a manner that was unthinkable for teenage girls in the media of past generations, but they also reveal a melding of class-based, anti-authoritarian resistance within a gendered context. The heroines of these tales combine a progressive idea of adolescent girlhood with a cultural critique of patriarchal systems of oppression. (Brown 2015, p.168)

Brown's (2015) insights are applied in Chapters Five and Eight, in textual analysis of the corpus of films with violent teenage heroines: *The Hunger Games* series (Ross and Lawrence 2012-2015), the *Divergent* series (Burger and Schwentke 2014-2016), and *Mortal Engines* (Rivers 2018).

Kirby (2015) interprets *The Hunger Games* as a progressive portrayal of a female protagonist. He reads *The Hunger Games* from a geopolitical standpoint, and as such fails to interrogate the film in terms of film language and to question the representation of Katniss on a deeper level. He utilises broad statements to argue that Katniss is a progressive character without qualifying them or supporting his arguments with evidence: "This progressiveness is demonstrated by the fact that Katniss is rarely defined by her gender and that, in the main, it places no restriction upon her thoughts or actions" (Kirby 2015, p.465).

As the literature reviewed in this section is focused on texts included in the corpus of films of concern to this research, it is of extreme importance. This literature is further considered and referenced when conducting textual analysis in the finding's chapters.

2.7. Conclusion

The literature discussed in this chapter highlights a dearth in academic knowledge in terms of contemporary science fiction cinema and gender. As demonstrated, particularly in section 2.3., there are extant and quite comprehensive theorisations of gender representations in science fiction cinema of the past. The division of section 2.3. into three key subsections has allowed a comprehensive understanding of extant literature on representations of violence, the “monstrous feminine” and cyborg feminism to be obtained. The literature reviewed in this section directly informs and helps to shape the arguments presented in Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven.

As mentioned previously there are only two protagonists in the corpus of films of concern to this research that are women of colour. Section 2.4. highlights the need for issues of diversity to be at the forefront in terms of consideration when analysing filmic texts. The section also outlines some of the ways in which race and gender have previously been discussed in Film Studies. Given the intersectional critical approach taken to this research, this section of literature is directly relevant to considerations of representations of women on screen.

Section 2.5. reviews literature that argues that representations of gender have shifted in the new millennium. It is a central aim of this research to determine whether this is reflected in the

corpus of films of relevance here, and whether contemporary science fiction cinema demonstrates such a shift over the course of the decade, 2010 to 2019. The literature discussed in this section will assist in this endeavour.

Finally, section 2.6. has pointed to a body of literature that deals with a specific series of contemporary science fiction texts of relevance to this research from a gendered perspective. However, overall, this process has shown that is a clear lack of broad and comprehensive analyses of gender and contemporary science fiction cinema. The research reported on in this thesis fills a gap in academic knowledge by presenting a comprehensive analysis of female protagonists in contemporary science fiction cinema.

Drawing on the literature reviewed in this chapter while conducting textual analysis of the corpus of films will assist in addressing the research questions this thesis is concerned with. This literature review has given an overview of the state of knowledge in Feminist Film Studies and focuses specifically on the genre of science fiction cinema. Building upon the tenets of third-wave feminism the critical approach taken when conducted analysis is an intersectional one, concerned with the intersections of woman with other markers of identity, in particular race, sexuality and ethnicity.

Chapter Three – Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This research was driven by a desire to address contemporary representations of women on-screen and to analyse their depictions. Quantitative reporting that highlights the lack of diversity in Hollywood, in particular the unequal distribution of roles between men and women, provided the initial impetus for researching this area. While this quantitative research demonstrates that Hollywood has progress to make in terms of gender and racial diversity, there remains a lack of qualitative interrogation of existing contemporary representations. This dissertation adds a new perspective relating to gender diversity on-screen.

The existing research investigating the lack of diversity on-screen is largely quantitative in its methodologies (Lauzen 2020; UCLA 2019). This research seeks to fill a dearth in this area by investigating gender issues further, from a qualitative perspective. In order to address issues of gender inequality, it is not enough to achieve gender parity in terms of on-screen representations. The representations of women on-screen needs to be analysed and the importance of creating positive progressive representations needs to be addressed.

The main aim of this research is to qualitatively analyse the representation of female protagonists in thirty-one top grossing science fiction films produced worldwide over the course of a decade, from 2010 to 2019. The research began with the hypothesis that although the number of female protagonists may have increased, the dominant meanings behind these representations are misogynistic, clichéd, objectifying and generally regressive. The focus of

the research is to investigate this hypothesis and determine if any progress has been made in recent cinematic representations of women.

This research focuses on the specific decade, 2010 to 2019, ensuring that it is contemporary, relevant and addresses a significant period of time. Furthermore, the focus on a specific category of commercially successful films at a global level ensures that the dataset is culturally far reaching and socially influential. As female representation is the main focus for the study, films featuring female protagonists are analysed. In terms of obtaining a manageable dataset, choosing to focus on one specific genre of cinema, science fiction, condensed the object of the research further.

Science fiction films were chosen, in part, as they present the possibility of representing futuristic, hopeful human evolution. Nama (2009, p.155) argues that:

With their (science fiction films) fantastical plots and far-off worlds, these films have the opportunity to present any kind of character or social system within the confines of their narratives.

Nama's (2009) statement, which he relates to issues of race, is also applicable to issues of gender. Furthermore, it has been theorised that science fiction as a genre, tends to speak to contemporary social and cultural concerns. While discussing science fiction's "cultural instrumentality" Kuhn (1990, p.15) argues that:

It is widely believed that social concerns and trends are reflected in mass media such as film and television, and that popular cultural forms can in consequence be regarded as a gauge of social attitudes and social change.

Likewise, Paz (2020, p.300) regards the genre in a similar manner arguing that science fiction narratives are often parables for the times in which they are produced:

Through the portrayal of future, alien, or alternative civilisations, and by imagining utopian and, more likely, dystopian scenarios, sf films are in fact talking about the present (the time of production of a given film).

Considering the mounting public discourses surrounding gender inequality, especially in Hollywood, with the appearance of social movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp, a specific aim of this research is a desire to discover if contemporary narratives have reflected these movements and potentially offered more progressive representations of women.

This rationale, alongside a personal affection for science fiction, influenced the decision to choose it as the genre to be analysed. A key aim of the research is to determine if any of the decade's social issues are reflected in the body of films concerned.

The literature review chapter of this thesis highlights the dearth in knowledge surrounding the representation of women in science fiction cinema since 2000. Through the prism of Feminist Film Studies, textual analysis of each film in the corpus is conducted. The analyses conducted are cognisant of foundational theorisations in this area. Elements of discourse analysis are woven into analysis, drawing on broader discourses on the representation of women on-screen in order to identify any contemporary social issues or anxieties possibly present in the corpus of films. Various film reviews of certain key texts are also drawn on at times, to consider audience reception of the texts in question.

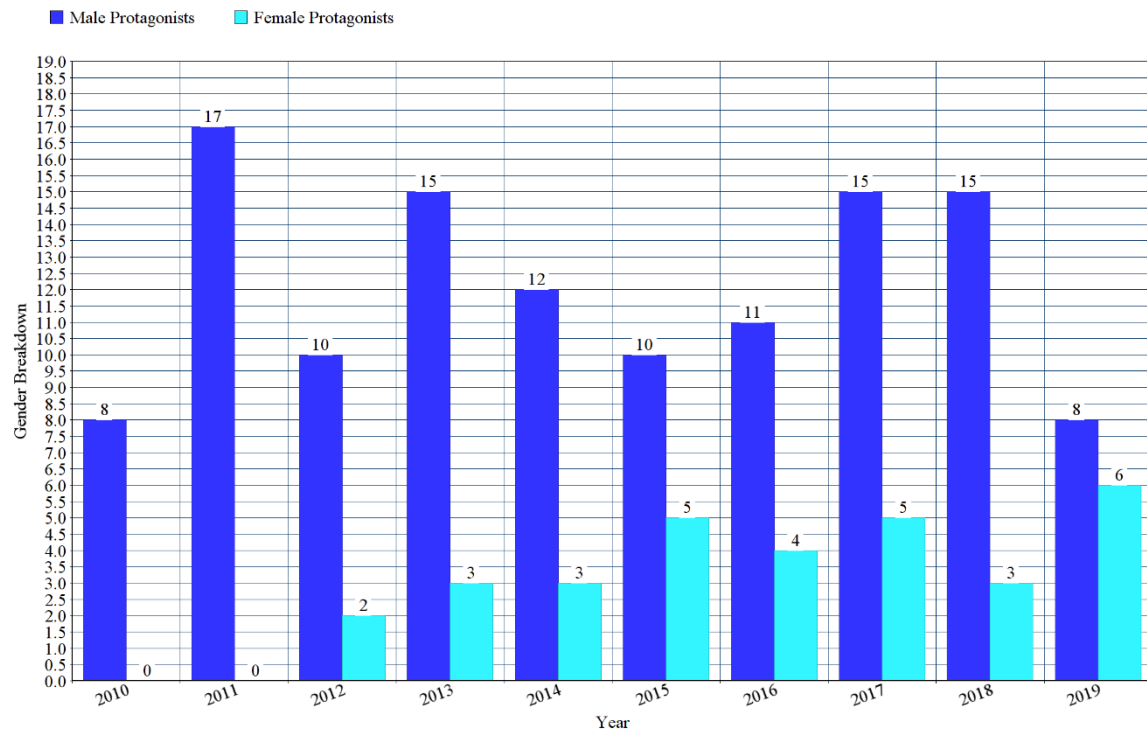
3.2. Refining and Choosing the Dataset

In order to extrapolate a working dataset, each year from 2010 to 2019 was analysed. In order to collect the data, “boxofficemojo.com” was consulted, as a reputable source of box office statistics. This data was refined in three stages:

- (i) Determining the top grossing 100 films worldwide by year.
- (ii) Extrapolating which of the top 100 films could be defined, primarily, as science fiction.
- (iii) From this condensed list of the top grossing science fiction films worldwide, identifying those which featured female protagonists.

The data gathering confirmed that over the course of the decade one hundred and fifty-two films from the top grossing one thousand films could clearly be defined as science fiction. Out of these one hundred and fifty-two films, one hundred and twenty-one featured male protagonists and thirty-one featured female protagonists. This demonstrates a split of eighty per cent of science fiction films featuring male protagonists in comparison to twenty per cent featuring female protagonists. Furthermore, the data gathering process revealed that a mere four of these films were either directed or co-directed by female directors. This represents two per cent of the entire corpus of science fiction films. This refined data is presented in the graph below which clearly highlights the discrepancies in gender representation within the genre over the course of the decade. The data breakdown by gender is clearly described in Appendix A.

Science Fiction Film Protagonists Breakdown by Gender, 2010-2019.



3.2.1. Science Fiction: Defining the Genre

Various theorists argue that science fiction is quite difficult to define: “It is symptomatic of the complexity of science fiction as a generic category that critical discussion of it tends to devote considerable attention to the problem of definition” (Freedman 2000, p.13). In a similar vein, Kuhn (1990, p.1) argues that it is difficult to provide a definition of science fiction, noting the irony of being readily able to recognise the genre without being able to readily define it. As Neale (2000) argues, film genres tend to be multi-generic, in that they usually feature elements from various genres. This issue, coupled with the lack of a clear definition of science fiction,

highlighted the need for clear parameters to be specified in order to conduct this research effectively and to carefully identify the corpus of films to be analysed.

Though they focus mainly on literary fiction and only touch on some film texts, Aldiss and Wingrove (1988, p.30) define science fiction as follows:

Science fiction is the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science) and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mode.

For Cornea (2007, p.4) science fiction relies on the fantastic, drawing on elements of fantasy and sometimes of horror. Drawing on the inclusion of science fiction within the fantastical genres like the musical and the horror film, she argues that science fiction is actually grounded in realism, in contrast to the two alternate genres. In a different vein, Attebery (2002, p.4) draws on codifications of the science fiction genre to determine conventions. He expands on theories of iconography, to determine a definition of science fiction, which he argues is grounded in the reordering of categories and the unknown.

This is similar to the approach taken by Sobchack (2004) who investigates what visual codes are present in the science fiction film. She does so with the goal of defining the genre through her findings. While interrogating science fiction's iconographies she simultaneously identifies the problems with relying solely on iconography to define a genre:

Beyond the fact that seeing a spaceship on the screen signals to the viewer that he is watching a film which does not take place in the present (and even that signal is weakening since space flight is now a reality), there is no constant meaning generated by that image; because there is no consistent meaning, there is little accumulation of 'emblematic power' carried by the object from movie to movie. (Sobchack 2004, p.6)

Sobchack (2004), ultimately determines that the derivation of fixed meanings from iconographic analysis is not possible with science fiction films. In fact, she determines that a key element of the science fiction film is the fluidity of meanings that can be attached to its iconographies:

The settings of science fiction know no geographical boundaries and may be found literally anywhere... Inevitably, then, we must be led away from a preoccupation with a search for consistent visual emblems into more ambiguous territory. It is the very plasticity of objects and settings in SF films which help define them as science fiction, and not their consistency. (Sobchack 2004, p.10)

These various theorists demonstrate how difficult it is to pin down a definition of the science fiction cinematic genre. Thus, it was pertinent to define science fiction for the purposes of this research in order to collate the corpus of texts for analysis.

Cognisant of these foundational theorisations this research argues that science fiction bases itself on reality and suggests imagined settings grounded in the possible. Science fiction represents that which is possible, however improbable, and based in science, pseudo-science and technology. Whereas, fantasy, to distinguish the two, is largely impossible, based on myths, magic and fairy tales.

The overlapping of other genres with science fiction has often proven troublesome for genre critics, in particular when it comes to those films which Cornea (2007) labels “creature features”. In the decade with which this research is concerned, “creature features” include the *Alien* franchise, the *Resident Evil* franchise (Anderson 2010-2016) and the *Underworld* franchise (Marlind 2012; Foerster 2016). *Alien* was included in the research, as some of the seminal works of Film Theory that focus on science fiction and gender issues pay particular attention to the earlier iterations of this franchise. Furthermore, it is grounded in the possible

as the events of the film take place in a futuristic setting featuring the discovery of an alien species. However, *Underworld* and *Resident Evil* lean more towards the horror genre and feature figures grounded in myth: vampires and zombies, to be specific. Two other texts where this same issue arose were *10 Cloverfield Lane* (Trachtenberg 2016) and *The Cabin in the Woods* (Goddard 2011). These texts do not offer much in the way of scientific explanations for their featured creatures and as such cannot offer much to an analysis of science fiction texts of this decade. As Neale (2000, p.85) argues on the complexity of separating horror texts from science fiction texts: “few would describe *Dracula* (1931) as science fiction”. Here Neale’s (2000) absence of a clear theoretical explanation for this differentiation highlights the difficulty of clearly defining the science fiction genre.

However, *World War Z* (Forster 2013) is also a text featuring zombies, yet its focus is on a UN employee rushing around the globe in an attempt to investigate the disease that has caused the “zombie virus”. This text centres on an aspect of science and focuses on the global spread of a virus rather than on repetitive sequences focused on killing zombies. As a result, it was included in the list of one hundred and fifty-two science fiction films. As Belton (2013, p.273) argues:

The horror film is a modal genre, its chief purpose is to generate horror, terror, or dread in the audience primarily through the figure of the monster and the threat it poses to humanity. Though the science fiction film often features monsters from outer space, its narratives are less concerned with inducing terror than with creating a sense of wonder...if the science fiction film features an occasional creature from outer space, the horror film is dominated by the monster figure.

His argument highlights the difference between the two aforementioned texts that feature “zombies”. *Resident Evil* focuses on inducing terror and therefore is categorised as a horror whereas *World War Z* focuses on the spread of a virus through the eyes of a scientist. It is therefore categorised as science fiction.

The inclusion of the superhero genre of films in the corpus of this research also needs to be justified. Both of the large superhero studios, Marvel and DC, produced a variety of superhero films in the decade under investigation. Both studios have also employed a tactic where each film intertextually links with the others, often referred to as the “Marvel Cinematic Universe” and the separate “DC Extended Universe”. It is a given that the events of these films take place in the same overall world, with characters often crossing over into other texts and appearing all together in *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo Brothers 2019) as part of the Marvel universe and *Justice League* (Snyder 2017) as part of the DC universe. *Iron Man* (Favreau 2008) marked the beginning of the Marvel cinematic universe. This text is clearly a science fiction film with a narrative rooted in physics and science. Similarly, *Man of Steel* (Snyder 2013) marked the beginning of the DC universe and features a similar science fiction narrative. Even though a text like *Thor* (Branagh 2011) stretches the definition of science fiction, the world of the film links with the other Marvel texts and efforts are made within the *Thor* texts to explain the existence of other species from the perspective of human scientists. Therefore, it was necessary to include the entire corpus of superhero films from the relevant decade in the corpus of films attended to in this research.

The examples discussed in this section highlight the necessity, early in the research process, of examining the generic modes and conventions present in each individual film in order to confidently identify them as science fiction texts.

3.2.2. Defining “Female Protagonist”

As discussed above, while it is an accepted fact that women are underrepresented on-screen, it is necessary to investigate their representations when they do appear as protagonists.¹¹ In order to collate the corpus of films, it needed to be explicitly determined how to define a film as having a female protagonist. There are certain texts that feature co-protagonists or an ensemble cast, and they are discussed at points throughout the research. However, they are not considered part of the main corpus of films. Films with a well-defined female protagonist were chosen for the main corpus of films. This involved selecting films with a clear female lead, a narrative trajectory that follows the female protagonist’s perspective and that privileges her point of view above those of the other characters.

As with the difficulties discussed in the preceding section relating to the identification of the genre, sometimes the task of clearly identifying the main protagonist in a text can be challenging. For example, *A Quiet Place* (Krasinski 2018) features a family in a dystopian future where alien creatures have invaded Earth and hunt humans guided by sound. This text follows an entire family and certain sequences are shown from the female members’ perspectives. However, the key sequences privilege the father’s perspective. Indeed, when the family is in a scene together the camera privileges his perspective and as such the film does not belong to the category of films featuring female protagonists.

¹¹ The UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report 2020 found that women remained underrepresented on-screen in 2019, representing 44.1% of film leads.

One trend that emerges from the dataset is the franchising of certain filmic texts. *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, the *Alien* series and *Star Wars* are four texts featuring female protagonists that dominated the decade of science fiction films. These franchises are discussed throughout the research, often as single texts, rather than as individual films.

To conclude, there have been thirty-one science fiction films in total over the decade that feature female protagonists. The two appendices of this thesis present firstly the entire corpus of science fiction films over the decade and secondly the corpus of these films which feature female protagonists.

3.3. Methodological Approach: Textual Analysis with Elements of Discourse Analysis

A consideration of the aims of the research led to a determination that the most appropriate methodological approach would be a comprehensive textual analysis which incorporated elements of discourse analysis. These two methods tend to complement each other, with discourse analysis having “affinities with semiotics” (Tonkiss 2012, p.405). By examining the most commercially popular science fiction films worldwide featuring female protagonists released over the course of a decade we gain invaluable insights into the meanings created by these representations, and insights into what these representations as a whole convey about women.

Drawbacks to textual analysis as a methodology have been pointed out by various scholars. Nichols (2000, p.3) for example, considers the semiotic approach taken by film critics to be

outdated and a “fad”. However, it remains a robust method of analysis for understanding the significance of collections of texts. Meaning is created through representation:

The material reality [of texts] allows for the recovery and critical interrogation of discursive politics in an ‘empirical’ form; [texts] are neither scientific data nor historical documents but are, literally forensic evidence. (Hartley 1992, p.29)

Thus, if we consider filmic texts as being constituted from film language, then it is possible to decode these texts and extract meaning through a process of textual analysis. In addition, this thesis acknowledges that cinematic representations of women are shaped by a multitude of contextual factors and are in constant interaction with broader societal discourses. As such, these representations can either confirm dominant discourses on gender or challenge established paradigms. This is reflected in the slight increase in female protagonists in the latter part of the relevant decade to this research, perhaps cognisant of the pressure the #MeToo movement put upon Hollywood. This is drawn upon in the concluding chapter.

This research adopts a poststructuralist approach to textual analysis and draws on a variety of feminist film theories. McKee (2004, p.9) claims that poststructuralist approaches to textual analysis involve acknowledging that individuals have different social positions and thus different experiences of reality, and that, as a result, we need to acknowledge the necessarily subjective nature of textual analysis in our analysis. Rose (2016) echoes this point, arguing that one should acknowledge their own social and cultural position as they analyse visual texts. This is extremely relevant to this study, and an intersectional feminist approach, acknowledging issues of race, class, sexuality and ethnicity, was taken during textual analysis.

Therefore, a poststructuralist textual analysis is conducted through the prism of feminist film theory while remaining cognisant of intersectional concerns. Semiological approaches to analysing representations of women on-screen allow for my own interpretation of the texts to be established while also revealing any recurring themes. Rose (2016, p.69) argues that “semiology offers a very full box of analytical tools for taking an image apart and tracing how it works in relation to broader systems of meaning”. This makes it a perfect fit for textual and discourse analysis, investigating representations of women within one genre, and then consulting alternate filmic theorisations on women’s representations on a broader scale.

Semiotics has long been embedded in Film Studies. Prince (1993, p.16) points out that Film Studies has been influenced by “structuralist and Saussurean-derived linguistic models” arguing that it is impossible to read films without this influence being present. As he claims (ibid.) “to speak about reading a film, irrespective of the critical methodology employed to generate the reading, is to index and emphasize this lineage”.

This semiological approach is not a perfect methodology and it is important to consider its drawbacks when conducting textual analysis. Rose (2016) discusses the polysemic nature of signs and the fact that they often carry more than one meaning. This is something that this research has made attempts to be constantly cognisant of, for example when comparing a post-feminist reading of a text to an intersectional feminist reading of the same text. The nature of signs as having a multitude of potential readings reinforces the need to constantly refer to intersectional concerns, and to consider multiple interpretations of the scopic regimes at work

in the texts.¹² By acknowledging and drawing on historic Film Studies theories that relate to representations of women, an approach is taken which acknowledges the patriarchal nature of the film industry and determines whether the corpus of films concerned is conscribed by dominant structures. These texts are mainly produced in large Hollywood studios which have long produced films which reflect a dominant patriarchal hegemonic ideology.¹³ It is important to recognise this and consider if these modern texts uphold this dominant ideology or transgress it.

Each chapter is foregrounded with an in-depth analysis and interpretation of various relevant Feminist Film Studies texts. These analyses then inform the textual analysis conducted in the chapters. This process assists in investigating what patterns concerning the representation of women on-screen remain present in contemporary science fiction cinema and this in turn informs the elements of discourse analysis. The elements of discourse analysis advance the research, considering if the issues present in contemporary science fiction cinema are encountered in other genres and identify contemporary concerns emerging in filmic texts from this decade.

Feminist Film Studies, as a field of academic study, has undergone major shifts since its emergence in the 1970s, reflecting the shifting attitudes within feminism as a movement more broadly. Radner and Stringer (2011, pp.2-3) suggest the need for a break from the theorisations

¹² This term was used by Metz (1982) in relation to apparatus theory. The “scopic regime” at play in a given film refers to the constructed nature of meaning created by representations present in cinema.

¹³ From the main corpus of films *The Host* was produced by independent production company Chockstone Pictures, and *Lucy* was produced by Besson’s own European production company with the remainder produced or co-produced by large Hollywood production companies.

of the 1980s and 1990s, in particular the focus on a need for a defined counter-cinema, a woman's cinema. They suggest that it is more important to focus on examples of popular cinema as "movies are accepted as important and complex social documents in their own right, serving a variety of functions, not all of which are in the interest of a hegemonic status quo". Radner and Stringer (2011, p.3) highlight the poststructuralist nature of contemporary Feminist Film Theory:

The shifting terrain of research in feminist film criticism, (is) marked by the increased participation of male scholars, by the heightened visibility of lesbian, gay, and queer history, particularly as it informs 'raced' and postcolonial subjects; by a more pronounced interrogation of the links between violence and gender; by the assumption that popular films, popular culture, and consumer culture are complex and ambivalent social forces in the production of gender.

While this shift has occurred within contemporary Feminist Film Studies it is necessary to draw on some of the seminal theorists while conducting textual analysis. These include theorists like Mulvey (1975) who established the theory of the "male gaze" and whose work is fundamental to Chapter Four on the objectification of female protagonists. Other seminal work which was important to consider during textual analysis included Silverman's (1988) work on the voice, and Butler's (2004) work on the construction of gender. Chapter Six draws on Creed's (1993) "monstrous feminine" archetypes and argues for their continued relevance as a framework for examining instances of abject femininity in contemporary science fiction cinema. Chapter Seven is an interrogation of contemporary cinematic female cyborgs and Haraway's (1991) work on the cyborg serves as an important starting point for this analysis. While contemporary research is of the utmost importance to this thesis it remains necessary to integrate insights drawn from these seminal theorisations into the textual analysis conducted.

Radner and Stringer (2011, p.4) argue that contemporary cinema has undergone a shift since the second wave of feminism. It has:

become much more self-conscious in its treatment of gender...movies in the 21st century are aware of their role in the social production of gender, and commonly represent, and deliberately reflect upon, the dilemmas that face the contemporary subject...they also raise questions about gender that undermine our understanding of it as being biologically ordained, or a 'natural' category.

They believe this shift is somewhat responsible for the move in academia towards more nuanced approaches to analysis, through the integration of race or gender perspectives, for example. Similarly, Kaplan (2009) suggests that a move towards interdisciplinary Film Studies has begun and that this new approach has positive merits.

Incorporating elements of discourse analysis allows for broader interpretations of the representations of women in contemporary cinema to be obtained. "(A) discourse is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e., a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic" (Hall 1995, p.290). Discourse analysis considers texts as sites that both reflect reality and construct our understanding of social reality.

Discourse analysts are interested in language and texts as sites in which social meanings are formed and reproduced, social identities are shaped and social facts are established. (Tonkiss 2012, p.406)

Foucauldian discourse analysis emphasises the relationship between dominant discourses and power. Therefore, when we apply Foucauldian discourse analysis to the film industry and the lack of female protagonists on-screen, we understand how the patriarchal nature of the Hollywood studio system reinforces notions of women as secondary characters, as less important and capable than their male counterparts.

Utilising elements of discourse analysis allows for a thorough overview of the representation of women on-screen to be obtained by comparing and contrasting the findings of the textual analysis with broader theorisations of women on-screen in twenty-first century cinema. By providing a comprehensive analysis of representations of women in science fiction cinema over the course of a decade and comparing this with broader theorisations on the cinematic representation of women we can obtain a clear and comprehensive picture of how women are represented in this decade. Employing elements of discourse analysis demonstrates how dominant discourses regarding women in cinema are created by naturalising and legitimising the regressive and sustained images of women as passive, lacking agency, and functioning primarily as objects to be enjoyed by audiences as well as by other characters on-screen.

Applying principles of Foucauldian discourse analysis highlights the dominant system where these meanings are produced and allows for the identification and interpretation of texts that attempt to subvert dominant discursive formations: “where there is power, there is resistance . . . a multiplicity of points of resistance” (Foucault 1979, p.95). This mode of analysis is of particular interest and merit when considering if gender diversity in key crew members is a factor in influencing more progressive representations on-screen. This research takes the fact that women remain underrepresented on-screen as its impetus for investigating existing representations thoroughly, however, female directors are even rarer than female leads.¹⁴ Women directed only four out of thirty-one films in the corpus of films of relevance to this research and so discourses on women involved in the production process of film as being

¹⁴ In the top one hundred theatrical releases in 2019 women featured as directors only fifteen per cent of the time (UCLA 2020). Out of the one hundred and fifty two films in this corpus of texts, women directed four films, two per cent of the entire corpus.

fundamental to the creation of more progressive representations were considered (French 2012).

3.4. Conclusion

This research investigates the representations of women as protagonists in contemporary popular science fiction cinema. In doing so it considers the top one hundred grossing films worldwide over the course of a decade, 2010 to 2019, while condensing these into a manageable dataset of thirty-one films. These texts explicitly feature female protagonists and are primarily and clearly identifiable as science fiction films. Science fiction films for the purposes of this research, are understood as a branch of speculative fiction, with an emphasis on science or technology, grounded in reality and representing possible scenarios or futures. The corpus of films is interrogated utilising textual analysis combined with elements of discourse analysis and audience research theory through the inclusion of film reviews, questioning how meaning is created through the representations of women presented on-screen and attempting to identify the social or cultural anxieties that may have emerged in such films over the course of this decade.

Chapter Four - Objectifying Female Protagonists in the Twenty-First Century: A Dominant Pattern of Sexualisation and the “Male Gaze”

4.1. Introduction

This chapter investigates whether women remain systematically objectified in contemporary science fiction films over the course of the current decade, in the manner described by Mulvey (1975) and expanded on by other film theorists (Haskell 1987; McCaughey and King 2001; Brown 2011, 2015). This chapter’s main focus is on the first main research question outlined in the introduction: Are women objectified in contemporary science fiction cinema, in line with historical theorisations of women’s objectification on screen?

This chapter determines whether female protagonists are objectified by addressing the following further research questions in relation to objectification:

- (i) Is the “male gaze”, as defined by Mulvey (1975), present in the films? Are the protagonists doubly objectified, by male characters and by the audience?
- (ii) Are female protagonists sexualised through costume design and objectified in terms of their appearance?
- (iii) Are female protagonists objectified through the *mise-en-scène*?
- (iv) Do choices with regard to shot type and framing objectify or empower female protagonists?
- (v) How does the female voice factor into the objectification of female protagonists?

In order to bolster the study of objectification, this chapter compares and analyses in detail two science fiction films that feature the same character, Wonder Woman: *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017) and *Justice League* (Snyder 2017). Both films were produced in the same year, 2017, with *Wonder Woman* led by a female director who intended to portray female empowerment through her representation of Wonder Woman.¹⁵ In contrast, *Justice League* was directed by a male director and features Wonder Woman sharing screen time with five male counterparts. Preliminary studies conducted of *Wonder Woman* and *Justice League* revealed a stark contrast in the portrayal of the same character, and a more in-depth analysis was required so as to further investigate the issue of objectification in this case. An analysis of the shot types, composition and framing of Wonder Woman in these two textual examples yields an interesting and informative comparative study.

This chapter begins by briefly reviewing historical academic discourses on the objectification of women so as to provide a context for a review of the current state of knowledge in this area. It then moves on to define objectification, drawing on more contemporary theorisations. This is followed by analyses of textual examples in the dataset that resonate with extant theorisations of the “male gaze” (Mulvey 1975). The chapter concludes with a comparative analysis of the same character, Wonder Woman/ Diana Prince, as she appears in the aforementioned films: *Wonder Woman* and *Justice League*.

¹⁵ Patty Jenkins discussed her intent in this regard in multiple print and video interviews promoting *Wonder Woman*.

In addition, the following texts from the dataset are analysed in detail within this chapter: *Prometheus* (Scott 2012), *Gravity* (Cuarón 2013), *Jupiter Ascending* (The Wachowskis 2015), *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Abrams 2015), *Arrival* (Villeneuve 2016), *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Johnson 2017), *The Shape of Water* (Del Toro 2017), and *Alien Covenant* (Scott 2017). For the purposes of investigating the hypothesis that co-protagonists are often more objectified than sole female protagonists, the following examples are also discussed in section 4.4.: *Passengers* (Tyldum 2016), *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (Besson 2017), and *Antman and The Wasp* (Reed 2018), the *Star Trek* franchise, and the background female characters in the Marvel films that feature an ensemble of heroes (the *X-Men* franchise and the *Avenger* franchise).

Out of thirty-one textual examples included in this dataset only two, *A Wrinkle in Time* (DuVernay 2018) and *Men in Black International* (Gray 2019), feature mixed-race female protagonists with every other protagonist being a white heteronormative, traditionally attractive woman. This statistic alone illustrates the manner in which Hollywood productions, whether consciously or not, systemically privilege white traditionally beautiful women on-screen. This chapter interrogates the representations present in the corpus of films in order to determine whether the objectification of women on-screen remains a sustained trend.

4.2. A Historical Overview of Objectification and the Current State of Knowledge

Theorisations of female objectification in film all acknowledge the seminal work of Laura Mulvey (1975), particularly her theorisation of the “male gaze”. Theorisations of female objectification preceded Mulvey’s (1975) work. Arguably her seminal essay was influenced

by the work of John Berger (1972, p.47) who examined the dynamics of “the look” through an analysis of a series of oil paintings:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves.

The principles of “the look” as discussed by Berger are expanded on by Mulvey (1975) in terms of cinematic representation. Mulvey first wrote her seminal essay in 1975 drawing on psychoanalytical principles, most notably the Freudian concept of “scopophilia”: the pleasure derived from looking. She argues that there is a power in looking and that, by typically being the subject of the “gaze”, women in Hollywood are largely objectified on-screen. Mulvey (1975) argues that cinema audiences adopt an implicitly heterosexual male gaze when watching Hollywood films. Thus, the women on-screen are doubly objectified: by the characters in the narrative and in turn by the audience.

The fetishisation of women on-screen is clearly present in classic Hollywood narratives which often feature stereotypical female characters, for example, the femme fatale and the damsel in distress. These archetypes usually function as a source of agency for the male protagonist. By adopting the “male gaze” the audience becomes complicit in the objectification of female characters. Criticism of Mulvey’s (1975) heteronormative point of view forced her to reconsider her position when she revisited her original essay in 1980, arguing that spectators “oscillate” in their viewing positions. Mulvey (1989) argues that each viewer, regardless of race, sex and sexuality, adopts a hegemonic white male heterosexual position due to the patriarchal nature of cinema.

The idea of performance, of women acting as a result of their awareness of being constantly watched, is one that Butler (2004) explores in her work on gender as a performative act. Butler (2004) argues that gender is culturally formed. She considers gender norms to be social constructs and performative acts. She argues that we are not born with established gendered identities (masculine/feminine) but rather, that we adapt to gender performativity as a social construct and a learned experience. This chapter bases its analysis on these understandings of gender as constructed (Butler 2004).

Feminist Film Studies has moved beyond the reading of films primarily through the prism of psychoanalysis. Contemporary scholars utilise a variety of modes of analysis in their readings. Most of these attempts, however, “bear the mark of this (psychoanalytical) research” (Radner and Stringer 2011, p.3). Some notable contemporary theorists whose work focuses on the representation of female characters on-screen are Schubart (2007), Brown (2011; 2015), Oliver (2016), and Lewis (2017; 2020). As noted by Radner and Stringer (2011) contemporary scholarship on the representation of women has moved beyond the more simplistic theorisations of objectification on-screen so as to incorporate related issues or examine specific problems. These include theorisations of violent women (Brown 2011 and Schubart 2007), of women’s representation in specific thematic strands (Lewis 2017; 2020), and the work of scholars like Oliver (2016) who link prevalent media images of women in incapacitated states with the provocation of real violence against women.

One area of notable disagreement within the field of feminist studies is the contrast between postfeminist ideals and those of third wave and fourth wave feminism. Repeatedly, certain theorists consider postfeminist theories when conducting their analyses and consider it possible

to read the representations of female characters as simultaneously empowering and objectified (Brown 2011; Schubart 2007). This can be a reductive and damaging way in which to consider such representations. Perhaps the ability to “read both ways” is of more relevance when discussing reception theory and the ability of women to generate negotiated meanings from existing representations.

However, it should be possible to analyse the texts in this dataset and consider whether the representations are presented first and foremost as objectified or if efforts have been made to create more progressive representations. Postfeminism’s assumption that feminism itself is unnecessary is damaging: “the postfeminist presumption (is) that feminism is dated, irrelevant, and inapplicable to current culture” (Negra 2006, p.4). Considering the extremely unbalanced nature of Hollywood productions and the fact that women remain underrepresented on-screen and underrepresented behind the screen, this type of postfeminist discourse is damaging and misrepresents the social inequalities at play. Thus, it may become reductionist to “read both ways” certain images of women that are prevalent on-screen. Perhaps this type of reading would be more relevant in a utopian society where equality already existed. However, in reality, it works to reinforce and bolster the clear inequalities at work by denying their very existence. Despite this, postfeminist viewpoints are considered throughout this chapter in the interest of maintaining a poststructuralist approach to the research, one which considers various different strands of theory, and refers to the contemporary literature on the subject of representation.

In terms of the female voice, which is a key research consideration in this chapter, it is pertinent to compare the use of the female voice with that of its male counterpart. It is also necessary to

examine instances where the female voice is lacking in texts featuring sole female protagonists. It is necessary to consider Silverman's analysis of cinema's dominant sound regime. This refers to the function and structure of sound, diegetic and non-diegetic, within the cinematic apparatus. This is particularly relevant to section 4.4. where films with co-protagonists are examined as the male voice is usually privileged over the female voice in such circumstances.

4.3. Defining Objectification under the Scope of this Research

Postfeminist theorisations often consider activities and images of women that would traditionally have been considered objectifying to be empowering. Regardless of one's position on postmodern feminism it is necessary to consider the fact that Hollywood is still a male dominated industry and that while it is possible to regard certain representations as empowering, when it comes to an industry where decisions are made largely by men, doing so comes down to a question of choice.¹⁶ Can undressing on-screen (*Lucy*) or being squeezed into a latex suit (*Ghost in the Shell*) or performing sex acts on-screen (*Alien Covenant*) be considered empowering if these are done at the behest of a male director? Is it merely expected in Hollywood that women on-screen will function as doubly objectified pleasure devices, as tools for audiences and for male character development alike?

As mentioned in the previous section, the approach of defining female protagonists as open to being read "both ways" is one explored in academic theorisations of women on-screen

¹⁶ According to the *2020 Celluloid Ceiling* (Lauzen 2020) in 2019, women comprised 21% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers working on the top 250 grossing films in the US.

(McCaughey and King 2001; Schubart 2007; Brown 2011). This approach serves to trivialise the objectification of women on-screen and its effects. Some theorisations link this kind of objectified representation with violence enacted upon women (Oliver 2016). Other theorisations of women in superhero franchises link the discourses present in culturally influential cinematic narratives with stereotypical gender beliefs and even with a lack of self-esteem in young girls (Pennell and Morawitz 2015). These claims of the damage that representations can have on women, and the potential real-world effects of certain representations are serious, and this research considers such implications to be profoundly important and highlight the need for more considered representations to be created.

When analysing the dataset of this thesis it is apparent that conscious attempts have been made in the production stages of some of the films to address the historical tendencies regarding female representation. Some of the female characters in the dataset possess strong attributes or are less subject to the processes of objectification to which their historical counterparts have been subject. These outliers are expanded on in Chapter Eight which further discusses the exceptional representations found in the dataset. However, a hypothesis is investigated in this chapter in section 4.4., that when female characters are not the main protagonist and feature as either co-protagonists or part of an ensemble cast, hegemonic objectification resumes.

4.4. Traditional Examples of the Objectification of Female Protagonists within the Dataset

This section analyses contemporary science fiction films which objectify their female protagonists in a consistent manner, as outlined by previous scholarly works. In order to bolster

the study, it is necessary to consider the texts in the dataset and identify those which fall into the traditional hegemonic objectification of female protagonists. As described in the introduction the analysis also involves considering issues of female objectification through the use of the female voice and through mise-en-scène.

Textual examples from the main dataset that objectify the female protagonists include *Jupiter Ascending*, *The Host*, *The Shape of Water* and the *Alien* series. Alternative texts that feature female cyborgs as objectified characters are analysed in Chapter Seven. The texts discussed in this section all feature male directors, except for *Jupiter Ascending* which is directed by two trans-women. This section, in addition to analysing women from the dataset who are objectified in a traditional manner, further argues that representations of women when they feature as co-protagonists or secondary characters in ensemble films tend to be more overtly objectified on-screen. Examples of co-protagonists and secondary characters within the relevant decade include Aurora from *Passengers*, Laureline from *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets*, the female characters Black Widow and Scarlet Witch in the *Avengers* series of films (2012 to present), and the female characters Mystique, Storm, and Jean Grey in the *X-Men* franchise (2011 to present). These textual examples tend to regress to more traditional patriarchal structures with the female characters often serving, in a variety of ways, as plot devices or as tools for their male counterparts.

Jupiter Ascending begins with a voice-over from Jupiter explaining that she is destined for great things and to meet the “one true love” of her life. The opening sequences makes it clear that she is unhappy in her social circumstances. Jupiter is a second-generation Russian immigrant in America who is unaware that she is a genetic reincarnation of the powerful

matriarch of an alien dynasty. The three children of this matriarch are searching for Jupiter in order to secure their inheritance. Jupiter falls in love with the bounty hunter, Caine Wise, who shows up to protect her.

The opening sequence introduces Jupiter's character trying on diamond earrings in a mirror only to then reveal that she is in fact a maid and not the owner of the earrings. The combination of the voice-over narration plus the focus on the materialistic elements work to reinforce traditional patriarchal narratives: the story of Cinderella, specifically. Jupiter will find happiness in material goods and love, yet without these things she is incomplete and despondent. This scene also objectifies Jupiter on-screen through a process of self-objectification. The camera pans across a dressing table on which is arrayed a tiara, various jewels and a round mirror which reveals Jupiter's face. A medium close-up depicts her staring into the mirror, imagining herself wearing diamond earrings.

The consumerist theme continues in another key sequence which features Jupiter selling her eggs to a fertility clinic in order to buy herself a telescope. The representation of reproductive consumerism as a viable option for contemporary women is something expanded on by Maher (2011, p.206) who notes the manner in which the alignment of reproductive choices with consumption in Western culture is reflected in contemporary cinematic narratives:

(the films) emphasize issues of choice through their attention to contemporary patterns and meanings of consumption...contemporary culture suggests that individual matters define and ensure optimal reproductive outcomes by their consumer choices...the consumption of food, goods and reproductive services for money as inherent in the landscape of contemporary reproduction and as part of women's engagement with motherhood.

Jupiter Ascending presents Jupiter's choice to be paid for her reproductive services as a natural and normal decision. Thus, this fits into Maher's (2011) reading of contemporary discourses on reproductive choices being linked with consumerism.

Similarly, consumerism is highlighted in *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets*. This is a detective mystery set in space in a future where Earth has made contact with hundreds of alien species. Agent Laureline is Valerian's subordinate and together they investigate a plot to eradicate a species and steal their planet's resources. The linking of the female character to consumerist ideals is achieved when Laureline is depicted as testing an alien species capable of replicating objects by replicating one of her diamond earrings. She comments: *Wow, I need to take you shopping with me*. This alignment of a desire for material goods with female characters is particularly troubling in this text. Laureline, who features as a co-protagonist is depicted as fantasising about shopping. This equates femininity with stereotypical gendered traits, specifically portraying shopping as a feminine pursuit and this contrasts with the narrative treatment of Valerian, the male protagonist.

Both *Jupiter Ascending* and *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* feature these consumerist themes in an unironic manner. Both textual examples also feature the female protagonist as a damsel in distress, needing to be saved on multiple occasions. The intersections of beauty ideals and consumerism in contemporary media embodies Dimulescu's (2015, p.507) argument regarding modern beauty representations:

Contemporary representations of female beauty within western societies are by-products of multiple economic, political and cultural factors, Under the emerging forces of consumerism, female beauty has become an industry and has penetrated all economic areas.

By aligning these female protagonists with consumerist themes and inferring that these ideals are the concern of women only, the films objectify these characters and position them in a superficial manner.

Both *Wonder Woman* and *The Hunger Games* franchise touch on the theme of consumerism and capitalism in a contrasting manner. The protagonists in these examples are conscious of the shallow nature of obsessions with material goods, particularly clothing. *The Hunger Games* follows Katniss, a young woman from a poor district of a dystopian society, Panem. Each district in Panem is responsible for a particular form of production with the wealth and goods created there all being shipped to the prosperous Capitol. When Katniss volunteers for the Hunger Games, a televised fight to the death by children from each district, she travels to the Capitol and sees the excesses of wealth on display for the first time. Katniss is given a styling team and a makeover.

Themes involving capitalism are intertwined with commentary on the use of social media and reality television in *The Hunger Games*, and Katniss is told repeatedly that the manner in which she presents herself could save her life. Katniss remarks to her stylist: *You're here to make me look pretty?* to which he replies: *I'm here to help you make an impression.* A key scene features the presentation of the “tributes”, the children who are to fight, to the wealthy people of the capitol. A procession of the teams from each district parades through the main street. Katniss is portrayed from the perspective of the enthusiastic crowd and from the President's perspective. A large close-up of her face is also displayed on large screens around the venue. The sequence positions her as an object in a number of ways: she is a device for the entertainment of the audience, she is a tool through which the President can display his power

and authority, and she is presented as an object of desire for Peeta, the male love-interest character. Though the intent of this scene is to foreground the fact that she is viewed as an object in the world of the film, the film itself takes a part in the process of objectification by mirroring this process on-screen through the choice of shot-types and costuming.

In a similar scene highlighting fashion and style, in *Wonder Woman* after Diana leaves her home of Themyscira for London, Steve Trevor insists that she go shopping before they embark on their urgent mission. With the help of Steve's secretary, Diana tries on multiple outfits in a montage sequence. She despairs at the fashion and remarks on the restrictive nature of the clothing asking how women are expected to fight in such tight clothes. Both *The Hunger Games* and *Wonder Woman* thus refer directly to the tendency of capitalist societies to target women with fashion and material goods while emphasising the problems of such societies. However, by including these scenes and visually highlighting the fashion the films themselves become somewhat contradictory. Tasker (2011) notes a pattern of self-awareness and self-referentiality in contemporary Hollywood. She considers this knowing tone to be a trope of postfeminist cinema. This tone plays with and mocks cinematic conventions while simultaneously fulfilling those same conventions (Tasker, 2011, p.69). The sequence of Diana trying on various outfits is shown in a montage, a typical trope associated with female-centred narratives. The sequence highlights the problematic nature of women's relationship to fashion while simultaneously portraying that relationship in a regressive manner. This example differs from *The Hunger Games* in that Diana is the bearer of the look and never the object – an argument that is developed in section 4.5. However, it is also something that the audience picked up on and embraced the character for: "As skimpy as Gadot's outfits may get, for example, Jenkins' camera never leers or lingers gratuitously." (Barker 2017). Thus, the critique

of such stereotypically gendered practices, like the fashion montage, are presented in more complex critical terms, pointing to their artificiality.

In a similar vein to *The Hunger Games*, *Wonder Woman* consistently positions Diana as the outsider looking in at and mocking societal conventions. She equates being a secretary to slavery and considers men as unessential to female pleasure and necessary only for reproductive purposes. However, she ultimately falls in love with Steve Trevor and is shown in later scenes to embrace modern fashion. Thus, *Wonder Woman* could be read as being a postfeminist film in Tasker's (2011) terms, reflexively aware of the conventions of romantic films while inevitably falling into an uncritical use of said conventions. Ultimately however, by highlighting these conventions in the critical manner used, it allows for generic conventions to be utilised (in *Wonder Woman* the use of the fashion montage) while also emphasising the stereotypical tropes at play, and the stereotypical nature of such a societal trope in itself. This works to underscore how regressive such stereotypes can be. The utilisation of stereotypes of femininity within this text actually point to the fallacy of such representations. This is echoed in audience reception of the text with one reviewer commenting: "Her femininity is part of the story, for the way it makes even the other heroes in the movie underestimate and discount her. But her gender is never the story's primary thrust" (Robinson 2017). This is reflected in the montage scene through her use of scorn at the fashion and insistence at carrying her shield with her new outfit. This reviewer echoes the analysis here, that while the film utilises some stereotypical notions of femininity, it does so in a knowing way, highlighting the issues that come with such notions.

A central theme within *Jupiter Ascending* is the idea of an essential femininity. In one key scene where Jupiter and Wise visit Stinger, an old friend of Wise, Jupiter is surrounded by a swarm of bees. They swarm protectively around her body, never actually touching her but forming a cloak-like layer. She raises and lowers her arms through the air, and the bees follow her movements seamlessly. This action proves to the other characters that she is, in fact, royalty with Stinger saying: *Bees are genetically designed to recognise royalty*. Discourses on masculinity often confirm the idea of an essential masculinity, one which transcends the male body and is depicted as an inherent trait, usually in terms of action heroes. *Jupiter Ascending* is propagating the idea of an essential femininity in this scene. Though completely unaware of her royal lineage Jupiter is portrayed as possessing a transcendental femininity instantly recognisable to other species. This marks her as different to the male characters and the secondary female characters. She is portrayed in this sequence from the perspective of the male characters and this essentialisation of femininity positions her in an objectified manner. Furthermore, the use of the non-diegetic music – violin strings and delicate piano – accompanying the scene, underpins the delicate portrayal of femininity.

Similarly, the representation of an essential femininity is present in *Valerian: The City of a Thousand Planets*. A key sequence features the destruction of a peaceful planet inhabited by a passive alien species that are represented as inherently feminine. The representation of the alien species as feminine underscores the stereotypical view that femininity is supposed to be serene and blissful. A female alien dances around in this key sequence, smiling constantly and looking at herself in a mirror while washing her face. This sequence positions the female alien as “to-be-looked-at” in Mulvey’s (1975) terms. The shot types used reinforce this positioning and present her as an object for the gaze of the audience. These actions of the female alien are

highly performative and, though stressing the idea of essential femininity, in actuality the scene manages instead to highlight the performative nature of gender. The colours in the mise-en-scène are all pastel shades of lilac and blues as the aliens collect pearls found in giant pink shells. The male and female aliens have a similar appearance with hairless heads and slim, tall bodies. However, the females of the species are marked by human sexual difference. Their breasts are barely covered by silk tops and they wear jewellery, specifically large earrings, that the males do not. They are also depicted in a more stereotypically feminine manner: dancing, giggling, and ultimately being protected by the male soldiers.

This type of femininity, in a similar vein to that depicted in the key scene discussed above from *Jupiter Ascending*, is depicted in both texts as naturally occurring, inherent or essential. However, by depicting femininity in this manner, usually through some form of dance, (the performative nature of dance is discussed further in relation to *Ex Machina* in Chapter Seven) the films ironically highlight the performative nature of such a femininity.

Butler's (2004) work on gender as performative is relevant to these texts and their representations of femininity. In particular with regard to *Wonder Woman* and *Jupiter Ascending* which both reference the capitalist societies that privilege wealth and beauty, femininity can be seen to be socially constructed: "the norm is femininity...and it is externally imposed, communicated through a set of expectations that others have" (Butler 2004, p.69). This bolsters the notion that the key montage scene in *Wonder Woman*, as expanded on above in fact knowingly highlights the performative nature of femininity.

Like *Valerian and a Thousand Planets*, *Passengers* features two main protagonists, Jim and Aurora. Jim leads the narrative and his perspective is explicitly privileged throughout the text. *Passengers* is an example of a film where a female co-protagonist acts as a plot device and is presented as an objectified figure on-screen. *Passengers* is the story of a human colony making a one-hundred-and-twenty-year journey in cryo-sleep to a new home in the universe. Jim, the male protagonist wakes up early due to a technical malfunction. After a year spent in solitude, he decides, after falling in love with her online profile, to awaken Aurora. Aurora, throughout the narrative serves as a plot device. Through her we learn more about Jim, his past and his desire to live off planet. She becomes his reason for living.

Aurora is treated as a literal object in this textual example. Jim has the power to wake her early from her cryo-sleep. He chooses her out of the thousands of sleeping passengers as if choosing an item from a catalogue. She is reminiscent of a doll in a display box with a clear window - lifeless and beautiful. This resonates with Oliver's (2016) work on creepshots of women and the proliferation of such imagery. Here, in *Passengers*, the message is that a lifeless, incapacitated woman is to be desired and objectified and chosen, like an object, as a potential mate:

With film, fantasies of violence towards girls and women take on a visual dimension that further eroticize and anesthetize images of abuse towards girls...filmic fantasies perpetuate, justify, aestheticize, and normalise violence towards girls. In addition, some of these contemporary fantasies take us back to medieval notions of consent as the purview of men only. (Oliver 2016, pp.27-28)

The camera pans along the chamber that Aurora sleeps in in a manner reminiscent of Soukup's (2009) "techno-scopophilia", fetishising her body within a technological device and thus producing a voyeuristic gaze that inscribes the human body with technology. When the camera explores her body in the sleeping pod, both her body and the technology on display are

eroticised. Furthermore, the camera implicitly adopts the perspective of Jim in this sequence. Aurora is framed from above, in a high-angle shot which reinforces her position of weakness and powerlessness in relation to Jim. This results in objectification in Mulvey's (1975) terms: she is at once both objectified by the camera, and the audience by extension and by the protagonist, Jim.

Passengers justifies Jim's actions through its cinematic language and tone. He becomes desperate and lonely as he exists alone in space. He does, however, have a male android bartender to talk to. The camera shots become tighter and more claustrophobic as his desperation grows, only changing back to wide-shots after he forcibly awakens Aurora. In a key sequence where Jim considers suicide, he debates whether or not to eject himself into space. The shots used when he is on a spacewalk prior to this debate are all closeups of his face inside his helmet, combined with reflections of his environment refracted off the helmet's surface. This emphasises his fate and reinforces his sense of entrapment. As he considers ejecting himself into space the shots are presented in a series of rapid cuts: closeups of his face, his hand hovering above the eject button and finally closeups of his feet as he runs away. The shot choices and fast paced editing serve to convey his anguish. The shots become wider after Aurora joins him, indicating his salvation. The visual language conveys to the audience that Jim needs Aurora in order to survive and that his intentional interference with her cryo-sleep is justified by his need to save his own life.

When a crew member, Gus, wakes up and starts to investigate the ship's malfunctions he remarks to Jim after discovering that he has forced Aurora to wake: *All this time I'm thinking you're one lucky son-of-a-bitch to get stuck with Aurora, it wasn't luck was it?* Gus's

commentary here reinforces the positioning of Aurora as an object, a device that gives Jim life and strength. This type of direct commentary on a female character's attractiveness is common across the genre. A notable example of a character subject to such commentary is Black Widow, a character within the Marvel cinematic universe.

Black Widow has existed in the Marvel cinematic universe since *Iron Man 2* (Favreau 2010), appearing in the majority of the films as a secondary character. She is played by Scarlett Johansson, who appears in multiple science fiction texts over the course of the specific decade with which this study is concerned. Black Widow's attractiveness is part of her character and is often directly commented upon. Matthews (2018, pp.5-6) argues that Johansson's representation in the Marvel cinematic universe is troublesome, at once responding to feminist calls for the inclusion of a female superhero while simultaneously seeing her being subject to objectification:

She functions as a cultural model for twenty-first century women and as evidence that feminist cultural movements remain effective. But is that all that is going on here?...In what ways can Johansson's paradoxical role as idolised subject and manipulated object be reconciled?

Black Widow first appears in *Iron Man 2* (Favreau 2010) as a spy working undercover as Tony Stark's employee. He quickly promotes her to being his personal assistant based primarily on her attractiveness. Commentary on her beauty is initiated by Pepper, the other secondary female character in the text, who warns Tony: *She is a potentially very expensive sexual harassment lawsuit if you keep ogling her like that*. After watching Black Widow from across the room Tony remarks to Pepper: *I want one*. This kind of language presents her as an object available for purchase or collection. This reinforces the theme of women as commodities and of consent "as the purview of men only" (Oliver 2016, p.28). As discussed later, in section 4.5,

this explicit commentary on a woman's attractiveness is also prevalent in *Justice League* with the male characters often remarking on Wonder Woman's beauty. This type of commentary by male protagonists about supporting female characters reinforces the notion of women existing primarily for male hegemonic pleasure. These female characters epitomise what Mulvey (1975) refers to when she discusses the double effect of female objectification on-screen. They are both pleasure devices for the audience and for the male characters.

The female characters in the superhero genre present an interesting problem: to what extent are these physically strong, often independent characters objectified? Discourses on masculinity within the action genre have focused on the fact that, since the 1980s, male bodies are persistently objectified (Neale 2000; Grey 2011). Female bodies have been consistently objectified in a variety of genres as discussed earlier in this chapter. Is objectification a staple of the action genre?¹⁷ Or is the objectification of the female characters a sustained issue that plagues the majority of on-screen female representation whatever the genre? Brown (2011, p.7) summarises the dilemma of the female action hero quite succinctly:

She commands the narrative and controls her destiny, makes her own decisions, and fights her own battles. She is inquisitive and intelligent, physically and emotionally strong, and is clearly portrayed as a heroic ideal with which audience members identify. On the other hand, the action heroine perpetuates the ideal of female beauty and sexuality that has always been the primary cultural value of women in our society.

Here Brown (2011) demonstrates his tendency to read the female action hero both ways. Certainly, the inclusion of female heroes in a genre that predominately features male characters is a progressive move. However, women still remain vastly underrepresented in the superhero

¹⁷ The idea of genre as multi-generic is adopted within this study. Contemporary science fiction cinema most commonly intersects with the action genre.

genre. Within the decade of study only two superhero films have featured female protagonists: *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel*. When the texts feature a large ensemble cast including a handful of women (often only one female character), the female characters are often represented in a stereotypical manner. The texts where this becomes an issue in the relevant decade include: the *X-Men* franchise, *Avengers Assemble*, *Avengers Age of Ultron*, *Captain America Civil War*, *Avengers Endgame*, *Infinity War*, *Batman vs Superman: Dawn of Justice* and *Justice League*.

When the female characters are considered in the broader context of the superhero genre it becomes obvious that they are more objectified than their male counterparts. Yes, the male characters often are shot in a manner that fetishises their muscles and objectifies their bodies, but Black Widow's existence relies upon her sexuality. She disarms men with her physical appearance and, as demonstrated above, is consistently spoken about in a degrading way by her male counterparts. *Avengers* introduces the audience to all of the key characters in the first sequence of the film. Black Widow is the only female member in this iteration of the franchise with the other female characters introduced in later iterations. She is introduced tied to a chair in a revealing black dress, in a scene where she is about to be interrogated by three Russians. The scene reveals that in fact it is she who is in charge of the situation and that she had been extracting information from her captors by allowing them to believe that they were in control. While still tied to the chair she manages to attack and subdue all three of the men and walk out of the room. One of the final shots in this sequence is a low-angle shot depicting her picking up her high heels and leaving. This scene shows the manner in which, as a spy working for S.H.I.E.L.D., the fictional government agency in the Marvel universe, she utilises her sexuality to deceive the Russians.

In fact, though recurring themes involving the male characters in the Marvel films relate to agency and control, it is never in doubt that Black Widow works for and takes orders from S.H.I.E.L.D. Other characters struggle with the unilateral control the agency has over them and the moral implications of using their powers for a government agency whereas Black Widow never questions their intentions. She just follows orders. The only time she almost strays from her role as a diligent agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. is when she considers leaving the Avengers with Bruce Banner, The Hulk, as a romantic partner. This scene is analysed in more detail in Chapter Five. Love or duty are the only roles available to her character. This reduces her character and its potential complexities to a subservient role; at the mercy of the men she works for and with. Audience reception of her character is expanded on in section

Scarlet Witch of the *Avengers* franchise is infantilised within the texts, first appearing as a violent and scorned woman in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, then becoming a teenage type character relegated to her room as a punishment for her powers in *Captain America: Winter Soldier*. Her costuming includes a tight, revealing corset worn under a fitted leather jacket. It is necessary to consider the tight costumes typically worn by female superheroes in these ensemble films: the *X-Men* franchise, and *The Avengers* franchise. As Tasker (2011, p.69) argues:

In the popular cinema the contradictory character of postfeminism- its simultaneous commitment to female strength and feminine passivity...is evident in the action cinema...in the highly accomplished yet girlish female fighters who are packaged for the screen in skin-tight costumes in such films as the X Men series.

While the newer iterations of the *X-Men* franchise do not rely on such revealing costuming for the female characters, Storm and Jean Grey, it is worth noting that these characters are younger versions of the same characters Tasker (2011) refers to. The lessening of objectification in their

cases may be due to a tendency to portray more positive representations of young women. This tendency is expanded on in Chapter Eight below. The other, secondary adult female characters in these texts remain objectified and sexualised through their costuming: Mystique, Emma Frost, Angel and Psylocke.

When theories on objectification and audience reception theory are considered (Pennell and Morawitz 2015), it becomes clear that women's self-esteem is linked to the imagery found in cinematic representations. Pennell and Morawitz (2015) consider costume design as being integral to female objectification. They regard clothing as often working to sexualise the female characters and as serving to further their objectification.

One noteworthy area, with regard to costume design in science fiction cinema, is that of uniforms. In the textual examples *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* and the *Star Trek* films the female characters, Sergeant Laureline and Lieutenant Uhura, are high ranking soldiers in their respective narratives. Both of these characters wear uniforms which are similar to those of their male counterparts but with skirts instead of trousers. The *Star Trek* universe is of particular interest in this instance as this is the third series of *Star Trek* films: the first having spawned from the 1970s television show and the second spawning from the 1990s television show. In the 1970s films the female characters wore miniskirts and knee-high boots, reflecting fashionable clothing of the time. In the 1990s reboot of the series the uniforms had changed and all of the characters, male and female, wore the exact same uniform: trousers and a long-sleeved top. This 1990s reboot addressed egalitarian issues head on and even changed the iconic voice-over introduction from: *Where no man has gone before* to: *Where no one has gone before*. The fact that the costume design has regressed in the current decade to a stark contrast

between the costuming of male and female characters is problematic. A uniform's primary function is to make team members feel like equal parts of a whole, yet by coding the female members as different and sexualising them through their costumes the recent iterations of the *Star Trek* franchise mark them primarily as objects.

Moving on from the role costuming plays in processes of objectification, the use of the voice is also pertinent to consider when analysing films with female protagonists. *The Hunger Games* is based on a young adult novel with the narrative told from the perspective of the female protagonist, Katniss. However, the film opens with titles which explain the history of Panem, the fictional country in which the story is set. The opening shot is a two-shot composition of two men discussing the historical significance of the Hunger Games in a televised interview, with Katniss's voice distinctly absent. Doane (1987, p.64) argues that the use of a combination of titles and male voice-overs often works to distance the spectator from a female protagonist.

Divergent's source material is also a young adult novel with a female protagonist. In contrast to *The Hunger Games*, however, this textual example begins with a narration from the female protagonist, Pris. The narration explains that her city, Chicago, is the only city to survive a nuclear war that has destroyed the rest of the world. In this case the narration comes from the protagonist and allows the audience access to the character's psychological interiority. In *Divergent* the narration demonstrates Pris's naivety and her belief in the system in which she lives, whereas in *The Hunger Games* we are not given access to Katniss's state of mind and thus are unable to judge to what extent she accepts the State's control. The use of voice-over to convey aspects of a narrative situates the bearer of the voice in a position of power and suggests that the story is depicted from their perspective or recalled from their memory.

The Shape of Water is another textual example where a female protagonist's voice is absent from the narration of her own story. However, Elisa, the protagonist in *The Shape of Water*, is mute which makes for an interesting textual example. The film is narrated by her neighbour and friend, Giles, and thus presented to us as his telling of her story rather than her telling of her own story. In a similar vein, *The Host* begins with a male voice-over narration explaining that the Earth has been invaded by an alien species that occupies human bodies and that a few human survivors remain on the run. The protagonist, Melanie, is introduced after this narration. She is depicted in a close-up, attempting to escape from a group of these body snatchers. The central theme of *The Host* is Melanie's attempt at regaining control over her body from Wanderer (the implanted alien host). The text demonstrates this struggle through an internal dialogue between the two characters. The choice of the use of a male voice-over in the opening sequence is problematic considering the theme of agency. In the manner described by Doane (1987) it establishes a distance between the female protagonist and the spectator. Doane (1987, p.147) argues that the subjectivity of the "voice" in cinema presents a certain viewpoint, a mode through which to access a character's "interiority":

In the cinema...the representation of subjectivity tends to exceed its own boundaries and constraints, bleeding over into a purportedly "neutral" diegesis. It is extremely difficult to localise subjectivity...subjectivity is reduced to interiority, and interiority, by definition, is invisible, inaccessible to the camera. Its numerous signifiers include facial expression, the voice-over, mise-en-scène as an externalisation of the internal, the point-of-view-shot, music and optical devices used to introduce a dream or daydream.

She regards the voice-over as integral to this process of localising subjectivity and as unique to the cinematic apparatus. Considering her arguments, it makes it all the more confusing when a male voice-over accompanies a text featuring a female protagonist.

Similarly, *Mortal Engines* features a male voice-over in the introduction. The voice belongs to the male cyborg Shrike, who is the father-figure of the female protagonist, Hester Shaw. The use of Shrike's voice-over is troublesome and underpins the distancing of the audience from Hester's character. In a similar vein, *Mad Max: Fury Road* opens with a wide-shot of Max from behind and a voice-over from his point-of-view. He introduces himself and his voice is intercut with audio files, in the vein of news soundbites, that explain how the Earth became barren: *it is the oil, oil wars, we are killing for gasoline, the world is actually running out of water, now there's the water wars, mankind has gone rogue, thermo-nuclear skirmish, the Earth is sour, our bones are poisoned, we have become half-life*. This represents what Soles (2019, p.185) regards as a significant shift in this iteration of the *Mad Max* franchise that reflects a move towards an intersection of "ecocriticism and gender representation". The sequence begins with male voices which give way to female voices that emphasise the importance of water and the Earth's wellbeing over the importance of gasoline. Where the earlier iterations focused on gasoline, this text focuses on water as a key resource and shifts the narrative focus from Max onto Furiosa.

Like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, *Mortal Engines* is also based on a young adult novel featuring a female protagonist. However, it differs from those texts in that it was authored by a man, Philip Reeve. All three cinematic texts, however, were directed by men. The texts that feature female voice-overs include: *Divergent*, *Arrival*, *Wonder Woman*, *Dark Phoenix*, and *Jupiter Ascending*. These texts make efforts to portray the female protagonists in a positive manner through the use of the female voice. Opening the texts with voice-overs from the female protagonists positions those protagonists in a place of power and serves to privilege their point of view and interiority.

As with *The Hunger Games*, the use of titles is present in the opening sequences of *Ghost in the Shell* and *Gravity*. The titles in *Ghost in the Shell* appear before the sequence of shots that show the assembly of the female protagonist, Major, as a teenage brain is implanted into a synthetic body. This sequence and Major's character are discussed in more detail in Chapter Five. The combination of the introductory titles with the "technoscopophilic" shots of Major's creation works to reinforce the distance between the audience and the protagonist and to objectify her on a double level (Soukup 2009). The text ends with a voice-over from Major, discussing how humanity will be integral to the next generation of cyborg soldiers: *My ghost survived to remind the next of us that humanity is our virtue*. However, during this sequence she is taking orders from her superior officer and fulfilling her "destiny" as a soldier designed to be used. Thus, she is portrayed first and foremost as an object. The lingering shots of her curves in this scene further underpin this objectification.

In contrast to the straightforward uses of voice-over already discussed, *Terminator: Dark Fate* begins with Sarah Connor being heard in voice-off before she is shown on-screen. This is a sequence transplanted from *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (Cameron 1991) featuring Sarah in a mental institution trying to warn the doctors about "Judgement Day", when machines will rise up and start a nuclear war. The sequence is intercut with the production company titles and the use of an effect to make the footage look like VHS quality video. As the footage fades to black the *Terminator* motif fades in and the aged footage is replaced with high quality footage connoting a shift forward in time. A more traditional voice-over from Sarah accompanies the opening scene which depicts the terminator machines murdering humans on a skull-covered beach. Sarah's voice is instantly recognisable, albeit having aged slightly, and this opening

sequence positions the narrative as emerging from her perspective and also privileges her interiority. Both the use of the VHS effect and the voice-over underpin Sarah's perspective, in the manner described by Doane (1987) creating a subjective effect and positioning Sarah as a key protagonist.

The analysis conducted in this section has demonstrated that women often remain objectified on-screen, particularly when they do not feature as a main protagonist. They remain objectified in terms of their physical appearance on-screen, and in terms of their roles as plot devices for the male characters. The absence of the female voice often signifies the objectification of female protagonists on-screen and distances audiences from their perspectives.

4.5. Wonder Woman: A Strong Female Character or an Object for the Male Heroes?

This section stages a comparative analysis of two texts, *Wonder Woman* and *Justice League*. These texts feature the same character, Wonder Woman, played by the same actress and were produced in the same year, 2017. They were, however, directed by two different directors, Zack Snyder and Patty Jenkins. The comparative analysis conducted in this section provides an insight into how the same character can be represented from two different perspectives. It demonstrates that when a conscious effort is made to portray a strong, empowering woman traditional objectification is absent and the film language used is deliberately empowering. In contrast, when the same character appears as a secondary character to five male counterparts, traditional objectification of her character resumes.

Wonder Woman and *Justice League* provide useful textual examples for a comparative study. *Wonder Woman* is the origin story of this character, while *Justice League* is centred around Batman and his desire to bring a team of heroes together to save the world. *Wonder Woman* introduces the island of Themyscira and the Amazons, as per the Greek myth, a tribe of all-female warriors. When a World War I era soldier crashes on the beaches of Themyscira Diana decides to follow him back to Earth in order to restore peace and defeat Ares, the God of War. She believes that he is responsible for the conflict.

One particular area of contention that sparked major discussions was the divergence in costume design between the two films.¹⁸ In the first text, *Wonder Woman*, the Amazons are dressed in Grecian-inspired leather clad uniforms. However, in *Justice League* a marked change in costume design has occurred with some of the background characters dressed in cropped tops and bikini-style costuming. On the subject of costume design for women in film Pennell and Morawitz (2015, p.212) argue:

it is the sexualisation through clothing and body type and victimisation through passivity and submissiveness of female characters in film that reflect traditional roles for women...It is the dichotomous representation of superheroines as being extraordinary, yet sexualised that muddies the potential for these characters to be empowering.

The unambiguous divergence in the costume design between the two films illustrates this clearly. A conscious effort seems to have been made in the production of *Justice League* to sexualise the background characters in a more overt manner. In comparison to the progressive aspects of *Wonder Woman* where the primary objective was to portray strong empowering

¹⁸ Articles discussing the discrepancies relating to costuming between the two textual examples were published by online magazines *Allure*, *Elle* and *Refinery29*.

characters, this move demonstrates continuity with the systemically patriarchal ideology present in Hollywood film.

Schubart (2007, pp.597-598) analysed the Amazon archetype prior to the on-screen cinematic iteration of Wonder Woman and considered the manner in which Greek mythology was transferred to Western cinema in a degrading and overtly sexualised manner:

In ancient Greece, Amazons dressed like men: heavy or light coats of war with fringes on the thighs, bare legs, sometimes just a dress in a light fabric. Men were occasionally depicted fighting in the nude; however, Amazons were depicted dressed or half-dressed...when the Amazon crossed the Atlantic and arrived in Hollywood she left her Greek costume behind... In the popular American cinema the Amazon costume is no longer Greek but combines Western lingerie with various styles of “tough,” male, or adventurous clothing signalling to the audience that this is an Amazon in a man’s world.

This theme is clearly evident in the contrasting examples of the Amazons in these two films. On the one hand, the background characters in *Justice League* are indeed dressed in more lingerie-type clothing with an emphasis on their sexuality rather than their strength. On the other hand, the Amazons in *Wonder Woman* are depicted wearing fringed leather uniforms, in line with the classic war outfits inspired by Greek mythology, as pointed out by Schubart (2007). Moreover, in *Wonder Woman*, the Queen’s guards wear metal bodices, long fringed skirts and protective gear for fighting, and there are no signs of exposed midriffs or of gratuitous objectification through costuming in this textual example. The key action scenes in the texts are also shot very differently. For example, when *Wonder Woman* introduces the audience to the training of the Amazon warriors, these scenes utilise predominantly wide-shots to demonstrate their strength and agility. In contrast when *Justice League* introduces the audience to the Amazons fighting off an invasion there are various close-ups of beautiful faces, mid-shots of exposed stomachs, with very few wide-shots utilised, except when they are used to illustrate the strength of Steppenwolf, the male antagonist.

Wonder Woman, Diana's origin story, depicts Captain Steve Trevor, an American spy in World War I, crash landing on Themyscira bringing news of the war to the Amazons. Diana chooses to leave Themyscira forever with Steve in order to stop the war which she believes is the work of Ares, the God of War. They fall in love over the course of the film and Steve eventually sacrifices his life to blow up a German plane filled with gas bombs. A key theme in *Justice League*, which is set in the present day, is Diana's relationship with Steve and her grief for him. At numerous points in the text she mentions her loss, even losing her temper and attacking Bruce (Batman) for merely mentioning Steve's name. This reduces a complex character to a single dimension, insinuating that without Steve, with whom she had a relationship seventy years ago, she is incomplete.

A central theme of *Wonder Woman* is representation, and the effects that it can have on young women. Diana as a young child watches the Amazon warriors fighting and copies their moves and techniques. She views Steve Trevor in awe as the first man she has ever laid eyes upon. She regards humans with fascination and bemusement. The childhood scenes where she obsesses about becoming an Amazon warrior include many close-ups of the young Diana's face and eyes. Her viewpoint is privileged through these shots and they reinforce the idea that this is her story and her perspective on the world. The connotations of this kind of framing and the emphasis on the young child's perspective speak directly to how important representation is in shaping our cultural and societal expectations and understandings. Diana wants to be a warrior because she grew up watching powerful women. It is the only way she knows, and her confusion at the way the human world works underpins the notion of the importance of representation.

Importantly, *Wonder Woman*'s uniqueness in the corpus of Hollywood productions discussed in this thesis arises from the fact that this film privileges a female perspective, but also from the manner in which the process of objectification is applied to male characters. For example, in a key scene, after being rescued by Diana, Steve is bathing in a turquoise pool located in a cave. Standing up, he realises Diana has entered the cave and is staring at his genitals, which he attempts to cover. Diana is primarily interested in determining if he is in fact: *a typical example of your sex*. The initial shots used in this sequence only depict Steve from the waist up, and then the film switches to a shot from behind his back which shows Diana looking at him. Diana is the bearer of the look in this scene. The shots switch between the two characters as they talk in matched mid-shots. As Steve exits the pool, the shot changes to a wide angle shot depicting his awkwardness as he again attempts to cover his genitals with his hand. The contrast between the Amazons and Western human cultural norms is highlighted here: Diana seems at ease with his naked form while he displays discomfort and unease.

The effects of World War I are also depicted from Diana's perspective. When she regards the wounded soldiers returning from war, her face is framed in a medium close-up, again privileging her point of view. Diana also narrates the action, her voice telling her story. The framing and use of female voice-over empower the character and privilege her perspective throughout the text (Silverman 1988). The film opens with her voice-over explaining: *I used to want to save the world*. The use of her voice-over connotes a closeness to the character for the audience. In contrast to the male voice-overs discussed in section 4.4., here the voice-over works to confidently position Diana as the bearer of both the look and the voice.

The theme of looking in *Justice League*, in contrast, works in only one direction: Diana serves as a tool for the visual pleasure of the male characters who consistently objectify her throughout the text. When Barry meets her for the first time, he is overcome by her beauty and loses the ability to complete a sentence correctly. In another key scene, Arthur (Aquaman) remarks to Wonder Woman while clearly looking her body up and down: *Whoof, you're gorgeous, and fierce and strong and mmm*. Here her strength and her ability as a hero take a backseat to her looks. The male characters regard her first and foremost as an object of beauty, existing for their pleasure. This is reinforced through shot choices. When the male characters are commenting on her appearance the shot/reverse shot sequence suggests a mono-directional gaze with Wonder Woman being looked-at by the characters and simultaneously by the audience. As Cook (2005, p.142) states on the use of the reverse through which male characters objectify women on-screen: "The effect is to deflect the spectator's access to the woman's body, confirming identification with the male hero as simultaneously desiring subject and object of desire".

Wonder Woman's role in *Justice League* seems to not only to be a tool of pleasure for the male protagonists, but also to be a sounding board and maternal figure for them. She is the one who argues with Batman against bringing Superman back to life. She is extremely nurturing and caring towards Victor, helping him to adjust to his life as a cyborg. She also intervenes when the men start squabbling, trying to keep the peace, and even helps Batman reset his arm when he dislocates his shoulder. These actions emphasise her femininity and her social position as a woman. This reinforces the idea of an essential masculinity/femininity and positions her in the role of mother, nurse and therapist. This echoes McCaughey and King's (2001, p.2) analysis

of the stereotyping of femininity on-screen: “cultural standards still equate womanhood with kindness and nonviolence, man-hood with strength and aggression”.

It is useful to compare these stereotypical actions with her representation in *Wonder Woman*. This text deliberately displays the flaws in a patriarchal society. When she arrives in London she complains about the clothing women are expected to wear, asking: *How are you supposed to fight in this?* She objects to the “men only” rule in Government, she laughs at the idea of slow dancing, and she tells Steve that men are not necessary for pleasure but only for procreation. She operates outside of the constraints of a patriarchal society while highlighting the peculiar restraints such a society places on women.

The contrast between the two texts is also visible in the choice of shot types used during action sequences. In *Wonder Woman* there are numerous action sequences: the invasion of Themyscira by the Germans who fight the Amazons, the advance of the troops following Diana in No Man’s Land at the front of the war, and the final battle with Ares. In *Justice League* the Amazons fight the invasion by Steppenwolf and his army of “para-demons”, the Justice League also fight these “para-demons” at various times throughout the text and there is a fight scene with Superman. The typical shots in *Wonder Woman* are mid-shots and wide-shots privileging Diana’s physical strength and superior fighting techniques. Any close-ups used focus on her muscles and in one key scene her ability to withstand powerful blows is shown through the use of a slow-motion close-up shot of her absorbing a powerful blow to her torso.

Another key scene in *Wonder Woman* portrays Diana testing her powers. At this point in the narrative, she is unaware that she is, in fact, the offspring of a God and therefore, more powerful

than the Amazons. She wishes to accompany Steve off the island so as to defeat Ares in battle but believes she needs a particular sword, “*the God-killer*”, in order to do so. The sword is kept locked in a keep. Diana jumps from a cliff on the unguarded side of the keep and claws her way up the tower with her bare hands, punching grips into the bricks as she does so. The shots focus on her face as she smiles upon realising her strength and closeups of her hands are featured as she physically punches through the bricks. This sequence demonstrates that it is possible to both depict her interior emotionality and her physical strength without resorting to the objectification of her body onscreen.

In contrast, within seconds of our being introduced to Diana’s character in *Justice League* she lassos a criminal and pulls him towards her. This shot is framed from below her knees and offers the audience a view directly up her skirt. While her skirt certainly shifts in *Wonder Woman* as she fights and jumps in various scenes, this is only ever for a split second and usually presented in a wide-shot. Contrastingly, this scene in *Justice League* lingers on this shot, clearly displaying her underwear as she extracts information from the criminal. The low-angle shot simultaneously displays her in a position of power and objectifies her body. This type of objectifying framing is absent from *Wonder Woman* which seeks instead to position Diana in an empowering way through the use of mid-shots and close-ups that, by focusing on her muscles rather than her thighs, emphasise her physical strength. Contrastingly, throughout *Justice League*, the shot choices used to cover Diana during the fight sequences consistently work to objectify her.

Furthermore, at various points in the fight scenes in *Justice League* she is saved by the male characters. Batman shoots the para-demons that are trying to attack her quipping: *Sorry guys,*

I didn't bring a sword. This line works to undermine her ability, especially considering that she is supposed to be a God who can heal quickly and who has unnatural strength and agility. Barry helps her reach the sword when she is being followed by a group of para-demons. He also pushes her out of the way when debris is about to fall on her. In what is clearly intended as a moment of comic relief he lands awkwardly with his face on her chest. This supposedly comedic moment serves to reinforce the notion of her as an object of sexual desire for the male characters.

The contrast between the shot types and framing utilised in these two textual examples lead to the presentation of two very different representations of the same character. *Wonder Woman* privileges her strength and point of view, while *Justice League* uses her character to emphasise the centrality of the male characters' pleasure and agency.

Reflecting on the critical reception of *Wonder Woman* as the first female-directed superhero film featuring a female lead uncovers that this character has been widely read as progressive and empowering. Reviews focus on the manner in which *Wonder Woman* is shot, in line with analysis conducted in this section, including insights like: "Diana is always framed as an agent of power, rather than its object" (Barker 2017) and "the director also refuses to focus the lens on Gadot's sexy soft bits. Her bosom is armoured, her legs are rocks. She's so solid and pure that she doesn't seem flesh" (Nicholson 2017). These reviews triumph in the use of cinema language to portray a more progressive female superhero.

This textual comparison of *Wonder Woman* and *Justice League* demonstrates stark contrasts in how the same character is portrayed. This section supports the notion that patriarchal

tendencies are still prevalent in Hollywood cinema, despite some attempts to create positive progressive representations of empowering female protagonists. What is interesting to note from this section is the clear disparity in the representation of the same character by two different directors, one male and one female. This is worthy of further examination. A comprehensive comparative analysis of representations of female protagonists by different directors, though it is outside of the scope of this enquiry, would be a useful area for further research. However, this initial analysis demonstrates that the female director in this instance, is more successful at representing an empowering, strong character.

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that although a positive shift in terms of the representation of female protagonists may have occurred in science fiction cinema between 2010 and 2019, certain problematic issues regarding objectification have been sustained within the genre. In particular, women tend to be objectified on-screen when they feature as co-protagonists or secondary characters, with stereotypical attributes projected onto their characters and with hegemonic, normative narratives being created. Furthermore, costuming is a consistent problem in contemporary superhero narratives with female characters being objectified through highly sexualised costuming choices. This is more prevalent in superhero narratives featuring female characters as background or secondary characters, supporting the first finding of this chapter. This chapter also identifies a trend where male voice-overs are sometimes used in films featuring female protagonists and work to create a distancing effect between the audiences and these protagonists. Distancing these characters from the audience by restricting the use of their voices reduces them to objectified plot tools and deprives the audience of access

to their interiority. Furthermore, as per Silverman's (1988) arguments, the inclusion of male voice-overs works to place men in positions of authority, even in these female-led films.

Section 4.5. demonstrates that when women are involved in films as key production team members more progressive representations can result. The comparative analysis conducted in this section argues that the active male gaze objectifies characters that, when instead are represented through, and for, a female gaze, become more progressive in nature. The shot choices, mise-en-scène and use of the voice in *Wonder Woman* bolster the representation of a more progressive female character. The identification of a discreet shift towards more positive depictions of women in the genre that these elements contribute to is reinforced by the findings of Chapter Eight below.

When women feature as co-protagonists to male characters or as secondary characters, their representation seems to regress, and stereotypical traits tend to emerge. These traits include essentialist ideas of femininity, the hyper-sexualisation of female characters and the use of these characters as plot devices who serve to further the male protagonists' journey. Furthermore, when a strong female character features as a protagonist she is often implicitly contrasted with other more one-dimensional and stereotypical female characters, insinuating that she is an exception to the rule.

This contrast between female protagonists and background characters seems to suggest an unspoken rule that there can only be one empowering woman present in a given text, and the regression visible in films in terms of the representations of female co-protagonists reveals a superficial aspect to progression overall. In order to create permanent change in terms of

representing women in more egalitarian manner, the representation of every female character should come into question. In a situation where a singular female character who possesses strength and who is not objectified is consistently contrasted with other female characters that are objectified and sexualised on-screen - there still remains a problem with representation.

It is important to clearly identify these representational shifts as they align clearly with the results of other studies on the representation of women in recent films. As Lewis (2017) contends, the emergence of more complex female characters in twenty-first century cinema is the result of careful planning from pre-production stages and of an increased involvement of women in the film industry as compared to the past. However, in general Hollywood-produced science fiction films still have progress to make in order to present satisfactory portrayals of women. As discussed within the chapter, the contrast with these representations reflects a marked difference between European cinema and Hollywood studio blockbusters. Lewis's (2017) work on European cinema notes a shift in representations that corresponds with an emergence of female directors and a focus on the female voice through all stages of production. Barton (2020, p.248) also regards contemporary Irish films directed by women as featuring some of the most progressive representations: "The edgiest of the arthouse productions were directed by women, which may account for the intensity of their narrative focus". A similar shift in representation is only distinctly evident in certain films within the dataset of relevance here. These are discussed in detail in Chapter Eight and significantly the majority feature women in key roles of production. Section 4.5. of this chapter also supports this argument with *Wonder Woman* having been directed by Patty Jenkins. She presents a more progressive representation of the character than that produced in *Justice League* by male director Zack Snyder.

The superficial nature of certain progressive representations is noted by Warner (2017), who explores casting in terms of race, specifically the rebooting of certain shows and films with all black casts. Warner believes this superficial attempt at diversity has become “plastic”: artificial and transparent. Warner sees a solution to this problem in the inclusion of black crew members across the board in all stages of production. Warner’s critique can be applied in the same manner to gendered representations. When a minority of films feature strong female leads but the larger patterns of representation of women across Hollywood genres are neglected these efforts can be read as “plastic” also. The fact that texts with protagonists that can be interpreted in more progressive terms also tend to feature women in key production roles, reflects Warner’s (2017) argument.

The lack of diversity on-screen, and the ongoing emphasis on traditional hegemonic beauty standards is symptomatic of the patriarchal nature of Hollywood. The discursive conclusion of this phenomenon of the positioning of white young women at the centre of narratives is that Hollywood has an inherent problem with bias, whether conscious or unconscious. The privileging of white hegemonic beauty standards in Hollywood is a phenomenon noted by hooks (1996) throughout her writing. The social modality (the social effects and the social connotations that go into the production of texts) of these texts reveals a regime that privileges white male heteronormative desire.

One of the key areas analysed in this chapter is the female voice. An analysis of the texts discussed here present an interesting finding: of the six films that feature voice-overs in their introduction only four utilise voice-overs which present the perspective of the female

protagonist. The trope of including a voiced male perspective, or even an impersonal text at the start of these films creates an effect where the audience is distanced from the female protagonists. They are presented to us as though from the perspective of the male characters whose voices are privileged. This underpins the notion of these female characters as objects, or subjects of the “look”, rather than presenting them as characters with their own agency and subjectivity. Silverman (1988, p.viii) argues that cinema’s sound regime is just as important as its visual regime in terms of the objectification of women:

Sexual difference is the effect of dominant cinema's sound regime as well as its visual regime, the female voice is as relentlessly held to normative representations and functions as is the female body.

These texts that feature this trope of a male voice-over underpin the idea that women’s voices are not as reliable as those of men. However, a promising shift in terms of male voice-over is present in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. As this chapter has demonstrated, the male voice-over in this film is utilised to introduce the audience to the world of the film and the shift in the importance of water in comparison to oil that has taken place. It also prepares the audience for a shift of focus within the text from the traditional male protagonist, Max, to the female protagonist, Furiosa. This shift in focus is further underpinned by recent news of plans by Miller to produce and direct a prequel to Furiosa’s story. Furthermore, traditional objectification of Furiosa’s character is absent on screen and she is in fact a more progressive empowering character. The shifts in this text, the voice-over, the focus on women including the older “Vuvalini” women present a powerful feminist message, a sentiment echoed by reviewers: “the film winds up as a testament to female resilience...I hadn’t foreseen its feminist ambitions” (Lane 2015); “it’s girl power that fuels a great deal of ‘Fury Road’” (Duralde 2015); “Miller also gives us the rare film that depicts killer ladies doing killer things in a killer-looking place” (Baron 2015).

The findings of this chapter suggest that anxieties surrounding women's changing roles in society still exist. The notion of stereotypical views of women's roles is also underpinned through the trope of creating contrasting, sexualised and feminine uniforms for female members of various teams in *Star Trek* and *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets*. The feminisation of these characters works to appease any perceived threat to the patriarchal order. The effect of objectifying these characters, who are otherwise depicted as highly accomplished and intelligent, is to diffuse any potential threat to hegemonic concepts of masculinity.

The findings of this chapter provide insights into the representation of women on-screen more generally and they will inform the remainder of this study. The fact that women are sometimes represented more progressively as protagonists when this is a clear aim of production is analysed further in the following chapters which deal with issues such as monstrous femininity, the damaged woman trope and representations of women as nurturing beings.

Chapter Five - Violent Women: Trauma Victims, The Nurturing Archetype and A Denial of Femininity

5.1. Introduction

This chapter examines representations of violent female protagonists in contemporary popular science fiction cinema. This chapter also considers additional representations of women in those rare cases where they appear as villains or antagonists. The texts examined in this chapter include: *The Hunger Games* series (Ross 2012; Lawrence 2013-2015), the *Divergent* series (Burger 2014; Schwentke 2015-2016), the *Star Wars* series (Abrams and Johnson 2015-2019), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015), *Mortal Engines* (Rivers 2018), *Dark Phoenix* (Kinberg 2019), *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017), *Alita: Battle Angel* (Rodriguez 2019), *Terminator: Dark Fate* (Miller 2019), and *Captain Marvel* (Boden and Fleck 2019). A group of textual examples from outside the main remit of study are also drawn on here. Due to the scarcity of female antagonists within the genre, an analysis of their representations serves to bolster the findings of this chapter. These textual examples include: *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi 2017), *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve 2017), *Ant Man and The Wasp* (Reed 2018), and *Suicide Squad* (Ayer 2016).

At the heart of this chapter are representations of acts of violence enacted by women, or representations of women engaging in violent behaviour on-screen. In order to analyse the additional representations of female antagonists that are of concern here it is necessary to examine theorisations of women as antagonists alongside theorisations of violent women on-screen. Foundational literature on violent, transgressional women in film informs the textual

analysis component of this chapter. There have been various filmic representations of violent women from the advent of the female action star who became more commonplace in the 1980s and 1990s (Brown 2011; Schubart 2007) to the female action heroes of the twenty-first century (Chappell and Young 2017).

This chapter argues that women's violence is often explained as a response to some form of trauma or as being rooted in a stereotypical nurturing trait ascribed to women. It also suggests that alternatively, when women are represented in positions of power or presented as antagonists, their appearance is often more masculine in character. The chapter explores the role of violent women on-screen, asking what contemporary social and cultural anxieties are possibly being reflected by their various representations.

5.2. Building a Framework for Analysing Representations of Violent Women

Theorisations on female violence in general may provide an insight into why it is portrayed in such stereotypical modes on-screen (Vronksy 2007; Motz 2008; Carrington 2018). Vronsky (2007) discusses the social problem of violence being perceived as being associated primarily with men. Through his investigation of female serial killers, he argues that:

(violence) was thought to be implicit in the male physique, a function of testosterone. Men commit violence; women and children suffer from it...When women commit violence the only explanation offered has been that it is involuntary, defensive, or the result of mental illness or hormonal imbalance inherent with female physiology (Vronsky 2007, pp.24-25)

Vronsky (2007) and Carrington (2018) both investigate a rise in female violence and note the perplexing tendency for the media, and society in general, to deny that such violence exists.

Motz (2008, p.3) argues that this denial is rooted in misogynistic and stereotypically gendered ideas:

Two important reasons for ignoring female violence are, on the one hand, the widespread denial of female aggression and, on the other, the idealisation of motherhood. A further reason is the secretive or personal nature of much female violence, perversity or deviance.

These arguments are considered when analysing representations of female violence in section 5.3. and when considering whether discourses on violent women have informed the types of filmic representations being created.

In order to bolster the study of violent women on-screen since 2010 it is necessary to first consult historical theorisations of violent women in cinema (Tasker 1998; Neroni 2005; Schubart 2007; Chappell and Young 2017). Theorisations of these violent women include arguments that female violence is often eroticised on-screen (Schubart 2007; Brown 2015), that female violence is usually punished in some way (Meyer 2009), and that representations of women's violence sometimes perpetuate conservative narratives that promote violence in general (Stringer 2011).

Violent women on-screen are common within the action genre. The turn of the twenty-first century saw a significant rise in prominent female action heroes: "After decades of playing the sidekick or the villainess, the new action heroine has come into her own" (Brown 2011, p.6). This was a growing trend in 1990s cinema, and such heroines have become more commonplace in the twenty-first century. Neroni (2005) argues that the 1990s saw an increase in the number of violent women in films and she traces this growth back to the emergence of the phenomenon in 1980s mainstream action films. Neroni (2005, p.38) comments on the emergence of the

violent woman across all genres: “today it is rarer to see a woman who can’t fight for herself or help out in a fight than one who can”. This remains true in the decade under investigation in this research, as twenty-five out of the thirty-one films in the main corpus of concern to this research feature some form of female violence. The exceptions to this are: *Gravity* (Cuarón 2013), *Jupiter Ascending* (The Wachowski’s 2015), *Arrival* (Villeneuve 2017), *The Shape of Water* (Del Toro 2017), *Bumblebee* (Knight 2018) and *A Wrinkle in Time* (DuVernay 2018).

Theorisations of the violence perpetuated by women and its eroticisation on-screen span from psychoanalytical approaches (Mulvey 1975) to more contemporary poststructuralist theorisations which consider issues of spectatorship (Staiger 2011), gendered representations of violence (Stringer 2011), and the sustained eroticisation of female action heroes (Brown 2015). It is only in this current decade that female action heroes in the Marvel/DC universe have taken the helm of their own films: *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel*. Hollywood appears to be attempting to create more female protagonists in the superhero genre at least, with numerous female-led productions set for release in 2020. These include: *Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn* (Cathy Yan 2020), *Black Widow* (Cate Shortland 2020), and *Wonder Woman 1984* (Jenkins 2020).¹⁹ These action heroines all engage in violence and are marketed as such.

¹⁹ Due to the global pandemic which began in early 2020 - these titles are likely to be delayed until 2021. *Black Widow* was the first to announce a delayed release.

Identifying the cultural and societal issues or anxieties that the proliferation of female violence in the genre since 2010 may reflect is a concern of theorists such as Neroni (2005), Loreck (2016), Lavin (2010) and Waites (2017).

Neroni (2005, p.11) argues that the representation of violent women is: “either ideological or revolutionary on the basis of the relation it [violence] takes up to antagonism”. Neroni (2005) links periods where representations of violent women are more common on-screen to ideological crises relating to gender identities. Neroni (2005, pp.18-20) argues that violence has been traditionally linked to masculinity and that when the violent woman appears on-screen this is rooted in a fear of the destabilisation of established gender roles:

Such an ideological crisis occurs when strictly defined gender roles—roles that give a logic and a sense to sexual difference—break down. Ideology works to produce clear gender distinctions in order to provide stable symbolic identities for both male and female subjects... In a sense, the appearance of the filmic violent woman, then, is a cautionary tale about the elision of difference.

Neroni’s (2005) point regarding violent women as reflective of an ideological fear of shifting identities is considered when conducting textual analysis, particularly of women who feature as antagonists, in this chapter. However, despite this proliferation of violent women, the representation of male antagonists and men more generally as more naturally violent than women remains a sustained theme in the genre. This appears evident when the number of male antagonists in comparison to female antagonists within the superhero corpus of films is considered.²⁰ Only two textual examples out of thirty-three in that corpus explicitly feature female antagonists: *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Ant Man and the Wasp*. This genre relies heavily on

²⁰ Including MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) and DC films there were a total of thirty-three superhero films produced and exhibited in the decade 2010 to 2019. Of the thirty-three films, two feature female protagonists.

action sequences and on violence as a key theme. The fact that only two of the antagonists are female underpins the idea of masculinity as being linked to violence.

Loreck (2016, p.2) suggests that more complex treatments of femininity and violence actually exist outside of Hollywood productions:

these films (films with more complex representations of violent women) do not hail from the same filmic milieu as the exploitation, action and horror genres that commonly host the violent woman. Rather, they circulate within groupings positioned in elevated counter-distinction to popular cinema.

She considers the representations of violent women found in counter cinema as being more complex and interesting than those found in mainstream cinema and refers to such counter cinematic representations as “provocative, thought-provoking cultural objects” (ibid.).

Loreck’s (2016) argument is certainly relevant when the corpus of films in this research is analysed.²¹ Almost all of these films were produced as large Hollywood studio productions. This is evident when we consider the superhero genre where women have generally featured as eroticised background characters, like Black Widow in the *Avengers* franchise or Mystique in the *X-Men* franchise. This pattern was only broken with the appearance of *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel*. Both of these films were directed by women determined to portray positive female characters.

²¹ Out of the twenty-four films in the corpus that feature violent women, two are horror/science fiction crossovers; *Prometheus* (Scott 2012) and *Alien Covenant* (Scott 2017), with the remainder categorised as action/science fiction crossovers; four films from *The Hunger Games* (Ross and Lawrence 2012-2015) series, the *Divergent* (Burger and Schwentke 2014-2016) trilogy, the four *Star Wars* texts (Abrams 2015 and 2019; Edwards 2016 and Johnson 2017), *The Host* (Niccol 2013), *Lucy* (Besson 2014), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015), *Ghostbusters* (Feig 2016), *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017), *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders 2017), *Mortal Engines* (Rivers 2018), *Alita: Battle Angel* (Rodriguez 2019), *Captain Marvel* (Boden and Fleck 2019), *Dark Phoenix* (Kinberg 2019) and *Terminator Dark Fate* (Miller 2019).

When considering representations of violent women, Chappell and Young (2017, p.1) focus on representations of “transgressive women: those who challenge, ignore or cross over the patriarchal limits intended to circumscribe them”. Their work focuses on representations of what they term “bad girls” and the often transgressional attributes of female heroines. Their work is useful when conducting textual analysis of films featuring female protagonists who may be read as transgressional.

Waites’ (2017) work on the violent woman is particularly relevant to this research as it focuses on action films, specifically *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* (Fincher 2011). She concentrates on the emerging representations of violent female protagonists in the action genre. Her work is utilised when analysing representations of female protagonists in the action/science fiction crossovers found within the corpus of films of concern to this research. She defines the new action heroine as a “tough, self-determining warrior woman in a realm that codifies masculinity, and she continues to inspire critical and popular debate” (Waites 2017, pp.33-34). Drawing on the work of Schubart (2007), Waites (2017, p.34) expands on the fact that the representations of these women are largely created and directed by men and as such are shaped by their perceptions of women:

The contemporary female action hero is “a contested site,” one in which male ambivalence is played out because such “films with female heroes are written by men, produced by men, directed by men, and intended for a male audience” ... The Hunger Games and Divergent film productions, however, both of which are based on novels written by women, have been directed and largely adapted by men—and one wonders where the Kathryn Bigelow’s are when they might better serve the purpose.

Considering that the majority of textual examples in the corpus of this research are directed by men, Waites’ (2017) work bolsters the argument that more progressive representations of

women tend to appear outside of Hollywood studio productions.²² Her insights are utilised when considering the impact of gender diversity within crews and production teams on creating positive cinematic representations of women.

Waites (2017, p.34) considers the more progressive images of women in the action genre which have appeared in the second decade of the twenty-first century:

Framed neither as a babe...nor as the protective maternal figure of the 1980s and 1990s the warrior woman of the new millennium's second decade in action and thriller films is a highly skilled, non-sexualized, non-"musculinized," genetically or socially freakish loner whose appropriation of violence is neither balletic nor cinematically cartoonish.

Similarly, Lavin (2010) also considers the first decade of the new millennium as being marked by the appearance of more progressive, less objectified female action stars: e.g. *Kill Bill* (Tarantino 2003). Lavin's (2010) work also deals with more socially acceptable images of violent women across a variety of media forms. This chapter considers these insights so as to determine if they remain accurate in the current decade and to assess their relevance to the science fiction/action genre.

Throughout their work Chappell and Young (2017, p.4) focus on the key question:

is bad-girl behaviour as represented in popular texts truly transformative and empowering—or simply playing in to a commercialized and ultimately non-threatening reestablishment of women's traditional roles?

The representations discussed thus far in this section suggest that it is the latter - that stereotypical ideas of femininity are present in the dominant representations found in the genre.

²² Only four films out of the thirty-one in the corpus of films in this dataset were directed by women; *Wonder Woman*, *Captain Marvel*, *Jupiter Ascending* and *A Wrinkle in Time*.

When considering the female antagonists analysed in this chapter it is worth consulting extant theorisations of these rare characters. The longest running film series in history, *James Bond*, has traditionally featured female antagonists. Though not explicitly relevant to this research as it is not part of the science fiction genre, the series belongs to the related action genre. Funnell (2016, p.200) considers the use of the female antagonist in this franchise as being a means of perpetuating gendered stereotypes:

Throughout the 1960s, the franchise both engaged with and recapitulated historical approaches to gender that situated female sexuality as suspect and dangerous when articulated outside of the confines of heterosexual marriage.

Funnell (2016) sees the Bond series as consistently reflective of the state of feminism in the public and political spheres. She regards the Bond films of the 1960s as reflective of new ideas of gender identity and of women's new found freedom. The Bond films of the 1970s, Funnell (2016) argues, reflect a push back against women's liberation movements, relegating the Bond girls to smaller parts. With regards to the 1980s she argues that, in particular, in *A View to a Kill* (Glen 1985), Grace Jones was unchallenged in her dominance over Bond and thus exceptional. Funnell (2016, p.206) argues that there occurs a masculine performance of femininity in the films of the 1980s particularly with Jones' character "conflating the strength and muscularity expected of masculinity with the aesthetic beauty associated with femininity".

Tasker (1998, p.21) explores this notion of the appropriation of masculinity further while differentiating between "cinematic cross-dressing" and more complex historical examples of cross-dressing integrated with issues of race, class and sexuality. However, she argues that cinematic cross-dressing allows characters to inhabit worlds to which they do not belong,

usually in relation to their gender. Tasker (1998, p.68) describes various categories of women that appear as protagonists in the action genre:

In developing roles for women as fighters, action and crime movies have made use of stereotypes and images including the 'butch' type, the tomboy and the 'feisty heroine', alongside the conventionally glamorous and/or sexual action women who continue to populate the genre.

Here Tasker (1998) introduces certain stereotypes of violent women as found in the action genre, some of which the proceeding section draws on in the context of the current decade.

5.3. Key Paradigms for the Representation of Violent Women

This section presents four main arguments, and as such is split into four parts. The first part argues that women's violence tends to be explained as stemming from some form of trauma or as an expression of emotional instability. The second part explores the stereotype of women as maternalistic, nurturing beings and argues that representations of female violence are often presented as being rooted in a response to this nurturing instinct. The third section examines the trope of parental absence and male mentorship being used to explain the creation of violent women. The final section argues that often when women are violent, or feature in antagonistic roles with no explanation given for their violence, they tend to be masculinised in their appearance.

The analysis conducted in the following sections allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the representations of women in contemporary science fiction cinema to be obtained. The following sections also consider possible contemporary anxieties that may be reflected in the corpus of films.

5.3.1. Emotional Instability and Trauma: Finding Excuses for Women's Violence

In line with Neroni (2005) and Tasker (1998) this section focuses on representations of violent women who have their violence explained as the result of trauma or as an emotional response more generally. Explanations for violent behaviour as being rooted in these factors are found in the following texts: *Dark Phoenix*, *Ant Man and the Wasp*, *The Hunger Games*, *Mortal Engines*, *Captain Marvel*, *Lucy*, *Alita: Battle Angel*, the *Star Wars* series and, the *Divergent* series.

Explicit examples of the trope of explaining female violence as being a result of trauma occur in *Ant Man and the Wasp* and *Dark Phoenix*. *Ant Man and the Wasp* is the second instalment of the *Ant Man* series, the first Marvel film with co-protagonists and a female antagonist, Ghost/Ava. However, despite its being titled *Ant Man and The Wasp* and Hope appearing as The Wasp for the first time, this text is clearly a male-led film, with the film adopting Scott's point of view and privileging his perspective throughout. Scott Lang, or Ant Man, is under house arrest and is separated from his partner Hope Pym (The Wasp). Hope is on the run from the authorities with her scientist father. He is attempting to open a "*quantum tunnel*" in order to find Hope's mother who has been trapped in the "*quantum realm*" since the 1980s. However, Ava also needs the same technology so as to open the "*quantum realm*" for her own purposes. When Ava was a child her father attempted to create his own "*quantum tunnel*" which exploded leaving Ava phasing in and out of reality and in constant pain. Ultimately the Pym's successfully open the "*quantum tunnel*", retrieve Janet Pym, and she returns with powers that allow her to fix Ava's phase shifting, thus curing her.

This text, unlike so many of the other Marvel texts which feature simple, powerful, evil male antagonists, not only excuses Ava's violent, antagonistic behaviour but redeems her for it.²³ She repents in her final scenes and is shown to be remorseful for the pain she has caused.

Neroni's (2005) insight regarding mise-en-scène as reflecting female characters' emotional states is relevant to Ava's character throughout the text. In a key scene, after Ava has stolen technology from the Pym's, she returns to her home. This is a messy, dark environment with a large wall covered in glass, and various medical equipment placed around the room. In the centre of the room is a large glass chamber containing a bed atop some metal stairs. Ava climbs into the chamber, activating it, and shows signs of relief from the pain when waves of air are shown penetrating her body.

The small chamber that provides her relief from her pain works to convey the manner in which she is trapped by her condition. The medical equipment establishes Ava's character as being sick and in pain. The music at this point is melodramatic, with strings connoting a sense of pity. This contrasts with the frantic, pulsing music from the preceding fight scene. Here, the idea of Ava as a character worthy of pity is beginning to emerge through the mise-en-scène. The claustrophobic chamber in which she sleeps suggests that she is trapped by her circumstances and this begins to excuse her behaviour: "In films starring violent women, the

²³ The simple male antagonists are typically evil powerful adversaries who unquestionably need to be destroyed. *Iron Man*, for example, features money hungry Obadiah Stane, who wants Tony out of the way in order to make more profits selling weapons. The main antagonist throughout the *Avengers* series is Thanos who wishes to halve the population of the universe, and the first *Ant Man* features the jealous, greedy Darren Cross who is filled with hate and driven by greed.

mise-en-scène that surrounds the violent woman is almost as important as the actual violence itself in shaping our ideas about the woman and subsequently about her violence” (Neroni 2005, p.16). Even the colours in this scene support this notion: the desaturated drab room and Ava’s monotone outfit contrast with the warm yellow waves of light that caress her body and provide relief from her pain.

In a similar manner to the human antagonists discussed in the next section, Ava is only ever depicted in plain grey clothes. However, her hair is always long and tangled. This imagery connotes the idea that she, unlike the other human antagonists, is not in control of her violent actions. This is underpinned when she redeems herself by the end of the text. Her anger and violence are further justified by her having lost both her parents in the explosion that caused her painful condition. This scene is presented through the eyes of a young Ava, who narrates the action through the use of a voice-over. Strings are once again utilised in the score here in order to create a sense of pity and of empathy for Ava’s character. Ava explains through the voice-over that she worked as a spy and assassin for S.H.I.E.L.D. (the fictional spy agency in the Marvel cinematic universe) in exchange for a cure for her condition. She describes how the agency used her to spy and kill for them only to find out that they had lied to her about a cure. Ava’s manipulation by S.H.I.E.L.D. underpins how justified she is in her anger. As a child she lost her parents and was then taken advantage of by an agency that should have cured her. The fact that S.H.I.E.L.D. were the ones to train her to be a spy and assassin further serves to justify her actions.

The utilisation of Ava’s voice-over during scenes of her traumatic childhood and her past as a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent invites the audience to adopt her perspective and to empathise with this

violent character. The use of the voice-over privileges Ava's perspective and explains her actions and emotional state and legitimises her violence. The events Ava narrates have created an emotionally unstable character, in constant pain, who blames her condition on Hank Pym.

Silverman (1988, p.45) argues that classic Hollywood cinema tends to relegate female characters and their voices "within a hyperbolically diegetic context". She discusses the lack of female voice-overs in classic Hollywood cinema. This has certainly changed in contemporary cinema, but as Chapter Four highlights, female voice-overs are still somewhat rare. Silverman (1988, p.49) argues that the voice-over holds a certain significance within cinematic texts, positioning the owner of the voice in a place of power and privilege:

the theological status of the disembodied voiceover is the effect of maintaining its source in a place apart from the camera, inaccessible to the gaze of either the cinematic apparatus or the viewing subject... the voice-over is privileged to the degree that it transcends the body.

The inclusion of a voice-over from the perspective of the female antagonist in the case of *Ant-Man and The Wasp* underpins the justification of Ava's violence and encourages audiences to adopt her perspective.

Jean's character in *Dark Phoenix* is depicted in an almost identical manner to that of Ava. Jean is shown as being constantly in pain as she succumbs to the dark powers within her. Like Ava in *Ant Man and the Wasp*, her look connotes her violence throughout the narrative and memories of a traumatic childhood event spark her rage. When she is overwhelmed by urges to violence her hair floats around her head, visually connoting the idea of her lacking control. This textual example, like *Ant Man and the Wasp*, also features a key flashback sequence presented from Jean's perspective, which invites empathetic feelings from the audience.

Dark Phoenix is the fourth instalment of the new *X-Men* series that was rebooted in 2011. It focuses on Jean who becomes a more powerful, darker version of herself after becoming infected by an alien flare from space. Jean is shown to be in constant pain, like Ava's character in *Ant Man and the Wasp*. This is reinforced through the use of tight close-ups of her face and by the mise-en-scène. She is portrayed as a victim of her circumstances, and her violence is explained away as such. Scenes where Jean's violence explodes feature close-ups of her face which show pulsing red cracks on her skin. This suggests that the darkness of her character is within her, attempting to escape. The facial cracks also suggest that her femininity is too fragile to contain such a powerful force.

Kaklamanidou (2011) argues that an earlier iteration of the franchise, *X-Men the Last Stand* (Ratner 2006), which features the same narrative of Jean becoming Dark Phoenix, is regressive in its representations. She argues that Jean becoming the most powerful mutant and thus being superior to her male counterparts resulted in her death: "Patriarchy cannot accept this gender reversal and shrewdly turned her into the villain in order to justify her death and restore order" (Kaklamanidou 2011, p.68). The same fate befalls Jean in this newer iteration of the franchise and order is restored once she sacrifices her life and Xavier once again becomes the most powerful mutant. This demonstrates how little has changed in this regard in the current decade with the male characters remaining as the patriarchal leaders of the group. Jean may be the main focus of the narrative throughout this text, but her position ultimately remains subordinate to the male mutants, Xavier and Magneto.

This narrative structure upholds patriarchal ideology and perpetuates the marginalisation and subordination of women on-screen in Hollywood. As Kaplan (2001, p.7) argues: "In

Hollywood films, women are ultimately refused a voice, a discourse, and their desire is subjected to male desire. They live out silently frustrated lives, or, if they resist their placing, sacrifice their lives for their daring”. This is directly relevant to *Dark Phoenix* where two of the strongest female characters, Jean and Raven, the only two women to challenge Xavier’s authority, are killed.

The narrative portrays Jean as simply being unable to handle her power, unlike her male counterpart Xavier. They both possess telekinetic powers, yet it is Xavier alone who has mastered his. Once Jean begins to experience the full strength of her powers, she loses her identity and lashes out at her team. This suggests that femininity is weaker than masculinity and perpetuates stereotypical gendered traits. Jean loses control over her powers at various points during the narrative where she is emotionally vulnerable. Her lack of control at these key points of emotional vulnerability underpins the notion that her femininity explains her actions.

Violent outbursts occur at key points throughout the narrative. When Jean is confronted with the fact that her father abandoned her as a child because he was afraid of her powers, this results in an angry outburst. When she is confronted by her friends and teammates about her lack of self-control, she accidentally kills one of them, Raven. The manner in which these violent outbursts are linked to emotion emphasises the trope of femininity as marked by an inability to maintain self-control. It transpires that Xavier created a mental block in Jean so as to suppress her feelings and trauma. He altered her memories so she would forget that, as a child, she was accidentally responsible for the car crash that killed her mother. Xavier also edited her memories to make her think her father was dead, when in fact her father chose to pass all

responsibility for Jean to Xavier out of his fear of her. Once Jean is confronted with these unresolved issues and her real memories she lashes out in violence. This underpins and justifies Xavier's actions and bolsters the idea of him as the patriarchal leader capable of altering his subordinates' memories and thoughts. Loreck (2016, p.3) considers the link between femininity and passivity as being entrenched in the cultural understanding of femininity: "the notion that femininity is essentially pacifist extends back to some of the earliest accounts of womanhood". *Dark Phoenix* upholds this idea, suggesting that Jean's femininity renders her incapable of controlling her powers in the way that Xavier can.

In a similar manner to *Ant Man and The Wasp* and *Dark Phoenix*, Furiosa's violence in *Mad Max: Fury Road* is also explained by the narrative. She attempts to bring the young women she has rescued to "the green place" where she grew up before she was taken by Immortan Joe. Her anger and violence are justified by the invocation of images of her as a child, forced into a life of servitude under a despotic leader who breeds children with a series of captive women. *Mad Max: Fury Road* features Max, a newer iteration of the 1979 action hero, who in a dystopian futuristic desert landscape joins forces with Furiosa. She is a commander for Immortan Joe, the leader of a band of survivors who has given her the title "Imperator Furiosa". She betrays Immortan Joe by helping five of his female prisoners to escape. The events of *Mad Max: Fury Road* are seen initially from Max's perspective and this shifts during the course of the text to Furiosa's perspective as she is revealed to be the protagonist of the film.

Furiosa is an ambiguous protagonist, depicted as having empathy for the brides but being indifferent at first to Max who is also in need of help. She is violent and dangerous and the mise-en-scène and costume design reinforce her monstrous nature. Furiosa is missing a limb,

and wears a mechanical arm as a replacement. This works to castrate her character on-screen and appeases the castration anxiety that she potentially evokes as a strong female protagonist, shown as being superior to Max when it comes to the use of weaponry. Her body is consistently fragmented by the cinematography and the shot compositions. She is introduced through a series of shots which are intercut with shots of Immortan Joe preparing to address a crowd. A total of four fragmented shots of her body parts are utilised before her face is revealed. This fragmentation further emphasises the castration of her character.

This visual fragmentation of her character, both as castrated woman missing a limb and through the use of shot composition, consistently positions her as damaged. Not only has Furiosa lost an arm, but she is unable to bear children for Immortan Joe and this is why she was free to work as a soldier for him.²⁴ These key elements work to both excuse and justify Furiosa's violent actions. However, in contrast to the other female characters discussed here Furiosa is shown to be equal in strength to Max, the male protagonist, in fact shown to be superior to him in one key scene where he hands a rifle over to her.

The reading of Furiosa, drawing on the analysis conducted here and the intersectional critical feminist approach taken during this thesis presents an empowering and progressive female character. When read through an intersectional feminist lens she navigates a world where her value has been linked intrinsically to her biology, having to carve an alternative path through violence when she was found to be infertile. The detachable arm that she wields which could

²⁴ Charlize Theron explained Furiosa's backstory in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* (2015). She revealed that Furiosa was initially a wife to Immortan Joe. She "couldn't breed" and so became a "war dog".

be read as castrating her character on screen, could also be read as a means of rejecting the phallus and symbolising her “monstrous” nature as a symbol of castration (Creed 1993). Critical reception of her character also reads her primarily as empowering and progressive, represented in key phrases like: “one-armed fearsome female road warrior” (Anderson 2015), “a powerful woman” (Tallerico 2015) and “at no moment does one ever think that Theron is at a disadvantage against this worthy opponent” (Duralde 2015). This connotes the idea of her violence as necessary for survival in the *Mad Max* universe, demonstrating that she is on equal standing with the titular Max.

In a similar vein to Ava, discussed above, Furiosa’s look is somewhat masculinised in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. She has an almost militarised appearance. Her head is shaved and she wears grubby combat trousers with a simple t-shirt. Neroni (2005, p.138) discusses the tendency to separate female soldiers from their violence by giving them a more masculine appearance: “splitting the violent woman from her femininity”. Though not as specifically a militarised look, Hester, the protagonist in *Mortal Engines*, similarly wears masculinised attire: a long black leather coat with thick work boots. This trope also occurs in *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *Captain Marvel* (though she is an actual soldier in the same uniform as her male team members). In this manner these women have their femininity separated from their violence. Hester, like Furiosa, Jean and Ava as previously discussed, has had a traumatic past that prompts a violent response from her.

Mortal Engines is a post-apocalyptic story of cities on wheels that roam the Earth consuming smaller towns and other cities. Hester was raised by a cyborg bounty hunter after her mother was murdered by Thaddeus Valentine, who also scarred Hester as a child. This physical scar,

a visual reminder of her trauma comparable to Furiosa's missing limb in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, works to justify her violent actions throughout the narrative. As a young adult Hester tracks Thaddeus down and attempts to murder him. When she is introduced on-screen Hester's face is covered by a red scarf and when the large scar on the left side of her face is revealed the camera emphasises her pain by lingering on a close-up of her face. Like Ava from *Ant Man and the Wasp* and Jean from *Dark Phoenix* her pain justifies and excuses her violent behaviour. Lavin (2010, p.112) considers that violent characters who are justified in their violence create more enjoyable characters for spectators: "when considering issues of women, fear, and violence, these contexts can add up convincingly to amplify the emotional charge generated by watching righteous, retributive violence". When considering Loreck's (2016) argument that femininity is associated with passivity, this insight from Lavin (2010) is relevant to violent female characters. These characters must have a strong justifiable reason for their violence in order to be palatable protagonists.

In contrast to Furiosa's and Hester's masculinised looks, Black Widow, who appears in multiple films in the Marvel cinematic universe as a secondary character, is presented with an alluring look.²⁵ This can be seen to further mark her as dangerous while her violence is simultaneously explained away (Brown 2011, p.57). Black Widow is the code name for spy Natasha Romanoff, who was a Russian assassin, and who turned S.H.I.E.L.D. agent. Black Widow is due to feature as the lead in her own film *Black Widow* (Shortland 2021). This film

²⁵ Black Widow appears in the following texts from the Marvel Cinematic Universe: *Iron Man 2* (Favreau 2010), *The Avengers* (Whedon 2012), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Russo Brothers 2014), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon 2015), *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo Brothers 2016), *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo Brothers 2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo Brothers 2019).

is outside the scope of this research, however, but it will prove very interesting to investigate her representation in this new text, which is also directed by a woman.

Black Widow is a character whose violence is explained and justified (Neroni 2005). In *Avengers: Age of Ultron* she confides in Bruce Banner, her superhero counterpart The Hulk, that she was recruited by the KGB and sterilised as a young woman in order to make her more effective: *They sterilise you. It's efficient. One less thing to worry about. The one thing that might matter more than a mission. Makes everything easier, even killing.* Here she is offering an explanation for the violence she has enacted, suggesting that it was trained into her as a child. The explanation that motherhood could damage her effectiveness as an assassin works to align traditional femininity with passivity.

This key scene is shot with a simple shot reverse shot of the couple discussing running away together while the Avengers are taking refuge from Ultron, the villain of the text. Natasha wants to leave with Bruce, despite his reluctance, and start a new life together. This scene is melodramatic in tone and as Natasha recalls her past, she is shown crying and expressing regret while simultaneously justifying her past actions as an assassin. The medium close-ups of her face reinforce the melodramatic tone of the moment and are in direct contrast to the more usual use of wide-angle action shots in these superhero texts. Drawing on Doane's (1987) seminal work, Mayne (1990) describes the melodrama as: "identifying female pleasure in the cinema as complicit with masochistic constructions of femininity". The inclusion of this key scene emphasising Natasha's traumatic past can be interpreted as "emotional porn" in Haskell's (1987) terms, with Natasha confessing her sacrifice. That she is also shown in this text as being affectionate towards Clint's children, who call her "aunt", further marks her situation as tragic.

Once again, this scene portrays the emotional instability of this character as being responsible for her violent actions. Like the previously discussed characters in this section, the trauma that Natasha underwent as a child has created a violent adult woman. In a similar manner to the other texts in this section there occurs a key scene portraying Natasha's childhood experience of trauma during her time as an agent in training. The shots are shaky and desaturated, conveying her instability and trauma. She is depicted as a young woman, in various training scenarios. Grating auditory tones and rapid editing build to a shot of her on a trolley being wheeled in for her "ceremony", where she will be sterilised. This sequence includes various close-ups of her face in pain and fear. This scene underpins how her trauma created her violence, in a similar manner to the other female protagonists: Ava from *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, Furiosa from *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Hester from *Mortal Engines* and Jean from *Dark Phoenix*.

Drawing on critical reception of Black Widow also reveals a disappointing reaction to her character, with many critics focusing on the fact that the MCU took too long to produce a stand-alone Black Widow film: focusing on her death in *Avengers: Endgame*. Bradley (2019) considers it: "a hasty exit for a long-sidelined heroine who has for years deserved better...she's also spent her years in the M.C.U. as an accessory to narratives foregrounding other heroes". Steven's (2014) considers her representation in *Captain America: Winter Soldier* as an improvement from the previous regressive manner she was portrayed in earlier texts:

dryly funny Natasha at times comes perilously close to being ... a well-developed female character? She never appears in a full-body catsuit that I can recall, she cracks actual jokes rather than just reacting to those made by her male counterparts, and she has an amusingly high opinion of her own superheroic abilities, frequently comparing her intelligence favourably to that of the shield-wielding hunk at her side.

Whereas Child (2019) considers her representation as always having been a disappointment:

Johansson, despite her reported \$20m-a-movie salary, has always been handed the role of a lesser member of the Avengers – a sidekick who started out as someone for Stark to leer at in *Iron Man 2* (2010) before graduating to something akin to wise best mate, plus occasional Hulk love interest.

These reviews support the idea of her representation as being weak and one-dimensional, serving to support her male counterparts, and as a result, often being relegated to “love-interest”. The focus on her character as a “side-kick” (Child 2019), a “side-lined heroine” (Bradley 2019) and “reacting to her male counterparts” (Steven’s 2014) demonstrates the frustration of her character being secondary to the male characters in the texts. These reviews underpin the notion of Black Widow as a secondary character existing to function as an objectified tool for the pleasure of the male characters in the texts, thus portraying ideas of violence and power as the purview of men and women as functioning as subordinate, sexualised objects.

5.3.2. Stereotypes of Women as Nurturing Beings

This section highlights a trend apparent within the corpus of films, where an inherent maternalistic, nurturing instinct in certain female characters is utilised to justify their violent behaviour.

The theme of the nurturing woman as an excuse or reason for violence is present in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *The Hunger Games* and *Terminator: Dark Fate*. Furiosa’s violence and rebelliousness is portrayed as being rooted in a maternal desire to protect a group of younger captured women. Similarly, Katniss, the protagonist in *The Hunger Games* series, is thrust into

a fight to the death by her government after volunteering to take her younger sister's place. This is explanation enough for her taking measures to defend herself, her family and engaging in violent acts. These two protagonists, Furiosa and Katniss, undertake heroic acts to save others. Their violence is justified and explained by their protective maternal instinct. Their choice to volunteer to put themselves in harm's way to protect others evokes connotations of women as passive, sacrificial characters. In the context of Neroni's (2005, p.59) arguments with regards to female violence, the presentation of their actions as rooted in stereotypically feminine traits perhaps makes the violence more palatable to an audience:

In contrast to male violence and masculinity, female violence doesn't fit conveniently into our ideas of the feminine, and, because of this, it has a disruptive and traumatic impact, as reactions to actual violent women in American history bear out.

This insight from Neroni (2005) resonates with Lavin's (2010) consideration of femininity as being intrinsically linked to passivity. Often, this is used to justify a shift towards violence if the female character's ability to nurture is threatened: in order to protect she must become violent. Neroni's (2005) argument that the female action heroine's actions are often explained and/or justified is echoed by Tasker (1998, p.69): "the female action hero offers a fantasy image of physical strength showcased within narratives that repeatedly seek to explain her (and to explain her away)". The first half of the first film in *The Hunger Games* series engages in this process and serves to explain and justify Katniss taking up arms and defending herself in the second half of the text.

The Hunger Games is presented through the protagonist Katniss Everdeen's perspective. The film is set in a dystopian world where humanity is split into twelve factions with the poorer factions having to sacrifice two children a year in the "Hunger Games", a televised event meant

to bring the factions together and to remind the poorer ones of their place in society. Katniss volunteers to take her sister Prim's place after her name is picked for a tournament. She is sent to the Capitol where she struggles to understand the political system and the uneven distribution of wealth she finds there. Katniss becomes a symbol of rebellion for the districts and ultimately, in the second film in the franchise, escapes the Capitol's control and joins District Thirteen. Long thought to have been destroyed, District Thirteen is in fact led by President Coin who works to overthrow the government in the Capitol and to free the remaining districts.

The handheld camera shots which privilege close-ups of Katniss's face reinforce her position as a victim trapped by her circumstances. When she is raised into the arena for the initial Hunger Games, the point of view shot emphasises her perspective. The sunlight fills the screen for a second before the camera pans around to the overexposed surroundings. This connotes how disorienting the experience is for Katniss. The shaky handheld camera shots edited in quick succession serve to reinforce the frantic and out of control nature of her situation. The countdown fades out to become pulsing tones and the diegetic sound is completely removed when the clock reaches zero. The absence of the sound of the violent acts on-screen underpins the horror of the scene as medium close-ups show tributes with knives slashing into victims and people being beaten to death.

The chaos of this scene is intercut with shots from the "game-keepers'" sterile control room. These people are tasked with the creation of the arena and the constant surveillance of the tributes. They have the ability to create obstacles and dangers for the tributes to overcome in the arena, like walls of fire that force the tributes to take a certain path. The inclusion of the shots of these game-keepers further underpins the idea that Katniss has tried to be non-violent

and is being physically forced into situations of violence through the game-keepers' remote manipulation of the arena. She uses the resources of the land to survive, fresh water, traps made out of tree branches to catch food, and manages to make it to the edge of the arena far away from the killing zone. However, the game-keepers turn her around by creating a forest fire that forces her directly into the path of violence. When Katniss is initially forced into violence, she manages to use it indirectly to escape situations rather than attacking other participants in a head-on manner like the other competitors do. The contrast between Katniss using the land to survive and defend herself and the other tributes relying on weapons and supplies provided by the game-keepers' positions Katniss as what Schubart (2007, p.89) describes as a "good mother" archetype: "She is the cultural symbol of 'mother nature' and 'mother earth'". This aligns femininity with passivity and naturally occurring maternal instincts.

Katniss is eventually forced to use violence to defend herself when she is chased down by an alliance of some of the strongest tributes. Rather than using brute force or grotesque violence against the group of tributes, she instead saws a branch with a wasp's nest attached to it off a tree and drops it into their camp, thus indirectly killing some of them. The idea of a maternal instinct linking her to protective violence is later underscored further when she finds Rue, one of the youngest tributes, and tells her: *It's ok I'm not going to hurt you*. Her maternal instincts are further emphasised when Rue is shown sleeping with her head on Katniss's shoulder as they huddle together by a fire.

The foregrounding of Katniss's maternal instincts peaks in a key scene when another tribute traps Rue and uses her screams to draw Katniss out of hiding. In this scene she directly kills someone for the first time. She draws her bow and fires an arrow at the same time that Rue's

captor throws a spear. This simultaneity reinforces the fact that she has been forced into this course of action and that she is driven by her desire to protect Rue. Once again, this key sequence foregrounds Katniss's desperation and the manner in which she is trapped by her environment. This is underpinned by the mise-en-scène and shot types used. The closeness of the forest and the dense trees in frame connote how trapped by her circumstances she is. Rapid handheld shots cut in with close-ups of Katniss's desperate face and the sequence concludes with a mid-shot cut in of Katniss pulling Rue into a protective embrace just before she is hit with the spear.

Throughout *The Hunger Games*' four texts Katniss never explicitly uses violence without being forced to in self-defence, until the final instalment of the franchise, *The Hunger Games Mockingjay Part II*. During a key scene in this text Katniss is supposed to publicly assassinate President Snow, the man previously in charge of the Capitol and the "Hunger Games". Knowing that President Coin, the woman who leads the resistance, is just as power hungry a character as Snow and possibly responsible for Prim's (Katniss's sister) death, Katniss raises her bow at the last second and murders Coin in front of the large crowd. The violence and trauma enacted upon Katniss over the course of the initial three texts comes to a head here and she acts out in her first explicit act of murder. The initial three texts have worked to explain and justify Katniss's actions in this scene to the audience. Her nurturing instincts, first towards Rue and finally the vengeance she enacts for her sister Prim, who she cared for throughout the texts, demonstrate how nurturing tendencies are utilised in this text to account for and justify Katniss's explicit use of violence. This portrays the idea that women will resort to violence only if pushed to it.

5.3.3. Male Mentorship: Reconfirming Violence as Men's Domain

Another repeated trope that has emerged from the analysis of the corpus of films with violent women is that of male mentorship and absent parenthood. Tasker (1998, p.69) argues that the father figure is integral to certain representations of violent women:

The female hero may be represented as identified with the father, in search of authority and, sometimes reconciliation with authority. Her heroism is somehow legitimated in relation to a lost or loved father in films.

The theme of lost or absent parental figures features in *The Hunger Games* series, the *Divergent* series, the *Star Wars* series, *Mortal Engines*, *Ant Man and the Wasp* and *Dark Phoenix*. In addition, male mentorship features thematically in *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *Star Wars*, *Mortal Engines*, *Ant Man and the Wasp* and *Bumblebee*.

In *The Hunger Games* the loss of Katniss's father is shown through flashbacks and hallucination sequences. He died in a mining accident leaving her mother helpless and forcing Katniss into the role of maternal figure for her younger sister Prim. The fact that Katniss learned how to hunt from her father makes her character typical of Schubart's (2007) "daughter" archetype. This archetype is significant as the daughter figure usually learns her violence from a paternal figure. It is Katniss's knowledge of hunting that saves her life more than once and ultimately results in her murdering Coin with a bow and arrow. The influence of male authority figures on female action heroes is also pointed out by Waites (2017, p.34) who claims it is a sustained trope in action films:

Male mentorship or influence—together with the absence or marginalization of the mother figure—is one of several conventions associated with Hollywood's iconic warrior woman carried over to the new millennium.

Male mentorship is also present in *Ant Man and The Wasp* with Hope's character trying to convince her father of her ability to wield his powerful technology and become a superhero in her own right. The character of Rey in the *Star Wars* franchise is also in search of her parents and finds a surrogate father figure in Han Solo. *Divergent* features both of Pris's parents being murdered in front of her. Three texts feature key scenes where parents are murdered in front of the characters as children: *Mortal Engines*, *Ant Man and The Wasp* and *Dark Phoenix*. *Dark Phoenix* also features a father figure who abandoned Jean as a child, afraid of his daughter's powers after she inadvertently killed her mother.

Like *The Hunger Games* series where Katniss learned her survival skills from her father before he died, Rey in *Star Wars* is constantly searching for parental mentorship and finds a role model in Han Solo. As a young child she was abandoned by her parents on the planet Jakku and as a young adult she still holds out hope that they will return. *Star Wars* follows Rey's journey as she becomes a Jedi knight, fighting for the resistance who oppose the dark "First Order", a new iteration of the old "Empire" from the original series. The trilogy follows Rey's story and her search for her identity. *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* reveals that she is, in fact the granddaughter of Emperor Palpatine from the original series of films.

Throughout the series she finds male mentorship in two main characters from the original series. In *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* Rey meets Han Solo and quickly attempts to win his approval. Rey, Finn and BB8 are hiding onboard Han's ship, The Millennium Falcon, when Han and Chewy enter, guns cocked ready to fight. Han is portrayed in a low-angle shot positioning him as a figure of authority. He stands above the three stowaways questioning their intentions and the shot composition underpins the idea of him being a superior pilot and fighter

to Rey. Chewy is injured in a fight with a “death gang” sent to kill Han and this forces Rey to co-pilot with Han. Their chemistry when piloting together is displayed through the duo’s ability to complete each other’s sentences, as they co-operate to resolve the technical problems that arise. In a key scene, when they land on a lush green planet, Han gives Rey a blaster (a gun) and tells her: *You got a lot to learn*. He offers her a job on the Millennium Falcon as a second mate telling her that she is someone who: *Appreciates the Falcon*. This is the first time Rey has experienced kindness and her fondness for Han is depicted through medium close-ups of her smiling face bathed in natural sunlight. This peaceful scene portrays the warmth of family that she lacked on Jakku. It reinforces her need for male guidance and mentorship and justifies her need to defend her new “family” through the use of violence.

When Rey is later captured by Kylo Ren, the antagonist and Han’s son, he reads her mind, mocking her by saying: *Han Solo... You feel like he's the father you never had. He would have disappointed you*. After Han’s murder by Kylo Ren, Rey travels to find Luke Skywalker, the main protagonist from the earliest iteration of the *Star Wars* franchise, and the *last of the Jedi*. Young Jedis usually have a mentor that trains them in *the ways of the force* before they unlock their full potential. It is through this training with Luke that Rey begins to unlock her full powers. Though she is one of the more powerful Jedis she still needs male mentorship in order to reach her full potential.

Rey’s lineage proves to be integral to her violence and powers as a Jedi when it is revealed in *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* that she is the grandchild of Palpatine, the ultimate villain of the first six films in the series. In a key sequence she is shown to possess the same dark powers as Palpatine - the lightning energy he shoots from his fingers. No other Jedi has been portrayed

as possessing these powers before Rey. This connotes the idea that she cannot escape her grandfather's powers and control and reinforces the idea of violence as the purview of men.

Similarly, Hester in *Mortal Engines*, after the death of her mother, is taken in and raised by the cyborg assassin, Shrike. The flashback sequences of Hester as a child are depicted in warm saturated light and the close-up shots of her smiling face are juxtaposed with the desaturated, cold shots of her expressionless scarred face as a young adult. This demonstrates that she is a victim of her trauma and that her violence is rooted in her upbringing by the male Shrike. In a similar manner to the flashback sequence in *Ant Man and the Wasp* described above in section 5.3.1., Hester's past is depicted through the use of her in voice-over describing the scene of her being rescued and raised as a child by the cyborg, Shrike. The connotations of being raised by a cold, cyborg figure, Shrike, imply that her cold, vengeful persona was inherited from this male cyborg figure. This also speaks to theories on the male cyborg, as 'creators', more inclined to existential questions than female cyborgs- a point explored in Chapter Seven.

Contrastingly, *Alita: Battle Angel* depicts a cyborg character, Alita, resurrected by her father figure, Dr Ido. Alita goes against his wishes for her to remain a peaceful character and instead embraces her violent origins as a warrior cyborg. Ido himself is a "hunter warrior", a vigilante tasked with bringing peace to the city in the absence of a police force. While Alita possesses the violent abilities that she was initially programmed for, it is Ido's paternal guidance that assists her in integrating into her new life.

The pattern of male mentorship, as analysed here, points to an idea as violence as predominately a masculine act with these violent women having learned or inherited their violence tendencies from these father figures.

5.3.4. No Trauma, No Femininity: The Masculinity of Violent Women

This section focuses on representations of women as antagonists and women who have their femininity denied as a result of their violence. It argues that women in positions of power, or women with no traumatic past to excuse their violence are often masculinised in their appearance. As previously mentioned women rarely feature as antagonists in contemporary science fiction cinema. It is necessary to investigate such representations when they do appear so as to inform the findings of the study as a whole. *Thor: Ragnarok*, *Ant Man and the Wasp* and *Dark Phoenix* are the only texts in the superhero corpus of films that explicitly feature female antagonists as the main villains. They are presented as supernatural, evil characters who must be defeated by the heroes in order to restore order.

Wonder Woman's two main antagonists are male: Ludendorff, the German general who wants to defy orders and continue the war and Sir Patrick who is an incarnation of the God of War, Ares. However, Ludendorff has a scientist, Dr Maru, working under him developing chemical weapons. She is an antagonist worth considering in this section because of the unique nature of her representation. Although she is not the main antagonist she is given considerable screen time as a character that creates extremely threatening chemical weapons intended to be unleashed on unsuspecting populations. More complex secondary female antagonists are also found in *Captain Marvel*, and *Avengers: Infinity War* which features a female henchman to

Thanos, the main male protagonist. However this female henchman has a limited number of scenes and is primarily defined by her relationship with another antagonist. This is in contrast to the male henchmen who are primarily defined by their power and strength.

Thor: Ragnarok, is the first Marvel film with a female antagonist, Hela. It is the only superhero text where there is a clearly marked central female protagonist, making it a noteworthy contribution to this chapter. This is also a trope that occurs with the female antagonists in the *Divergent* series and *The Hunger Games* series. *Rampage* (Peyton 2018) falls outside the remit of this research as it features a male protagonist. However, as it is categorised as science fiction and features a female antagonist, a rarity for any genre, it will also be discussed in this section.

Thor: Ragnarok is the third instalment in the *Thor* series of films. The narrative features Thor returning to his home world, Asgard, to find that his fugitive brother, Loki, has taken the place of his father, Odin. Loki and Thor travel to Earth to find Odin who informs them that he is about to die and that once he does, their sister, Hela, will return and wreak havoc on the universe. Once Hela returns the duo barely escape a brief battle with her before being dumped on the planet Sakaar where people are enslaved and forced to fight each other for entertainment. Hela unleashes her wrath upon Asgard as Thor attempts to escape Sakaar and rescue his people. With the help of Hulk (a character from the other Marvel corpus of films), and Valkyrie (a soldier originally from Asgard), Thor makes his way back to Asgard where he finds that the only way he can defeat Hela is to bring about Ragnarok, the prophesised apocalypse, and destroy his home world.

Hela appears initially in a key scene after Odin dies. The skies turn grey and a large gaping hole appears in front of Loki and Thor. This void widens, and green ominous light emits from its centre while the edges appear to be a liquid substance. The camera cuts from Thor in a medium close-up to a close-up of the green light as the ominous soundtrack builds the suspense. Hela emerges from the green light as the camera pans up her body from her feet to her head until she is in a reverse medium close-up reflecting Thor's perspective. Various elements work together to reinforce Hela's monstrosity: her costume and look, the imagery associated with the void and the castration anxiety that her destroying Thor's hammer brings. This scene is reflective of Neroni's (2005) theory that women's violence is reflected in the *mise-en-scène*. However, the representations of this antagonist contradict Neroni's (2005) argument that women's violence tends to be explained away. In the same manner as the antagonists in *The Hunger Games* series, *The Divergent* series, and *Rampage* Hela does not have an explanation for her violence as rooted in trauma. In fact, Hela is to be feared for her natural desire for destruction and is so powerful that Odin locked her away and never spoke of her.

After his meeting with Hela Thor is emasculated. She destroys his hammer, the symbol and source of his power, and expels him to the planet Sakaar where he becomes a slave. Here he is captured by another woman, Valkyrie, doubly emasculating him. The narrative structure involves Thor realising that his power does not come from his hammer but from within and thus understanding that he has the ability to defeat Hela without his hammer. Thus the castration anxiety is appeased with this notion that there exists an essential power within. This reflects Cartesian philosophical dualisms on the idea of traditional binary essentialisms. Read through Clover's (1992, p.49) theorisations, the appropriation of the phallic symbol by the

female character represents an appropriation of the male character's masculinity. This works to underpin notions of masculinity as linked to violence and strength.

In relation to Hela and her monstrous look, she is dressed in a skin-tight black suit, similar to the one worn in *Ghost in the Shell* and discussed in Chapter Eight. In the initial scene where Hela is introduced the camera pans up along her curves highlighting her femininity. Her femininity is reinforced both through the cinematography and through costume and she is at once defined primarily in terms of her gender:

Both the actress and her costumes are essential in the construction of the woman on the screen and the two often become inextricably linked...the feminine ideals already embodied by dress and appearance seem to be amplified when projected onto screen as costumes, providing fertile ground for exploring the cultural definitions of femininity that shape our understanding of what it means to be a woman. (Gibson 2018, p.46)

This is in contrast to the manner in which she prepares for battle by waving her arms over her head materialising a crown made of black thorns. This crown covers her entire head and her hair disappears from view. This suggests that her costume is linked to both her femininity and her strength, but that she must hide her femininity (her hair) in order to be truly powerful.

In a similar vein *Dark Phoenix* features an unambiguously evil antagonist in Zuk. The energy Jean absorbed is sought out by Zuk, the leader of a shape shifting race of aliens. Zuk wants to draw the energy from Jean, killing her. Zuk, the female leader of the alien race, is the main antagonist in this iteration of the X-Men. However, as discussed in section 5.3.1., Jean's emotional instability in this text results in her character blurring the line between antagonist and protagonist. She murders a friend but ultimately redeems herself through sacrifice.

On-screen Zuk's facial expressions remain stoic and unchanging and her costumes consist of simple black clothing. Zuk is a shape-shifter and murders a pretty young woman, assuming her appearance. The woman is depicted in a white dress before her murder. This simplistic costume colour change, from white to black, is enough to convey the monstrous intentions of Zuk. Similarly to Hela in *Thor: Ragnarok*, she is consistently framed in low-angle shots, positioning her as empowered and in control.

In contrast to these two antagonists, Hela and Zuk, Neroni (2005) regards iterations of the violent woman as often being explained as their being products of their environments. This trope is present in *Dark Phoenix* with Jean's character, and in *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, with explanations and excuses made for the violent women in these texts. This trope is absent in *Thor: Ragnarok* where Hela relishes the days of the past where she and Odin would invade planets. There is no background story or narrative offered to explain her transgressive behaviour; she simply is evil and destructive. Similarly *Rampage*, the story of three animals - a gorilla, a crocodile and a wolf who are exposed to a pathogen that causes them to grow at an exponential rate, portrays the antagonist Claire Wynden as a ruthless money-hungry CEO valuing profits over human life. In the same vein *The Hunger Games* series and the *Divergent* series feature female leaders who are cold, calculating and evil.

One important commonality between these human characters in *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent* and *Rampage* is their masculinised appearance. They are all represented in a cold, hard manner. Claire from *Rampage*, President Coin from *The Hunger Games* series and Jeanine from *Divergent* all wear their hair in short blunt bobs, in comparison to the female heroes in these texts who wear their hair long and untamed. This connotes that these are not naturally feminine

women, and reinforces stereotypes about masculinity being hard and cruel and femininity being soft and delicate. As Neroni (2005, p.20) argues:

There are, of course, many different characteristics that we associate with maleness and many that we associate with femaleness, but one of the most significant is the identification of violence with masculinity.

These three antagonists also all wear simple block colours, grey for Coin, red for Claire and blue for Jeanine. This coupled with the lack of female antagonists across the genre reinforces that stereotypical views of masculinity and femininity are still pervasive. The dearth of female antagonists in comparison to male antagonists alone speaks to this. Brown (2011, p.43), when discussing the female action hero speaks of the tendency to project stereotypical masculine traits onto her: “A central concern for critics has been the common interpretation of the action heroine as simply enacting masculinity rather than providing legitimate examples of female heroism”. Brown’s (2011) insight is relevant here with regard to these female antagonists.

Neroni (2005, p.57) has a similar view:

Serving as a fundamental signifier of masculinity, we not only consider violence more the province of men than women, but it is also an activity that inevitably enhances a man’s masculinity as much as it would conversely detract from a woman’s femininity.

These women are presented as more masculine in their look to connote the idea of their being cold, hard, and villainous. Their simple business-like attire in block colours marks these women as what Tasker (1998, p.80) describes as “power dressers”:

both the power-dressed working woman type and the ‘masculinised’ attire of the action hero(ine) involve costumes that incorporate elements of supposedly male clothing as part of a negotiation of the presentation of women’s (aberrant) bodies in relation to women’s role(s).

This reinforces the argument made here that some of these violent women are represented in a masculine manner and their femininity is denied through their appearance.

While these women sustain patriarchal stereotypes regarding gender, one way in which such representations have shifted is that they are unapologetic in their hardness. While Neroni (2005) argues that violent women are trapped usually by their *mise-en-scène* and often have their violence excused, as discussed above in relation to *Ant Man* and *The Wasp* and *Dark Phoenix*, these alternative texts do not feature this trope. These women, as leaders, often removed from acts of violence themselves, issue orders and have innocent people killed with ease. Yet, no explanation is provided for their behaviour. *The Hunger Games* briefly mentions that President Coin's family was killed in an attack from the Capitol years ago but doesn't confirm whether this event is the motivation for her callousness. *Divergent* features a female leader who believes in her ideological cause and wishes to murder an entire subset of the population. Similarly, *Thor: Ragnarok* features Hela wistfully reminiscing about invading planets and spreading violence and destruction throughout the galaxy.

Like the other female antagonists discussed in this section, Dr Maru, the female antagonist in *Wonder Woman*, offers no explanation for her actions. Nicknamed "Dr Poison", she works on creating weapons of mass destruction for the German army. Like Furiosa (*Mad Max: Fury Road*) and Hester (*Mortal Engines*) she is physically scarred, wearing a porcelain mask that covers half her face. However, unlike these protagonists, it is implied that she accidentally scarred herself through her own grotesque experiments. As with the "power dressers" (Tasker 1998) discussed above - when Dr Maru appears out of her medical scrubs she is dressed in masculine apparel. The film is set in 1918 towards the end of the First World War and the women are dressed in historically appropriate costumes throughout the text. However, when Dr Maru is shown with Ludendorff murdering the commanding German officers, she wears

trousers and a cap. Later, at a formal ball, she is depicted wearing a dark coloured, collared coat in the midst of other women wearing feathered headdresses and soft, flowing gowns. This costuming has the effect of masculinising her character and it suggests that her evil intentions are only possible because she lacks femininity.

Furthermore, this key scene at the formal ball features Diana, Wonder Woman, appearing in a long silk dress. Shots of Diana are intercut with a medium close-up of Dr Maru's face. The contrasting effect of these shots highlights Diana's beauty as compared to the scarred face of Dr Maru. The effect underpins the idea that femininity is righteous and pure, and that masculinity is once again to be associated with violence.

The texts discussed in this section reflect contemporary anxieties concerning gender. The fact that these women are denied femininity in their appearance displays how sustained tropes about masculinity as strong and violent are being upheld in the current decade. Furthermore, these texts feature concerns about capitalism at the heart of their narratives. The *Hunger Games* focuses on the distribution of wealth and the unjust nature of a capitalist society which provides for the wealthiest in society while the poorest work the hardest and struggle. The *Divergent* series explores these themes in a different manner; their dystopian society is also split into "factions", resembling this type of capitalist society. *Thor: Ragnarok* displays similar themes, depicting the planet Sakaar as an unlawful society where people are imprisoned and forced to fight for the entertainment of the wealthy. Life has a price on Sakaar, as shown when Valkyrie sells Thor to the Grandmaster. Similarly, *Rampage* depicts CEO Claire ordering a scientist, the sole survivor on board a space station trying to flee from a mutated rat who has killed the rest

of the crew, to either bring home a sample of the pathogen or not to return at all. Claire lacks empathy throughout the narrative and is presented as only being concerned with profit margins.

These texts align the denial of femininity with the evils of capitalism. Anxieties regarding capitalism are also present in the fears around technology that the texts represent. *Rampage* features the development of a “mutagen” weapon engineered by scientists. It also features a private military group hired by Claire to recover samples of this “mutagen” which have landed at various crash sites across America. These men are presented as evil through their appearance and through the mise-en-scène. The *Hunger Games* series references the nuclear weapons that destroyed the world before the districts were created and portrays the population as being controlled through the weaponisation of their fear of another nuclear war.

5.4. Conclusion

This chapter makes four important arguments: (i) women who are violent on-screen must have their violence explained as a result of trauma and/or (ii) as emerging from an inherent maternalistic and nurturing desire to protect. (iii) Female violence is often a learned or inherited trait from a male mentor or results from the absence of a parental figure and (iv) when no explanation is provided for such female violence the women concerned are given a masculine appearance. These conclusions demonstrate that stereotypical ideas about femininity and masculinity are pervasive in contemporary popular science fiction cinema.

As demonstrated in this chapter violent women are often presented as victims forced into their violent actions. Examples of this pattern include *The Hunger Games* series, *Ant Man* and *The*

Wasp, *Dark Phoenix*, *Mortal Engines*, and the *Divergent* series. These women have all experienced some form of trauma in their past and that trauma is presented as having fuelled their violent behaviour. Another trope that has emerged in the current decade is one that was identified in historical discourses on female action heroes; the influence of absent parents and the father figure. This key theme occurs in *The Hunger Games*, *Star Wars*, *Dark Phoenix* and *Ant Man and The Wasp*. By focusing on a father figure as an influencing factor on female violence the idea of violence as being linked to masculinity and passivity linked to femininity is sustained.

This chapter argues that women's violence, in contrast to men's, is consistently explained, often as a response to trauma. This perpetuates stereotypical notions of femininity as inherently passive. The sustained theme of male mentorship as integral to women's violence also underscores the idea that violence must be learned from a father figure. Loreck (2016) draws on various discourses to argue: "the view that women are less likely than men to inflict physical harm upon others – or, in a similar vein, more often the victims of violence than the perpetrators – is an enduring and pervasive perspective in present day culture". This chapter demonstrates that contemporary science fiction cinema upholds this idea of women as being naturally passive, and violence as being primarily a male trait. This notion is further supported by the focus on audience reception of the character Black Widow as she appears in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In line with arguments presented in this thesis, in relation to objectification of secondary female characters, she becomes a tool for visual pleasure and lacks any real substance in the corpus of Marvel texts. The audience research conducted portray a character received as objectified and side-lined in the corpus of films, relegated to support her

male counterparts. Read through the critical lens appropriated for this study she demonstrates a one-dimensional character, with the focus on her desirability rather than her ability.

This chapter also makes the argument that a sustained pattern evident with regard to representations of violent women in science fiction cinema is that their violence is often linked to, and justified by, an instinct to protect and nurture. Women are often forced to become violent in order to protect, and this features as a theme in the following films: *The Hunger Games*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and *Terminator: Dark Fate*.

The chapter also addresses the fact that women remain in the minority when appearing as antagonists within contemporary science fiction cinema, examples discussed here include: *Wonder Woman*, *Ant Man and The Wasp*, *Dark Phoenix*, *Thor: Ragnarok*, *Rampage*, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. When they do appear as antagonists, their representations play into stereotypes regarding masculinity/femininity with their appearance often being masculine in nature. Their masculinity is often aligned with capitalist concerns, marking capitalism as the purview of men with women forced to enact masculinity in order to engage in it. The concern with capitalism and masculinity/femininity may reflect contemporary anxieties concerning modern society. According to the Central Statistics Office (Gender Balance in Business Survey 2019) only one in nine CEOs in Ireland is female. In America, where the vast majority of the films in this corpus were produced, the highest number of female CEOs in the Fortune 500 companies ever was recorded in 2019 with women making up only 6.6% of CEOs. This clearly informs the representations being created of powerful women in science fiction cinema which consistently marks them as masculine in appearance. This trope of denying female CEO's or leaders' femininity and creating an androgynous or masculinised appearance represents a

biased view of the nature of leadership roles as necessarily involving stereotypical elements of masculinity.

Another contemporary anxiety reflected in the corpus of films discussed in this chapter is the anxiety surrounding issues of gender identity. The sustained stereotyping of masculinity and femininity as depicted through the representation of violent women speaks to these anxieties. Previous theorisations of women as violent in cinema considered them as emblematic of changing attitudes regarding gender: “The continuation and proliferation of films starring violent women was also a reaction to the continuation of and proliferation of ways in which gender differences were elided” (Neroni 2005, p.36). The increased numbers in this decade of female antagonists, however flawed the representations may be, perhaps reflects a cultural shift in attitudes with regard to gender roles.

A similar argument is made in Chapter Seven that representations of women as cyborgs in cinema have shifted in this decade in a manner which reflects current anxieties regarding gendered identities. This chapter has demonstrated that the representation of stereotypical gendered traits is a sustained and dominant pattern in the genre. Contemporary societal anxieties are appeased by dominant representations of women on-screen that support patriarchal stereotypical views of femininity and masculinity. Violence remains a phenomenon that is perceived as masculine and when women enact violent acts these are explained away or justified in some form. Neroni (2005) argues that increased depictions of violent women appeared historically on-screen during points in history where ideological crises relating to gendered identities were prevalent.

The textual example of *Thor: Ragnarok* is one strong exception to this pattern. It depicts a female antagonist with similarities to typical male antagonists of the genre; as evil without an explicit reason for being so. However, the lack of female antagonists within the Superhero corpus of films, with Hela (*Thor: Ragnarok*) and Ava (*Ant Man and the Wasp*) being the only two main female antagonists across a total of thirty-three films, reinforces that this is an anomaly. Typically speaking women are perceived as being less likely to commit acts of violence or threaten disorder in the way that male antagonists can:

Patriarchy works in carefully calculated ways, and the latest superhero cinematic narratives serve once again as the proof of its hegemony despite the filmic evidence that points to a newfound respect for the powerful female heroine. (Gray and Kaklamanidou 2011, p.61)

This remains an important point to consider, especially given the fact that this genre of superhero film continues to dominate box offices worldwide. As this research has consistently argued, the dominant meanings being produced and circulated by contemporary popular science fiction cinema have real world consequences and it is of vital importance that a broad comprehensive survey of the representations of women found in this genre be conducted. As Kuhn (1990, p.53) argues: “In producing meanings, representations may in effect shape our understanding of the world we live in”.

Haskell (1987, p.373) writes about the increasing depictions of rebellious women on-screen from the late 1970s to the 1980s:

Even when the anger was turned inward, these women were symbols of defiance, of a refusal- or inability – to live by the old rules, accomplished by the doubts and confusion that any such shift must necessarily bring.

Troublingly, forty years later such women remain underrepresented on-screen. Exceptional violent and rebellious women are certainly to be found in contemporary science fiction cinema

- yet should this have not have become more of a standard trope at this stage rather than an exception? Regardless, by appropriating instances of violent women with nurturing instincts and representing stereotypical ideas of femininity, binary dualisms regarding gender identity are sustained and these work to reinforce hegemonic patriarchal norms. The important arguments made here demonstrate that contemporary science fiction cinema works to sustain conventional hegemonic ideas of femininity and masculinity. This results in a sustained and damaging pattern of stereotypical gendered representations.

Chapter Six - The “Monstrous Feminine”: A Consistent Pattern of Abject Feminised Imagery in Science Fiction Films

6.1. Introduction

This chapter argues that Creed’s (1993) theorisations of the “monstrous feminine” remain relevant to contemporary Hollywood science fiction cinema. The chapter maps out how Creed’s (1993) foundational framework can be applied, twenty-five years later, to popular Hollywood productions and reveals those trends relating to “monstrous feminine” imagery remain a prominent feature in recent science fiction films. The texts analysed in this chapter through the lens of Creed’s (1993) framework include: *Arrival* (Villeneuve 2017), *Lucy* (Besson 2014), *Prometheus* (Scott 2012), *Ghostbusters* (Feig 2016), *Alien Covenant* (Scott 2017), and *Dark Phoenix* (Kinberg 2019). These analyses consider how film language, cinematography, mise-en-scène and narrative structures represent the “monstrous feminine”. In addition, it is also pertinent here to investigate one film outside the main corpus of this research, namely *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi 2017) as it features a strong example of “monstrous feminine” imagery. This chapter suggests that the “monstrous feminine” imagery speaks to cultural and societal anxieties surrounding changing gender identities.

6.2. The “Monstrous Feminine”: A Theoretical Framework

Barbara Creed first described the “monstrous feminine” in 1993. In her seminal work she identifies and catalogues a range of typical female characters found in horror films through the prism of psychoanalysis, while being critical of some of Freud and Lacan’s theories regarding

castration anxiety. Moreover, Creed (1993) utilises Kristeva's theories on abjection to analyse the "monstrous feminine" in the horror genre. Creed (1993, p.8) argues that Kristeva's (1982) theorisations on abjection:

(Attempt) to explore the different ways in which abjection works within human societies, as a means of separating out the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject.

Creed (1993) considers abjection as rife in the symbolic mise-en-scène of the horror film which tends to blur boundaries. Her categorisation of female characters which utilises various archetypes of the "monstrous feminine", explained in detail below, is relevant not only to horror but also to science fiction as both genres tend to draw on similar gender stereotypes and to operate within fantastical spaces. Moreover, as Neale (2000) argues, many science fiction films, such as the *Alien* series, incorporate elements and tropes of the horror genre.²⁶

Importantly, Creed (1993) applies Freudian and Lacanian principles of the uncanny to analyse how women are portrayed both as victims and as sources of abjection. Creed (1993, pp.10-11) argues that the horror film provides the perfect setting for representations of abjection:

The horror film would appear to be, in at least three ways, an illustration of the work of abjection. First, the horror film abounds in images of abjection, foremost of which is the corpse, whole and mutilated, followed by an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrefying flesh...Second, the concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film: that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject...The third way in which the horror film illustrates the work of abjection is in the construction of the maternal figure as abject.

²⁶ Other popular films from 2010 to 2019 that can be primarily defined as horror films with elements of science fiction include: *The Cabin in the Woods* (Goddard 2011), the *Resident Evil* franchise (Anderson 2010-2016), *Get Out* (Peele 2017), *The Meg* (Turteltaub 2018), *The Purge* series (DeMonaco 2013-2016; McMurray 2018), *Us* (Peele 2018), *The Predator* (Black 2018) and *A Quiet Place* (Krasinski 2018).

Freud's theory of the uncanny mentioned above refers to familiar elements that evoke fear and revulsion. In order to explain the concept Freud lists three possible categories of the uncanny: (i) things that relate to the notion of a double (cyborg, twin, doppelganger), (ii) castration anxieties expressed as fear of the female genitals or of dismembered limbs, and (iii) a feeling associated with a familiar/unfamiliar place (Creed 1993, p.53). Creed (1993, p.53) argues for the application of Freud's uncanny to uterine imagery in the horror film suggesting that all of these three categories of the uncanny are rife in the horror genre:

All of these fears are explored in the horror film. The horror presented within each category can be defined in relation to a loss of clear boundaries...It would appear that the uncanny and the abject share common features for the uncanny also disturbs identity and order.

The textual analysis presented in this chapter reveal elements of the uncanny found in the corpus of films under scrutiny and explains them as reflecting or expressing contemporary societal fears and anxieties.

In addition, the notion of abjection as described by Kristeva (1982) is a key element of Creed's (1993) analysis. Kristeva (1982) regards abjection as a part of the process of identification by which an infant distances itself from the figure of the mother before engaging in the Lacanian "mirror-stage" of psychic development. The repression of this stage of psychic development continues to haunt the subject as an adult through abject imagery: "The abject confronts us...this time within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her" (Kristeva 1982, p.13). Furthermore, Kristeva (1982, p.17) traces abjection through religion, and iconography associated with religion, and argues that it eventually exposes itself through art:

The various means of purifying the abject-the various catharses-make up the history of religions and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion.

Kristeva (1982) considers the fundamental function of religion as being the purification of the abject. Doing so brings about catharsis by confronting the abject and then ejecting it in order to reinforce the boundaries between the human and the non-human. Creed (1993, p.10) argues that this catharsis is evident in the horror film, considering the corpse as being “utterly abject” in that it is a body without soul: “Within a biblical context, the corpse is also utterly abject. It signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution – the body without a soul”.

As Creed’s (1993) work is grounded in Freudian theories of the uncanny the concept is of particular interest when analysing a body of science fiction films that destabilise order and create worlds where the uncanny is rife. Her work is often abstract in its analysis, applying her “monstrous feminine” framework to otherworldly and alien species. Chare et al. (2019) argue that the “monstrous feminine” framework has been utilised by theorists concerned with a variety of genres and is relevant to most cinematic genres. They consider this framework as having continuing relevance, particularly to the horror genre:

The kinds of anxieties regarding genders and sexualities that Creed examines in her book are remarkably enduring in horror films...many of the themes and issues examined in *The Monstrous Feminine* continue to manifest in contemporary art and cinema. (Chare et al. 2019, p.2)

Chare et al. (2019) highlight how anxieties surrounding gender and sexuality remain a sustained theme in contemporary cinema, indirectly echoing Kuhn’s (1990) notion of the cultural instrumentality of filmic genres. Cultural instrumentality is Kuhn’s (1990, p.10) term for the function of a genre. She identifies five main modes through which it interacts with contemporary concerns:

First of all there is a notion that the overt contents of science fiction films are *reflections* of social trends and attitudes of the time...secondly, there is the idea that science fiction films

relate to the social order through the mediation of *ideologies*...Third is the view that films voice cultural *repressions* in 'unconscious' textual processes...A fourth cultural instrumentality concerns what science fiction films do to and for their *spectators*...Finally, there is the view that science fiction films are actively involved in a whole network of *intertexts*, of cultural meanings and social discourses.

Along with applying Freud's concepts to the horror film, Creed (1993) also critiques the essentialist claims of Lacan's work, proposing an alternative to his notion of "female lack". Lacan considers women as representing a lack in the symbolic order: "It is because woman is 'castrated' that she is seen to represent 'lack' in relation to the symbolic order while man inherits the right to represent this order" (Creed 1993, p.110). By reworking Lacan's claims of the mother as a *castrated* figure due to her *lack*, Creed (1993) argues that she is, in fact a *castrating* figure. Chare et al. (2019, p.7) summarise Creed's (1993) argument succinctly:

Woman as a psychic category not only figures as castrated, as not in possession of the phallus, but also as castrating. In this sense, Creed foregrounds the body as signifier of a sex, of sexual difference, as a contested site of meaning. The vagina is open to being figured not only as a signifier of lack but also as a substantial force, a castrating entity.

Finally Creed (1993) argues that both Freud and Lacan – reflecting social norms - privilege a male perspective and neglected the possibility of female agency. She argues that imagery of woman as castrator has existed throughout history, from classic mythology onwards and that "the concept of the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallocentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration" (Creed 1993, p.2).

This interpretation and use of psychoanalysis allows Creed (1993) to read phallic imagery as often symbolically associated with images of the "monstrous feminine", for example the phallic nature of the "witch's" nose which Creed argues represents her castrating abilities.

Contrary to studies previous to her work, Creed (1993) interprets certain female characters in a more complex manner than as “phallicised and pseudo men” (Chare et al. 2019, p.8).

The belief that woman terrifies because her genitals appear castrated is crucial to the Freudian theory of the castration complex. The argument that woman’s genitals terrify because they might castrate challenges the Freudian and Lacanian view and its association of the symbolic order with the masculine. (Creed 1993, p.110)

Creed (1993) identifies seven categories of the “monstrous feminine” in her framework: “the witch”, “the archaic mother”, “the monstrous womb”, “vampire”, “the possessed body”, “the castrating mother” and also “woman as castrator” or “*femme castratrice*”.

The only two categories of Creed’s (1993) “monstrous feminine” that are not found within the corpus of films under the remit of this research are: “the vampire” and “the castrating mother”. The five categories of Creed’s (1993) “monstrous feminine” found in the corpus of films under the scope of this research are discussed one by one in the proceeding section.

6.3. Representations of the “Monstrous Feminine” in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema

Drawing primarily on the theorisations of Creed (1993) which the previous section discusses, and cognisant of her foundational insights, this section conducts textual analysis of a subset of the chosen corpus of films, namely *Prometheus* (Scott 2012), *Lucy* (Besson 2014), *Arrival* (Villeneuve 2016), *Ghostbusters* (Feig 2016), *Dark Phoenix* (Kinberg 2019), the *Star Wars* trilogy (Abrams 2015 and 2019; Johnson 2017), *Alien Covenant* (Scott 2017), *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017) *The Shape of Water* (del Toro 2017) and *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders 2017). *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi 2017), which is not included in the main corpus of films with female

protagonists, is also considered here as it is a contemporary science fiction text which contains significant examples of “monstrous feminine” imagery associated with the female antagonist. The section analyses these cinematic texts utilising each of the relevant categories of Creed’s (1993) “monstrous feminine” framework: “the witch”, “the archaic mother”, “the monstrous womb”, “the possessed body”, “woman as castrator” and “monstrous mother”. In doing so, it investigates filmic portrayals of the uncanny and explains how filmmakers use monstrous imagery to perpetuate fear of, and to create repulsion towards, the feminine “other”.

6.3.1. “The Witch”

Creed’s (1993) “witch” category remains a prevalent trope in the horror genre having recently been used in a number of popular horror films: *The Witch* (Eggers 2015), *Suspiria* (Guadagnino 2018) and *Hereditary* (Aster 2018). Creed (1993, p.74) argues that, historically, the figure of the witch spoke directly to societal fears of women’s biological differences, most specifically women’s ability to create life:

Historically and mythologically, the witch has inspired both awe and dread. In ancient societies all magical powers, whether used for good or evil purposes, inspired the deepest dread amongst the members of the community.

Identifying a link between women’s blood and the supernatural, Creed (1993) argues that the curses of pregnant or menstruating women were considered more potent. Creed (1993) traces the historical vilification of real life witches in her work, citing “*The Malleus Maleficarum*” (1484), a guide for identifying witches. Creed (1993, p.75) argues that at that time women represented a fear of castration: “Witches were accused, among other things, of copulating with the devil, causing male impotence, causing the penis to disappear and of stealing men’s

penises”. Creed (1993) considers how fears played out in horror films featuring witches stem from this mythology and the history of the vilification of women based on their sexual difference. Within the corpus of films with which this study is concerned, elements of Creed’s (1993) “witch” can be found in: *Dark Phoenix* (Kinberg 2019), *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Abrams 2015), *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Johnson 2017), *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (Abrams 2019) and *Lucy* (Besson 2014).

This subset of films from the main corpus of texts links powerful women with supernatural powers. The *Star Wars* films from this decade feature the character Rey as a female protagonist discovering her Jedi powers. One potent example of Creed’s (1993) “witch” is the character Jean Grey in *Dark Phoenix*. She becomes more monstrous as her powers grow. Elements of the witch are similarly present in the *X-Men* franchise which features female characters like Storm who can control the weather: “Her [the witch] evil powers are seen as part of her ‘feminine’ nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature such as tempests, hurricanes and storms” (Creed 1993, p.76). The heroines in this franchise have powers which are more closely aligned with nature than those of their male counterparts.

Jean in *Dark Phoenix* is presented as having always possessed a dark side. As a child, she was accidentally responsible for her mother’s death. Xavier, the patriarch of the X-Men, took her in as a child and created barriers in her mind to contain the raw strength of her powers. Xavier betrays Jean by inserting false memories inside her head. This causes her to lash out in rage when she discovers the truth. By placing barriers in Jean’s mind rather than helping her control her powers Xavier is portrayed as being responsible for creating the monster she becomes. This is a trend that Creed (1993) recognises, where male scientists create female monsters. Before

Jean acts out as her alter-ego, Dark Phoenix, extreme close-up shots show a red electric charge pulsing through her eyes. This connotes the idea that darkness and evil lurk within her awaiting release. When she unleashes Dark Phoenix's powers the red pseudo-electrical currents spread across her face and her hair floats around her head, linking her monstrosity to her femininity. This is achieved through her look. When she is in control her hair is tied back and tidy and when she loses control her long hair floats around her face emphasising her femininity.

In contrast, Rey, in the *Star Wars* franchise, possesses Jedi powers, which have been predominately possessed by men in previous iterations of this franchise. Male Jedi heroes include Luke Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Yoda, Mace Windu, and Qui-Gon Jin. Female Jedis in the earlier films were presented as background characters. Rey's femininity is not linked to her powers in the same manner as Jean Grey's. In fact, she adopts a somewhat masculine appearance in the texts. This tendency to link power to masculinity is expanded on in Chapter Five.

However, Rey's powers grow throughout the trilogy of films until *Star Wars: Episode IX Rise of Skywalker* (Abrams 2019) where she becomes immensely powerful. This final film of the franchise reveals her as having descended from Emperor Palpatine, the dark Lord and main antagonist from the original six films. Rey struggles in this text to maintain her peaceful nature and to reject the Emperor's invitation to become a despotic ruler of the Galaxy. In a key scene she is with a group of rebels and friends when Chewy is kidnapped by the stormtroopers and his ship is shot down. Believing her friend to have been murdered in front of her eyes, Rey loses control and attacks Kylo Ren with a flash of lightning that spreads from her fingertips. This new power is shown as being steeped in evil, having only been wielded by the Emperor

previously, and it is Rey's loss of control over her emotions that unleashes this power. Linking her character to this force of nature, the lightning, connotes the idea of this kind of power as being natural to her as a dark powerful being. In this way Creed's (1993) "witch" archetype is invoked, linking her to forces of nature. Whilst Rey doesn't have her femininity linked to her powers in the same manner as Jean in *Dark Phoenix*, the comparison of this female Jedi's powers with those of her male counterparts suggests a gendered difference and a monstrous link with femininity.

Contrastingly, Hela, in *Thor: Ragnarok* represents a pure form of the evil witch as described by Creed (1993, p.76):

She is usually depicted as a monstrous figure with supernatural powers and a desire for evil. Her other social functions as healer and seer have largely been omitted from contemporary portrayals.

Hela, as described in detail in Chapter Five, is the first female antagonist in the Marvel corpus of superhero films from the twenty-first century. Depicted as violent, evil and powerful she matches this "witch" archetype perfectly. She returns from exile upon Odin's death to create disorder and displace Thor from the throne of Asgard. As Creed (1993, *ibid.*) argues with regard to the "witch" archetype:

The witch is defined as an abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order. She is thought to be dangerous and wily, capable of drawing on her evil powers to wreak destruction on the community.

This is underpinned in *Thor: Ragnarok* as the narrative focuses on Thor who, with the help of members of his community, must work to destroy Hela and liberate the people of Asgard. Hela possesses elements of the "witch" from her supernatural powers, to her ability to reanimate her dead familiar- a gigantic black dog. The key scene in which she reanimates her dead dog depicts

Hela diving into a tomb beneath Asgard to the dog's grave. This tomb is symbolic of what Creed (1993, p.77) describes as: "where she [the witch] hides her 'filthy secrets' in dark secret places which suggest the 'evil womb' of the abject mother".

While "the witch" remains a key figure in contemporary horror cinema, this section argues that elements of this archetype are also to be found in science fiction cinema. In line with the findings of Chapter Five this highlights the tendency to align femininity with nature. In the representations of "the witch" archetype, the natural, inherent alignment with nature is abject and horrific. The examples presented in this section occur during key scenes where the protagonists transgress the line between good and evil. The following section focuses on the next archetype in Creed's (1993) framework of relevance to this thesis, "the archaic mother".

6.3.2. "The Archaic Mother"

Creed's (1993, p.17) "archaic mother" archetype refers to the symbolic mother figure: "The archaic mother is the parthenogenetic mother, the mother as primordial abyss, the point of origin and of end". Reworkings of the primal scene, as grounded in Freud's theory of primal phantasies, are central to this figure of the archaic mother. The primal scene represents the origins of life: a child witnessing or phantasising about the primal scene is witnessing his/her own origins. Freud regards this also as the origins of other phenomena: The primal scene represents to the child its own origins in its parents' lovemaking; the seduction phantasy is about the origin of sexual desire; and the phantasy of castration pictures the origins of sexual difference (Creed 1993, p.18).

Creed (1993) expands on Freud's suggestion that an extreme primal phantasy involves "observing parental intercourse while one is still an unborn baby in the womb". She does this by analysing various reworkings of the primal scene in the horror genre. Creed (1993) suggests that in cinematic reworkings of the primal scene the archaic mother lurks in the background. She regards certain imagery that is evocative of the female reproductive system as suggestive of the archaic mother's presence. It is in Creed's (1993) chapter on the archaic mother, in which she presents an analysis of *Alien* (Scott 1979), that she posits that the archaic mother causes fear, not because she is castrated, but because she is the castrator. Creed's (1993) "archaic mother" can be found in the textual examples: *Arrival* (Villeneuve 2016), *Lucy* (Besson 2014) and the newer iterations of the *Alien* franchise, *Prometheus* (Scott 2012) and *Alien Covenant* (Scott 2017), and also in *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017).

Prometheus and *Alien Covenant* are prequels to the popular *Alien* franchise that began in 1979 with *Alien* (Scott 1979). As per Creed's (1993) original analysis of *Alien*, the "archaic mother" is also to be found in these newer iterations of the franchise. Creed (1993) applies her analysis not only to the alien species as a castrating symbol but also to reproductive imagery reflected in the architecture of the ship, The Nostromo. These elements are also present in the new textual examples in the *Alien* franchise. Furthermore, Creed's (1993) "archaic mother" is relevant to *Arrival* where alien ships drawing on similar reproductive imagery are present.

Prometheus and *Alien: Covenant* are framed as prequels to the *Alien* series and attempt to explain the origin of the alien species. *Prometheus* depicts a journey into space in search of humanity's creators. The crew of the USS *Prometheus* includes an archaeologist couple, Holloway and Shaw, and is led by Meredith Vickers on a mission in search of the planet LV-

223. The team explores an uninhabited pyramid structure on the planet. They discover that the “engineers”, the species they are in search of, evacuated the planet in an emergency. The engineers had been experimenting with biological weapons which escaped and infected them. The android that has accompanied the mission, David, infects Holloway with a black goo found on a cylinder in the pyramid.²⁷ Once infected, Holloway has sex with Shaw and impregnates her with an alien creature. Shaw is forced to abort the creature in a medical tube on board Prometheus. Every crew member dies on the planet except Shaw who manages to escape with David.

This sets up the next film in the series, *Alien: Covenant*, which tracks the progress of a colonising mission crewed by teams of married couples. The ship, Covenant, which had been set to colonise a planet, veers off course when a stellar burst damages it and kills the captain. The ship has a newer iteration of the android figure on board called Walter. He is a doppelganger of David from the previous film. The crew finds a nearby planet that seems habitable and some of the crew members become fatally infected with alien spores while exploring it. Eventually the surviving members of the crew meet David who brings them to the abandoned alien city. David has become insane and murderous, having killed Shaw and used her body as an incubator for the Xenomorphs (the name of the alien species in this franchise). The remaining crew members eventually leave the planet only to discover that a Xenomorph is loose on the ship. They successfully expel it into space. As Daniels, the female protagonist,

²⁷ Android characters are a common element of the *Alien* franchise: Ash features in *Alien* (Scott 1979), Bishop features in *Aliens* (Cameron 1986), and Bishop II features in *Alien 3* (Fincher 1992).

is put into hyper-sleep she realises that the android on board is in fact David and not Walter as she previously thought.

In her analysis, Creed (1993) links her “archaic mother” archetype not only to the actual alien but also to the representation of the ship, called *The Nostromo* in the original text. The “archaic mother” remains present in these newer iterations through the representation of the ship’s curved corridors and the sleeping pods. Creed (1993, p.18) saw this reproductive imagery as evocative of Freud’s primal scene:

The first primal scenario, which takes the form of a birthing scene, occurs in *Alien* at the beginning, when the camera/spectator explores the inner space of the mothership. This exploratory sequence of the inner body of the ‘Mother’ culminates in a long tracking shot down one of the corridors which leads to a womb-like chamber where the crew of seven are woken up from their protracted sleep by Mother’s voice.

This application of the “archaic mother” to the architecture of the ship is not only applicable to the *Alien* franchise within the dataset of concern here, but is also applicable to *Arrival* where the alien ships resemble large eggs. These connote the female reproductive system generally and ovaries in particular. As per Creed’s (1993) theory, the “archaic mother” remains a suggestive background figure inferred through female reproductive imagery. Similarly, the presence of the “archaic mother” figure is reinforced in *Arrival* through the film’s theme of time as circular and the manner in which the origin of and the end of life are linked in the narrative. This linking evokes the presence of the archaic mother: “the mother as primordial abyss, the point of origin and of end” (Creed 1993, p.17). However, the presence of the “archaic mother” in *Arrival* differs in an important manner to the abject presence in the *Alien* franchise, becoming a more hopeful figure.

Arrival is the story of a peaceful alien race that suddenly arrives in various locations around the world in large egg-shaped ships. Dr Louise Banks is a prominent professor of linguistics who is asked to assist the American military in communicating with the aliens. Fear and paranoia grow world-wide as humans fail to understand what the aliens want and governments prepare to attack them with nuclear weapons. Dr Banks with the help of physicist Ian Donnelly attempts to communicate with the two aliens on board the ship. Her encounter with their language, “heptapod”, gifts Dr Banks with the ability to experience time in a non-linear fashion. She sees her own future where she will marry Ian and have a child who will eventually die as a pre-teen. Ultimately Dr Banks saves the World and brings about World peace by translating the alien language and by choosing to embrace her future and fate as a mother destined to lose a child.

The idea of the cyclical nature of motherhood, and, consequently, of the “archaic mother”, is reinforced through *Arrival*’s mise-en-scène in a similar manner to that found in the *Alien* franchise. One key scene depicting the aftermath of the death of her daughter depicts Dr Banks walking away from the camera which tracks behind her in a wide-shot. She slowly walks along a curved corridor. The imagery connotes the idea of cyclical motherhood and hints at the fact that this scene depicts the future rather than the past. The curved corridor here resembles the corridors found in the *Alien* franchise that Creed (1993) suggested represented elements of the female reproductive system. Chare et al. (2019, pp.23-24) argue that representations of the “archaic mother” have shifted somewhat in the newer iterations of the *Alien* series:

There are also important textural differences between *Alien* and the prequels. Something of the vapourousness and viscosity of the alien craft in *Alien* is absent from the tunnels and chambers of the alien structure the crew explore in *Prometheus*... The industrial patina of parts of the *Nostromo*, its dirt and grime, has also been replaced by the clean, clinical-looking decks of the *Prometheus* and the *Covenant*.

Arguably, this is in fact reflective of a stylistic shift in contemporary science fiction cinema. The majority of the texts from this decade feature clean, white ships. This is the case with regard to *Passengers* (Tyldum 2016), the *Star Trek* franchise (Abrams and Line 2009-2016), *Oblivion* (Kosinski 2013) and *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (Besson 2017). Chare et al. (2019) agree that the archaic mother is still very much present in the newer iterations of the *Alien* franchise, though the representations may have shifted slightly. This shift may reference anxieties surrounding more inorganic methods of creating life as they become more popular in contemporary society: IVF, surrogation etc.

Arrival focuses on a fundamentally positive narrative in comparison to the *Alien* franchise- that the aliens, the other in the text, are peaceful and wish to gift humanity with their language. It does so while representing their otherness through the prism of the “monstrous feminine” - the archaic mother is consistently present within this text but in a manner which contrasts with the *Alien* franchise. This is particularly evident in the reworkings of the primal scene found within the text. Creed (1993) regards representations of the primal scene as central to the figure of the archaic mother. The “archaic mother” in this instance is represented in a positive manner.

Reworkings of the primal scene are present in two key scenes in *Arrival*. The first reimagining of the primal scene occurs when the scientists enter the alien ship, which is egg-shaped, for the first time. They are raised into a large dark shaft reaching towards a sliver of light. This connotes notions of the primal scene and of copulation. The scientists then enter the chamber where they first encounter the aliens. This chamber is a dark womb-like room, with the aliens placed on the other side of a glass wall in a smoke-filled containment area. The sounds the aliens make are almost sonogram-like: low rumbles, clicks and tones. Creed (1993) argues that

scenes of the astronauts exploring a series of dark womb-like chambers in *Alien* are a reworking of Freud's primal scene and this analysis is directly relevant to this key sequence in *Arrival*.

She (the "archaic mother" is there in the images of birth, the representations of the primal scene, the womb-like imagery, the long winding tunnels leading to inner chambers, the rows of hatching eggs, the body of the mother-ship, the voice of the life support system, and the birth of the alien. She is the generative mother, the pre-phallic mother, the being who exists prior to knowledge of the phallus. (Creed 1993, p.19)

The second reworking of the primal scene that is present in *Arrival* is arguably the most important scene in the text. Dr Banks enters into the alien's containment chamber for the first time, crossing the glass partition that usually separates her from them. She enters through a cylindrical dark pod which deposits her directly into their smoke-filled chamber. There is a white, organic, cell-like substance on the ground. Dr Banks' femininity is explicitly on display here. Her hair is down and flows around her face for the first time in the film as she is weightlessly lowered into the chamber. The mise-en-scène and sound design in this scene evoke the idea of a baby in the womb and the sonogram-like sounds are once again utilised here. Imagery of copulation is evoked in this scene from the small pod which penetrates the chamber to the floating woman within. Much like Jean in *Dark Phoenix* this explicit display of Dr Banks' femininity - her hair until this point has been tightly constrained in ponytails - links it to the monstrous in this reimagining of the primal scene.

This representation of the primal scene, in fact, recalls Freud's reference to an extreme primal scene phantasy where the subject imagines travelling back inside the womb to watch her/his parents having sexual intercourse, and also perhaps to watch themselves being conceived (Creed 1993, p.19). Following Creed's (1993) analytic use of the primal scene and applying it to this key scene in *Arrival* suggests that it may represent Louise travelling back to watch her own rebirth. If time is non-linear then this is indeed Dr Banks's rebirth, her awakening to a

new way of life. Louise is interpreting moments from the future so as to influence the past, and her realisation that time is non-linear occurs during this key scene.

Similarly in *Gravity* (Cuarón 2013) there is a prominent sequence that features a reworking of the primal scene and which evokes Creed's (1993) "archaic mother". *Gravity* is the story of a female astronaut, Dr Stone, taking part in her first space mission, while simultaneously coming to terms with the loss of her daughter. As a result of a spacewalk that is catastrophically disrupted by a meteor shower, she is forced to fight to make her way back to Earth safely with the guidance of veteran astronaut Matt Kowalski.

The key sequence occurs after Dr Stone is left alone by Kowalski who has just sacrificed his life for hers. Her suit is running out of oxygen and she finds her way to a shuttle pod. This near-death experience is heightened by an emphasis on Dr Stone's frantic breathing and the presence of pulsing warning tones. Similar tones are present in *Prometheus* during the birthing scene, as explained below. Once she pressurises the pod, she is able to breathe again and the warning tones fade as her breathing returns to normal. She sheds her space suit and floats in the pod in a vest and her underwear. This scene is shot in wide angle with Dr Stone positioned in the centre of the screen. She floats in the foetal position in front of the circular pod door as her safety cord floats around her body. This imagery is reminiscent of sonogram imagery, suggesting a reworking of the primal scene here with Dr Stone in the womb before being reborn after her near death experience. The music becomes extremely poignant here. Strings and harmonies evoke a sense of wonder. The representations present in this scene, and in *Arrival*, demonstrate a sense of awe regarding the "archaic mother". Where once she was feared, now

she is revered. These reworkings of the primal scene position the “archaic mother” as a figure of renewal, hope and reverence.

This sense of the “archaic mother” as a symbol of renewal and divinity is also present in *Ghost in the Shell*. The opening sequence of the film depicts the brain of a teenage girl being implanted in a synthetic body. This key scene features a variety of shots depicting the character’s “rebirth” as a cyborg soldier. The soundtrack is minimal and serene, with a choir eventually joining the melody as various camera shots of her body emerging from a factory assemblage process are edited together. The soundtrack, in particular the choir, works to underpin the idea of the events depicted in the scene being miraculous and divine. A circle of strong white light expands and fills the screen before flashing a variety of strong colours. This combined with the choral score reinforces the idea of this scene as representing a rebirth.

The first shot in this sequence positions a robotic body in the centre of the screen as a brain is slowly lowered into the head. Once the brain is secured and a face is fastened into place the body drops, limp, into a dark abyss. The body is then shown being inserted into a red canal before emerging from a milky substance through a circular opening. The music features a pulsing tone which at this point quickens, clearly connoting the beating of a human heart. As the body emerges from the milky substance the music fades before the voices of the choir reinforce the religious imagery of a human-like body being shown suspended below a white halo of light. This is followed by a series of fragmented shots of the cyborg body which are intercut with the flashing coloured lights until a fully formed naked cyborg body is revealed.

Creed (1993) observes that science fiction and horror films often depict reworkings of the primal scene. When discussing *Alien* Creed (1993, p.83) notes that:

In outer space, birth is a well-controlled, clean, painless affair. There is no blood, trauma or terror. This scene could be interpreted as a primal phantasy in which the human subject is born fully developed – even copulation is redundant.

Creed's (1993) observation is applicable to *Ghost in the Shell* and *Gravity* as their representations of rebirth are portrayed as painless, serene and as almost holy occurrences. The opening scene of *Ghost in a Shell* also presents a primal phantasy where "the human subject is born fully developed", (Creed 1993, p.83). The mise-en-scène, in combination with the soundtrack reinforce this idea of rebirth. Furthermore, Creed's (1993) archaic mother is present in *Ghost in the Shell*, evoked through the imagery of the female reproductive system, in the canals and organic material that create the cyborg character, and the beginnings of a new type of life.

An important shift has occurred since 2010 in relation to Creed's (1993) "archaic mother" archetype within the three texts *Ghost in the Shell*, *Arrival* and *Gravity*. Where the archaic mother previously appeared in a negative manner, as per Creed's (1993) interpretations, she is now present in a positive manner in these texts. Creed (1993) argues that this figure evokes fear and revulsion in previous texts, whereas the examples discussed in this section present a more positive, almost divine figure. Her presence signifies themes of renewal, hope and an emphasis on the primordial mother as a symbol of divinity.

This section demonstrates the prolific appearances of the “archaic mother” archetype from 2010 to 2019. This archetype remains a prominent figure in contemporary science fiction cinema.

6.3.3. “The Monstrous Womb”

The third archetype identified by Creed (1993) is the “monstrous womb”, which draws on the historical tendency to align women’s maternal functions with the grotesque. As she (1993, p.45) claims: “From the time of Hippocrates to Ambrose Pare, it was generally believed that monstrous offspring were created by the maternal imagination”. Creed (ibid.) recognises a variety of ways in which the birthing process is represented as abject in cinema: as a parthenogenetic birth, and as a link to the animal world:

Parthenogenesis is impossible, but if it could happen... woman could give birth only to deformed manifestations of herself... The second reason why woman’s maternal function is constructed as abject is equally horrifying. Her ability to give birth links her directly to the animal world and to the great cycle of birth, decay and death. Awareness of his links to nature reminds man of his mortality and of the fragility of the symbolic order.

Furthermore, Creed (1993, p.46) identifies horror films as sites where abjection is played out in terms of monstrous birth:

Horror films that depict monstrous births play on the inside/outside distinction in order to point to the inherently monstrous nature of the womb as well as the impossibility of ever completely banishing the abject from the human domain.

An important way in which Creed (1993, p.51) regards the “monstrous womb” as being suggested by the horror film is through the *mise-en-scène*. She considers certain elements of production design as reflective of uterine imagery and, as such, serving to evoke the “monstrous womb”. She identifies winding passages, cellars and a central rooms as symbolic

iterations of this imagery. Creed (1993, p.44) further regards the “monstrous womb” as being present in scenes of monstrous birth or in representations of monstrous offspring, linking the mother to nature and positioning her as a symbol of abjection: “woman, because of her reproductive capabilities, is not far removed from the world of nature. Her generative functions position her on the side of the abject”. Creed (1993) also regards this “monstrous womb” archetype as representing a breakdown of the inside/outside boundary.

The notion of the “monstrous womb” is present in the following texts from the corpus of films of concern to this research: *Arrival* (Villeneuve 2016), *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015), *The Shape of Water* (del Toro 2017) and *Lucy* (Besson 2014).

Arrival features elements of Creed’s (1993) monstrous womb. Through being able to simultaneously see her past and future, Dr Banks knows that her daughter will eventually die at a young age. Yet she chooses to marry Ian and give birth without Ian having pre-knowledge of the child’s fate. This causes him to leave them both, unable to cope with the pain. Creed (1993) argues that a child born without the agency of the opposite sex is illegitimate and monstrous in nature. The idea of “procreation and birth taking place without the agency of the opposite sex” is a key concept of Creed’s (1993, p.17) “archaic mother” and can also be found in the “monstrous womb” archetype. Birth taking place without the involvement of the opposite sex is also present in *Wonder Woman*. Diana explains that she was born when her mother shaped her out of clay and prayed to Zeus to give her life. It is also present in *Alita: Battle Angel* (Rodriguez 2019) when Alita, a cyborg, is found in a dump and brought back to life by a male scientist.

This theme is also present in *Mad Max: Fury Road* where birth takes place without the mother's agency. This text features a dystopian future where water is scarce and oil is the most important commodity. A faction of humanity is governed by Immortan Joe who controls a large body of fresh water. He keeps five young fertile women imprisoned so as to impregnate them with his offspring. One scene depicts a group of large women reclined with their breasts hooked up to large jars into which their breastmilk is being pumped. The abject scene is reminiscent of cattle in a milking parlour and links the women solely to their reproductive functions. Brabazon (2019) explores themes of forced impregnation in her work, through the prism of Creed's (1993) "monstrous feminine". Brabazon (2019, p.147) considers the theme of women as reproductive servants as confirmation of a fear of the feminine:

As Creed demonstrated, the maternal is also abjected... Being a woman means being a slave. No income. No property. Possessing a vagina creates life narratives of becoming an 'unwoman'.

Mad Max: Fury Road reflects this perfectly. The five young imprisoned women are defined primarily by their fertility. Furthermore, the linking of imagery of breastfeeding women to cattle blurs the boundary between the human and the animal. This works to underpin Creed's theorisation of the monstrous womb.

As Creed (1993) argues, the womb is represented as monstrous and as a site of abjection in horror films which feature monstrous births or in which the boundary between the human and animal is crossed. The boundary dissolution between human/animal is present in both *The Shape of Water* and *Prometheus*. The first textual example features an amphibious humanoid creature, and the narrative follows a lonely mute janitor who falls in love with him, ultimately helping him to escape the military facility where he is held captive. The sheer existence of this

amphibious creature is reminiscent of the “monstrous womb” and represents the breakdown of the human/animal distinction. Amphibian Man’s existence references a monstrous birth, evoking the uncanny.

Furthermore, *The Shape of Water* reveals the protagonist, Elisa, as having gills on her neck. The narrative resolves when she escapes to the water with Amphibian Man, who heals her gills enabling her to survive in the ocean. The reveal of the gills on her neck marks her as monstrous, suggesting that this is the cause of her muteness, which has already marked her as other. She is simultaneously marked as human and non-human through this reveal. However, unlike the horror films with which Creed (1993) is primarily concerned, this textual example marks another shift in the use of “monstrous feminine” imagery. This text consistently marks certain human characters as monstrous while portraying both Elisa and Amphibian Man as positive, peaceful creatures. This shift is hinted at during the surreal opening sequence. The film opens under water as the camera pans towards a cave on the sea-bed. Once inside the cave a hallway is revealed and this leads the audience into Elisa’s apartment which is entirely underwater. Elisa floats asleep in the water, her dress billowing around her legs. As she is slowly floats down to her sleeping position on her couch the narrating voice refers to her as *the princess without voice*, and introduces the film as a *tale of love and loss, and the monster who tried to destroy it all*. The monster referred to in this narration is the human character, Strickland, who experiments on and tortures the Amphibian Man, believing himself to be superior to this “monster”.

The theme of the outsider is evident in *The Shape of Water*. Elisa, has chosen to surround herself with outsiders, or those who might be considered ‘others’. She herself is deaf, her

neighbour Giles is gay, Zelda, her friend and confidant at work, is a black woman and ultimately Elisa herself falls in love with the Amphibian Man. The film treats these outsiders in an affectionate manner, and Strickland, a racist misogynist, is positioned as the antagonist of the piece. Strickland directly refers to the Amphibian Man as *an affront*, clarifying that his existence is *an offence*. In this manner he evokes elements of the uncanny to refer to the creature's human-like quality and that while he may appear close to humans in appearance, he is in fact to be feared. *The Shape of Water* deconstructs the "monstrous" in this manner by choosing to foreground the monstrous nature of humanity.

Creed (1993, p.41) sees the representation of grotesque birth as a way of linking femininity to the monstrous: "the feminine, particularly the maternal, is constructed as unclean specifically in relation to menstruation and childbirth". The notion of the female body as inherently abject due to the process of birth is highlighted most notably in *Prometheus* both in terms of the dissolution of boundaries between inside and outside and the involvement of the male scientist David in the process of creation. Shaw is impregnated in *Prometheus* with an alien foetus that she must remove. Creed (1993, p.57) argues that films that represent the womb as monstrous sometimes feature male scientists "attempting to create new life forms but only succeeding in creating monsters". It is David that impregnates Shaw with the alien creature and it is from her body that an inhumane monster is birthed. Creed (1993, p.57) argues that films featuring some form of monstrous birth define the woman involved as "monstrous in relation to her womb, that is, her reproductive system". The monstrous womb is doubly reinforced in this new iteration of the *Alien* franchise through this sequence of Shaw giving birth to the alien creature. David's orchestration of this monstrous birth evokes another of Creed's (2005, p.17) insights - the idea that when men are monstrous their monstrosity is somehow linked to the feminine:

“The male monster is made monstrous when he enters the domain of woman, animal and nature”.

Originally Creed (1993) saw the monstrous womb as found in *Alien* as representing a part of nature, as it is from the female alien that a nest of aliens is spawned. This is depicted as a natural occurrence. However, *Prometheus* links the origin of these aliens to another human-like species, conveying the fact that there is, in reality, nothing natural about them at all. This is further underpinned by the revelation that they are David’s creations, and that he, a “mad scientist” is responsible for their evolution.

The monstrous womb in *Prometheus*, highlighted in the birthing scene, is extremely reminiscent of Creed’s (1993, p.79) insights:

Procreation and birth take place without the agency of the opposite sex; and the creature born is primitive rather than civilized suggesting that a thin line separates the human animal from its ancestors.

Shaw finds a surgical pod and programs in a surgical procedure for the removal of a foreign body from the abdomen. She climbs into the pod while crying in agony as the alien foetus grows and moves at a rapid rate. This scene begins with wide-shots depicting Shaw climbing into the pod and then cycles between a variety of close-ups of Shaw emphasising her desperation and connoting a feeling of claustrophobia. The room has a surgical, sterile feel which is conveyed by the use of florescent lights and by the use of monotonous beeping on the soundtrack. The sterility of the environment contrasts visually with Shaw, who is dishevelled and dripping in sweat as she enters the pod. Bruises are visible on her legs and the foetus can be seen moving under the skin of her abdomen. Shaw screams: *get it out*, as the automated

surgical tools descend from above and slice into her abdomen. The laser that cuts into her abdomen is shown in a close-up as her skin splits apart. This is clearly reminiscent of a caesarean procedure. The perversity of the situation is heightened by the awareness on the part of the audience that Shaw cannot have biological children of her own. Thus, she is doubly violated by this alien creature. One of the shots used in this sequence is a point of view shot showing the laser from Shaw's perspective. Close-ups of Shaw's face screaming in pain are intercut with shots of the surgery as the foetus is removed from her body. Shaw must remain in the pod while staples are inserted into her abdomen as the alien foetus struggles and screams inches above her body.

The scene's representation of birth is emblematic of Creed's (1993) "monstrous womb" and also provides a strong exemplar of Freud's uncanny. The birth is depicted as monstrous and the lines between the familiar and unfamiliar are transgressed in a horrific manner. The persistent emphasis on close-ups of the laser during the surgery emphasise the inside/outside transgressions at play and serve to heighten the grotesque nature of the scene. Castration anxiety is also at play in this scene through the representation of female anatomy. The surgical pod scans Shaw's body and her reproductive organs which host the alien foetus are on display.

Discussing imagery of monstrous birth Creed (1993, p.222) argues that:

the act of birth is grotesque because the body's surface is no longer closed, smooth and intact – rather the body looks as if it may tear apart, open out, reveal its innermost depths. It is this aspect of the pregnant body – loss of boundaries – that the horror film emphasizes in its representation of the monstrous.

All of this monstrous imagery combines to create an unsettling, disturbing atmosphere, one where the female reproductive system is positioned as a site of abjection.

Another monstrous birth takes place in *Lucy*, the story of a woman in Taiwan who is unwillingly exposed to an experimental drug that unlocks the full potential of her brain. One key sequence features the monstrous womb through a double reworking of the primal scene. Lucy births a computer from her physical body and eventually evolves beyond her own corporeal form. Thus the primal scene is reworked twice. By her travelling back in time to witness the birth of the planet, Freud's extreme primal phantasy is evoked and taken further than witnessing your own birth. Here Lucy witnesses the birth of her entire species (Creed 1993, p.19). The "monstrous womb" is also invoked here as the boundary between human/non-human is crossed with Lucy literally becoming a computer by birthing a black, organic liquid from her body that then goes on to create new technology.

The monstrous womb imagery discussed in this section works to perpetuate the association of monstrous imagery with femininity and women on-screen. Biological differences are shown to be monstrous and thus patriarchal ideology is upheld. *Prometheus* is categorised as science fiction/horror crossover and thus Creed's (1993, p.43) observations remain especially valid when applied to these texts: "In the horror film the ancient connection drawn between woman, womb and the monstrous is frequently invoked". However, as with the shifting of representations in certain cases involving the "archaic mother", the "monstrous womb" in *The Shape of Water* is marked as a positive, natural element, with the monstrousness shifted onto the male character. These shifts need to be further analysed, in particular with regard to the horror genre, to ascertain if similar shifts are present in other textual examples of the horror genre.

6.3.4. “Woman as Possessed Monster”

The fourth category of the “monstrous feminine” present in certain representations within the corpus of texts is “woman as possessed monster”. Once again, this is an archetype usually found in the horror film, in particular films featuring possession by spirits or ghosts. This archetype, however, is relevant to *Ghostbusters* (Feig 2016) which attempts to marry science fiction and the supernatural in its narrative. A key scene in the film features the possession of one of the female protagonists. It is argued below that this possession of a female character is marked as more abject than the possession of her male counterparts. The “possessed monster” archetype is found in another form in *The Host* (Niccol 2013). Here, an alien race possesses human bodies and the narrative unfolds from the perspective of a young woman possessed by one such alien. “Woman as possessed monster” is also relevant to the texts *Lucy* and *Thor: Ragnarok*.

Creed (1993, p.55) draws on Freud’s third category of the uncanny as discussed earlier in section 6.2, “a feeling associated with a familiar/unfamiliar place”, to analyse horror films featuring a haunted house. *Ghostbusters* is primarily a comedy but has strong elements of science fiction and horror. It is a pertinent text to include in this study, particularly because of the level of public discourse it prompted. The film features a team of female scientists who have developed scientific methods of identifying, studying and capturing ghosts. The film opens with a haunted house tour featuring an explanation from the tour guide that the mansion is haunted by Gertrude Aldridge, the oldest daughter of Sir Aldridge, who stabbed all the servants in their sleep one night. Gertrude was imprisoned in the basement for the remainder of her life and now haunts the mansion.

Through Creed's (1993, p.211) prism of the haunted womb, the basement can be read as womb-like and thus a monstrous space: "The symbolization of the womb as house/room/cellar or any other enclosed space is central to the iconography of the horror film". The ghost of Gertrude Aldridge is trapped in the basement of the house, as she herself was in life, making it a haunted womb-like space. The monstrous imagery associated with the female ghost in *Ghostbusters* is further expanded when the ghost vomits green slime all over Erin. While the green ectoplasm is present in other scenes in the film featuring other ghosts, it is only this female ghost that knowingly opens her mouth to deliberately cover Erin with slime.

Later in the text the ghost of Rowan, the male antagonist, possesses Abby by shooting out from a sink and into her mouth. Green ectoplasm oozes from Abby's ears and nose and she, like the female ghost, vomits green slime all over the bathroom. After the ghost is forced out of Abby's body it possesses Kevin, the secretary to the Ghostbusters. However, this time it merely absorbs itself into his whole body at once and he is instantly possessed. There is no green slime involved in male possession. The possession of Abby is reminiscent of that of Regan in *The Exorcist* (Friedkin 1973), with a combination of green slime and head twisting present in both texts. In discussing texts involving female possession Creed (1993, p.128) argues:

Central to these (texts) was a strong sense of the vulnerability of the body and its susceptibility to possession. They also focused attention on the graphic detailed representation of bodily destruction.

The fact that Abby's possession is more violent and perverse than Kevin's reinforces Creed's (1993) argument. The text portrays the female body as vulnerable and weak in comparison to

the male body. Furthermore, the uncanny is present in these scenes as both bodily and gender boundaries are transgressed. Creed (1993, p.131) regards this as doubly violent:

The possessed or invaded being is a figure of abjection in that the boundary between self and other has been transgressed. When the subject is invaded by a personality of another sex the transgression is even more abject because gender boundaries are violated.

The green substance that is at first vomited onto Erin and which oozes from Abby's ears and mouth is explicitly abject. Its exclusive association with the female characters reinforces the idea of the abject as being linked with femininity. Drawing on Kristeva's (1982) work, Creed (1993, p.38) argues that the abject is that which must be "expelled or excluded in the construction of self" and that during childhood "all signs of bodily excretions – bile, urine, shit, mucus, spittle, blood – must be treated as abject, cleaned up and removed from sight". Creed (1993) regards the depiction of bodily excretions as evoking abjection and as central to certain horror films.

Likewise, monstrous imagery associated with bodily fluids is also present in *Lucy*. As she unlocks her brain's full potential the film climaxes with a key sequence where she casts off her corporeal form and creates a computer out of her body. This sequence is intercut with a shoot-out between the police and the drug lord who injected her with the drug initially. As the drug leaves the I.V. and enters her bloodstream, a white light shoots out of Lucy's mouth creating lightning which causes the electricity to fail. Root-like structures form under Lucy's skin and emerge from her limbs as a black, blood-like ooze. The ooze grows across the room and begins to suck energy from the computers. As this happens Lucy is portrayed as absorbing energy into her body from the electrical items in the room. This is indicated by the pulsing blue electrical light which is emitted from the gooey structure she has created. After she has absorbed all of

the electrical items, the confines of the room are stripped away and the scientists and Lucy find themselves in a white open space. Here she constructs a “next generation computer” out of the substance that has emerged from her body. Only her torso remains visible with the substance enveloping her lower body. Lucy is then shown travelling to various locations including Paris and New York, while demonstrating the ability to stop and move time with her hands. She watches the earth at different historical stages, and eventually observes the actual creation of the planet. As her brain’s potential inches closer to 100% unlocked – a process which is conveyed by screen titles intercut throughout the scene - the black substance grows up her body, until finally - at 100% unlocked - her corporeal body disappears completely. Like *Ghost in the Shell* this sequence features minimalistic choral singing connoting an ethereal, divine atmosphere. This element of the score serves to portray this transformation as being the next stage of human evolution and as somewhat miraculous in nature.

The “monstrous womb” is present in this key sequence in the form of the bodily fluid that grows from Lucy. Connotations of the female body as abject are explicit in this scene through the substance that grows under her skin and eventually emerges from her body. The boundary between human and machine is crossed in this sequence. This effacement of boundaries between the natural and unnatural reinforces the abject and monstrous nature of the sequence.

In the same manner in *Thor: Ragnarok*, the female body is depicted as abject through the use of fluid like imagery. Before Hela fights in various scenes, she waves her hands over her head and a crown seemingly made from liquid emerges from nowhere. This crown resembles the horns of a stag. This abject imagery works to represent Hela as a horrific character. Her waving

of her hands so as to make this crown appear suggests that she has control over this abject liquid. This serves to emphasise her monstrosity.

As with the “witch” and “the monstrous womb” archetypes, research suggests that “woman as possessed monster” is more prominent in the horror genres. However, this section demonstrates her presence within the science fiction genre also. The final archetype of the “monstrous feminine” is discussed in the following section.

6.3.5. The “*Femme Castratrice*”

The last archetype of Creed’s (1993) framework is the woman as castrator or “*femme castratrice*”. She argues that representations of the “monstrous feminine” present women not only as being castrated but also as agents of castration:

Male castration anxiety has given rise to two of the most powerful representations of the monstrous feminine in the horror film: woman as castrator and woman as castrated. Woman is represented as castrated either literally or symbolically... Whereas the castrated female monster is inevitably punished for her transgressions, the castrating woman – usually a sympathetic figure – is rarely punished. (Creed 1993, p.122)

Creed (1993) regards the archetype of the castrated woman as being most commonly found in rape revenge films. She also regards slasher horror films with women as victims as a significant category of the castrated woman, their bodies literally castrated on-screen. She (1993, p.125) regards the victimisation of women on-screen and the use of their bodies as sites of violence as being linked to Freud’s work on symbolic castration: “symbolic castration appears to be part of the ideological project of the slasher film”. Referring to a trend highlighted by Clover (1992), Creed (1993) also turns her attention to the female victim-turned avenger of the slasher film.

Clover's (1992) "final girl" archetype considers a trend in 1970s cinema where the surviving character of horror films was often a virginal teenage girl. She argues that in order to overcome the male antagonist the "final girl" becomes phallicised through the appropriation of certain weaponry and by overcoming death. Creed (1993, p.125) disagrees with Clover's (1992) argument that the female hero is phallicised on-screen. Instead Creed (1993) regards her as a "*femme castratrice*", an agent of castration. Whilst Creed (1993) focuses on literal representations of the *femme castratrice* - female slashers relegated to the horror genre - this section argues that more subtle, symbolic representations of this archetype are to be found in *Lucy*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the *Star Wars* franchise, and *Thor: Ragnarok*.

Lucy's narrative possesses elements of the rape revenge film, a genre which Creed (1993) regards as one of the common settings for the "*femme castratrice*". Though not a literal representation of the archetype Lucy represents: "woman as castrator by implication or through filmic devices such as substitution or symbolism" (Creed 1993, p.129). Lucy is violated by a drug lord who surgically inserts drugs into her abdomen in order to force her to mule for him. When she is incarcerated by some of his henchmen they subject her to sexual assault by groping her when she is tied up. Though no actual rape occurs, her body is certainly violated on-screen and this provides narrative justification for her revenge. As Creed (1993, p.135) argues of the rape revenge films: "Woman is represented as castrated either literally or symbolically". In *Lucy* it is both - her body is slashed open and her bleeding wound is shown in a variety of close-ups. She is further castrated symbolically as her agency is removed when she is kidnapped and she is forced to evolve beyond her human form. *Lucy*, in line with Creed's (1993) arguments, represents woman as castrator in a rape revenge plot. She is depicted in a sympathetic manner and is not punished for her acts of revenge. "Although her revenge might appear monstrous,

woman is not implicated in guilt for what she has done in the way that the protagonists of the male revenge film are” (Creed, 1993,p.129). She slashes and shoots her way through the text, punishing the men who wronged her.

The first scene where Lucy begins to enact her revenge is a quite literal representation of Creed’s (1993) “*femme castratrice*”. After she awakens with the drug coursing through her veins, helping her to unlock her brain’s potential, one of her captors enters her prison. His intentions are shown to be suspect as he checks the corridor behind himself to ensure he hasn’t been followed. Lucy takes advantage of the situation and spreads her legs invitingly. As he reaches down between her legs she crushes his hand with her thighs and incapacitates him, taking his gun. This erotically charged scene clearly illustrates Creed’s (1993, p.129) argument: “Woman, pleasure and death are intimately related in these scenes”.

Similarly, in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Furiosa is literally castrated through the absence of a limb and symbolically castrated through her infertility. Creed (1993, p.128) notes a particular trend regarding this archetype, in that she usually is a beautiful woman: “Why is the *femme castratrice*, one of the more deadly personae adopted by the “monstrous feminine”, almost always represented as fulfilling a stereotypical image of female beauty?”. This is the case in both in *Lucy* and in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. *Mad Max: Fury Road* is of particular interest as efforts are made to give Furiosa a partially masculine demeanour. This is achieved through the costume design and through the decision to shave her head. However, despite the fact that she is literally castrated on-screen, missing an arm, Furiosa is played by Charlize Theron, one of Hollywood’s most beautiful actresses. This contradiction cannot be ignored. Creed (1993, p.130) argues that the beauty of the “*femme castratrice*” works to reinforce her dangerousness:

“She arouses a fear of castration and death while simultaneously playing on a masochistic desire for death, pleasure and oblivion”. In the same vein as Furiosa, Hester from *Mortal Engines* is depicted as castrated on-screen. A large scar runs down the side of her face marking her as monstrous. She is simultaneously castrator/castrating in this text, in the vein of Creed’s (1993) “*femme castratrice*”, attempting to murder Valentine by stabbing him.

Hela, the female antagonist in *Thor: Ragnarok* is also associated with abject feminised imagery and can be read as a symbolic “*femme castratrice*”. *Thor: Ragnarok* is the third in the series of *Thor* films and the first to feature a female antagonist. After Odin’s death, Hela returns to Asgard with a plan to take over the galaxy. Thor, the protagonist, eventually destroys his home world in order to stop her as this is where she draws her power from. In a key scene Odin, before he dies on a cliff in Norway, warns the two brothers, Thor and Loki, of Hela’s power and the danger she represents. Odin disappears into the air in a peaceful, serene way, his body disintegrating into shining shards of light that float out to sea. Immediately following this, Hela’s monstrosity provides a contrast to the peace and serenity of his demise.

Accompanied by darkening skies and ominous thunder, a gaping black hole appears in the field from which she emerges, giving the impression that she has been birthed from the abyss. The hole appears organic in nature. The black oozing abyss emits a green light with pulsing liquid swimming around the edge of the hole. The “archaic mother” is present in the reproductive imagery utilised here. Hela has emerged from a reworking of the primal scene to wreak havoc. Her monstrosity is further demonstrated when she effortlessly destroys Thor’s hammer. The hammer has been a symbol of Thor’s power since the first film in the series, *Thor* (Branagh 2011), and Hela’s destruction of it symbolises her castrating power. This reinforces Creed’s

(1993) understanding of the “monstrous feminine” as a character to be feared due to her castrating powers.

The dangerous yet beautiful Hela doubly castrates Thor in this text. She destroys the symbol of power, his hammer, with a squeeze of her hand while mocking him and replaces him as ruler of Asgard. She later slashes an eye out of his head with her sword. This iteration of the castrating female monster departs from Creed’s (1993) readings of the films of the 1980s and 1990s. Creed (1993) argues that this figure is usually a sympathetic one, seeking revenge on society or on men who have raped her. Hela is not represented as a sympathetic figure. She is represented as inherently monstrous and violent, a point expanded on in Chapter Five. Furthermore, Creed (1993) argues that this figure is rarely punished for her actions. Hela, however, is punished in *Thor: Ragnarok* and she is ultimately defeated by Thor.

Castration anxiety is also invoked in various scenes throughout the *Star Wars* franchise. Firstly, Luke loses his hand when he confronts Darth Vader in a key scene in *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* (Kershner 1980). His hand is replaced with a robotic hand in a similar manner to Anakin Skywalker (a young Darth Vader from the prequel films) who loses his hand in *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (Lucas 2002) while fighting the evil Count Dooku. Anakin loses multiple limbs in *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* when he loses a fight with Obi Wan Kenobi and finally becomes Darth Vader. The new iterations of this franchise, episodes seven to nine, finally focus on a female Jedi who wields the “lightsaber”. This Jedi weapon is a phallic sword made from a laser capable of slicing off limbs with ease. Where castration anxiety in the earlier texts came from male dominated fights, this new text presents a female Jedi who is more powerful than most and who can harness the

strength of lightning. This represents a shift when representing a female Jedi. It is no longer enough to invoke castration anxiety through the symbol of the “lightsaber”. Rey is shown as possessing powers aligned with her femininity and with the “witch” archetype. This in turn make her an agent of castration and a powerful example of the “*femme castratrice*” archetype.

While the “*femme castratrice*” is not present in the corpus of films in her purest form, as commonly found the horror genre, elements of this archetype are clearly to be found in the corpus of science fiction films under the scope of this research.

6.4. Conclusion

Chare et al. (2019) argue that the “monstrous feminine” refers to anxieties surrounding gender and sexuality which is a key finding of Chapter Seven relating to representations of female cyborgs. It is pertinent to examine whether anxieties surrounding gender and sexuality are present in the corpus of films where the “monstrous feminine” imagery is present.

Creed’s (1993) insights remain relevant when considering cinematic representations of femininity in contemporary science fiction cinema. Sustained “monstrous feminine” imagery, as initially observed by Creed (1993), remains a key feature of the genre, in particular in crossovers between the science fiction and horror genres.

The key archetypes described by Creed (1993) that are present within contemporary popular science fiction cinema featuring female protagonists are: “the witch”, “the archaic mother”, “monstrous womb”, “woman as possessed monster”, and the “*femme castratrice*”. The two

remaining categories, “woman as vampire” and “woman as castrating mother” are not to be found within this corpus of films. Further research would be required to establish if these categories play a role in other genres or within contemporary popular science fiction cinema featuring male protagonists.

This chapter demonstrates that elements of Creed’s (1993) “witch” archetype are visible in representations of women with supernatural powers in contemporary science fiction cinema. The *X-Men* series of films is particularly notable in this regard. The series consistently portrays female superheroes as having powers that are more closely aligned to nature than those of their male counterparts. This perpetuates elements of “the witch” archetype and suggests that female powers are naturally occurring and monstrous in nature. The emphasis on these powers as being influenced by women’s emotions further works to underpin the idea of femininity as monstrous. Thus, the representation of these supernatural powers as being linked to nature and emotion marks them as different to the powers possessed by male heroes. This could be a means to appease any perceived threat to patriarchal norms. Aligning these powers to the natural world, and inferring that women have a natural link to such destructive forces, underpins the idea of femininity as being monstrous in nature.

The “archaic mother” remains a potent analytic element of Creed’s (1993) framework, particularly with regard to contemporary iterations of the *Alien* franchise. The archaic mother remains a sustained presence in the background of these texts through abject imagery of the female reproductive system. One shift visible within the films of this decade occurs in certain representations of the “archaic mother”. While previously, as Creed (1993) observed, she was a fearful and negative symbol, some representations of this figure are more positive in films

produced since 2010. Such positive representations occur in *Arrival*, *Gravity* and *Ghost in the Shell*. These become visible primarily through the mise-en-scène of the films which depict positive associations with the archaic mother. However, the newer *Alien* films, *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Dark Phoenix* continue to perpetuate negative associations with regard to the “archaic mother”. These texts portray the “archaic mother” as an all-encompassing black hole which is to be feared. Furthermore, elements of the “archaic mother” perpetuate the othering of women on-screen. By consistently representing alien ships as inherently feminine, and by suggesting the presence of the “archaic mother”, *Arrival*, the *Alien* franchise and *Gravity* continue to associate feminised imagery with the abject and the unknown.

Another of Creed’s (1993) categories, “the monstrous womb”, is used above to demonstrate that pregnancy and motherhood continue to be represented as abject on-screen in contemporary science fiction cinema. Ussher (2006, pp.82-83) observes a shift in twenty-first century cinema with regard to representations of birth. These representations have become more “controlled” and regulated through the medical gaze:

Women are positioned as mere vessels which bear healthy babies, their subjectivity absent from the frame, with dire warnings of danger meted out to those who might resist submitting the passive and docile pregnant body to the all controlling medical gaze.

This is relevant to the texts analysed in this chapter. *Mad Max: Fury Road* features mothers with no agency, essentially farmed for their reproductive abilities, and *Prometheus* features a clinical, futuristic birth made possible through the use of technology, which saves the protagonist’s life. These representations support Ussher’s (2006) contention that births that take place in the absence of medical intervention are accompanied by warnings and marked as monstrous.

This is perhaps reflective of contemporary anxieties surrounding technological advancements and the evolution of the birthing process. Scientific advances have made alternative methods of conception and birth possible, through IVF, surrogacy and the widespread use of caesarean sections. These advancements have made the birthing process much safer and these texts which depict birth outside a medically regulated environment as being inherently abject, speak to these anxieties.

The “monstrous womb” (Creed 1993) is more explicitly present in *Prometheus*, *Lucy* and *The Shape of Water*. These films suggest the transgression of the boundary between the human and animal and highlight the abject nature of femininity in this regard. *Lucy* portrays the boundary between human and machine being crossed when her body melts and merges into a machine. The human/animal boundary is crossed in *The Shape of Water* where an amphibious human-like creature exists and the female protagonist has gills in her neck. These texts embody Freud’s uncanny by featuring a key boundary between the familiar and unfamiliar being crossed. As Creed (1993) argues these transgressions systematically align femininity with the monstrous. However, as noted in section 6.3.3. *The Shape of Water* clearly links this “monstrous womb” imagery with love and compassion, contrasting it with representations of human-kind’s atrocities: the subjugation of black people in America, the marking of homosexuality as illegal, and environmental atrocities.

The two remaining categories, “woman as possessed monster” and the “*femme castratrice*”, are also sustained tropes of the genre in the current decade. Portrayals of woman as possessed monster that render femininity abject remain prominent on-screen. *Ghostbusters* emphasises

this through the visible contrast between male and female possession which marks female possession as much more abject than male possession. Bodily fluid, which is associated with abjection as a marker of femininity according to Creed (1993) and Kristeva (1982), is closely associated with femininity in *Ghostbusters*. Though beyond the scope of this research, it would be pertinent to investigate the use of this trope within examples of the horror genre featuring female protagonists from the same decade. The marking of bodily fluid as abject and linked with femininity, as discussed above, is also a trope present in *Lucy*. Her body is marked as abject as it evolves and is reborn as a computer.

The “*femme castratrice*” category is also found in the corpus of films of relevance to this research. One of the prominent markers of this archetype, beauty, is present in representations of the “*femme castratrice*” in *Lucy* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*. The beauty of both of these protagonists is emphasised alongside the danger they represent.

The following chapter argues that representations of women as cyborgs in cinema have shifted in this decade to reflect current anxieties regarding gendered identities. As discussed above in section 6.2., Chare et al. (2019) consider Creed’s (1993) work as articulating a crisis surrounding sex and gender taking place in the 1980s. This chapter has demonstrated that female abjection is a sustained and dominant pattern in the genre. This indicates that little has changed regarding societal anxieties surrounding sex and gender. These anxieties are still being played out in contemporary science fiction cinema.

Other chapters of this research argue that the gender disparity in relation to the crewing of film productions is a key determinant of the types of representations of women being created. As

argued in Chapter Five, films such as *Wonder Woman*, *Captain Marvel* and *A Wrinkle in Time* which were directed by women provide a more progressive approach to the representation of female protagonists. The present chapter demonstrates the manner in which, generally, the representations of women on-screen of concern to this research align femininity with monstrosity. It is worth noting that the films discussed in this chapter were all directed by men. This trend, where the tendency to align elements of femininity with the monstrous is prominent in male directed films, emphasises the importance of gender diversity in background crew roles to the creation of more progressive representations of femininity.

This chapter argues that the female body remains a site of abjection and the linking of abject imagery to femininity remains a sustained trope in science fiction/horror films featuring female protagonists. Thus, conventional hegemonic ideas of femininity as “other” are being circulated through contemporary science fiction cinema. This results in the sustenance of stereotypical gendered representations and the perpetuation of anxieties and fears regarding sexual difference and gender identity.

Chapter Seven - The Cinematic Female Cyborg: A Regressive, Objectified Figure

7.1. Introduction

This chapter analyses the proliferation of female cyborg characters that have emerged in science fiction cinema over the last decade. The chapter begins with a review of academic interpretations of female cyborgs and describes the rationale for utilising cyborg feminism as an analytical tool. This is followed by an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of the cinematic cyborg. The chapter then examines a number of textual examples of female cyborg characters in films released over the past decade.

This chapter suggests that the representations of the female cyborg found in contemporary science fiction cinema are emblematic of sustained female objectification and of prejudiced working practices historically dominant within the mainstream film industry. These practises tend to uphold hegemonic patriarchal norms through the representations they produce.

The films discussed in the chapter include *Prometheus* (Scott 2012), *Lucy* (Besson 2014), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015), *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders 2017), *Alien Covenant* (Scott 2017) and *Alita: Battle Angel* (Rodriguez 2019). The following films from outside the dataset are also considered in this chapter as they are science fiction films produced in the same decade which feature prominent iterations of the female cyborg: *Her* (Jonze 2013), *Ex-Machina* (Garland 2014), and *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve 2017). These texts feature male protagonists, and also, *Ex Machina* and *Her* did not feature in the top one hundred grossing films worldwide in

their first year of exhibition. However, these texts have been of interest to film studies scholars, and their inclusion in this chapter assists in providing a comprehensive study of the contemporary cinematic female cyborg. They also all feature complex and relevant examples of the female cyborg that are of direct relevance here.

A cyborg character provides the possibility of exploring the blurring of boundaries, the constructed nature of gender, and the opportunities created by the development of technology. However, this cinematic figure is, in fact, overtly sexualised and systematically becomes a figure onto which heterosexual hegemonic male desires that reflect the patriarchal nature of cinema are projected. Melzer (2006, pp.26-27) argues that, in order to be truly transgressive, the female cyborg must embrace diversity: “A feminist cyborg consciousness can only be transgressive and oppositional when developed in a critique not only of sexual but also of racial and class difference”.

The lack of racial diversity within the corpus of films of concern here highlights the missed opportunity of presenting a truly transgressive cyborg character. hooks (1996) describes the systematic privileging of white heteronormative stories in cinema, identifying this as a result of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy creating a hegemonic normative context where white stories are privileged, and black stories are marginalised. The privileging of white protagonists and the marginalisation of women of colour is visible across all of the texts within the remit of this study: all but two protagonists are white women. Furthermore, often when women of colour are cast in science fiction narratives their skin is often covered up or disguised. Examples of this phenomenon include Zoe Saldana in *Avatar* (Cameron 2009), and

the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films (Gunn 2014 & 2017) and Lupita Nyong'o in *Star Wars* (Abrams 2015).

This chapter demonstrates how a figure that could potentially embody progression and reflect ideas of diversity on-screen has become instead a site on which to project hegemonic desires.

Melzer (2006, p.28) makes the case for the type of cultural texts within the remit of this study being relevant instances through which to analyse the representation of female cyborgs:

The issue of representation...makes up a large part of cyborg debates and much of which takes place in the discourses on science fiction literature and film, the seemingly most "natural" realm of the cyborg.

This chapter argues that there exists a disconnect between the potentially progressive figure of the cyborg, as theorised by cyborg feminism, and the existing cinematic representations of female cyborgs. It does so by examining three key areas: (i) whether, as per cyborg feminism's definition, the characters transgress any boundaries, (ii) the objectification and hypersexualisation of these characters as they appear on-screen and (iii) whether these characters possess agency.

7.2. Defining the Cyborg

It is necessary to begin with an explicit definition of the cyborg figure in order to justify the choice of films which are discussed within this chapter. Melzer (2006) considers the cyborg as a hopeful figure which emerged initially from Haraway's (1991) seminal work. Melzer's (2006, p.8) identifies the cyborg metaphor as a key concept in feminist theory, arguing that:

The metaphor of the cyborg, a concept that becomes central to both feminist fiction and feminist criticism, emerges from explorations of the interface of technology and humans and

the boundary dissolutions that accompany biotechnologies and global capitalism's consumerism.

Drawing on Melzer's (ibid.) identification of the cyborg as being an "interface of technology and humans", other definitions state that a cyborg is typically considered to be an amalgamation of machine and man. Featherstone and Burrows (2000, p.2) claim that the figure's roots are found in cybernetics:

The term cyborg refers to a cybernetic organism, a self-regulating human-machine system. It is in effect a human-machine hybrid in which the machine parts become replacements, which are integrated or act as supplements to the organism to enhance the body's power potential.

This amalgamation of organism and technology can vary from pacemakers inserted in a chest, to cybernetic limbs, to the fictional depiction of A.I. and to android characters created with human qualities and attributes combined with technological elements.

For the purposes of this chapter, the term cyborg encompasses gendered android or robot characters and A.I. figures that possess self-awareness. The characters discussed here fit within the definition of cyborg in that they possess both human and technological elements, a point that is expanded on below.

Some theorists make an explicit distinction between cyborgs and androids. In particular, Springer (1998) considers the "replicants" in *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) to be androids as they are devoid of the human element that would constitute them as cyborgs. Springer's (1998) interpretation overlooks the fact that these androids have human memories implanted in their 'brains', and some of them, as a result, are unaware that they are in fact machines. They are autonomous beings capable of rebellion and dissent, and, in some cases possess their own

agency. For the purposes of this study, these characters are considered as an amalgamation of humans and machines, and thus as cyborgs. Furthermore, the sequel *Blade Runner 2049* features a cyborg giving birth as a key element of the narrative, demonstrating that “replicants” are capable of creating life.

Similarly, with A.I. characters, their capability to think for themselves defines them in the terms set out in this research, as being cyborg characters. Hayles (1999, p.xii) discusses the “Moravec test”, which proposes that human identity is essentially an informational pattern. This is in line with Baudrillardian concepts that consider the separation of the mind from the body and the philosophical questions surrounding the definition of ‘human’. In the same vein as the “replicants” of *Blade Runner* the A.I. characters included in this chapter, Samantha from *HER* and Joi from *Blade Runner 2049*, are both autonomous and independent individuals. Because these particular A.I. creations possess human identities capable of emotion and agency they are considered as cyborgs for the purposes of this research. While not the purest form of cyborg character, in that they possess no biological elements, they demonstrate autonomy and empathy, and these humanistic qualities support their classification as cyborgs.

With these definitions and explanations in mind, the definition of the cyborg adopted for the purposes of this research is as follows: a figure that combines elements of human biology and/or emotionality with technology and which exists as an autonomous being. As a figure that combines elements of humanity with technology, the cyborg presents the possibility of an existence outside of hegemonic social boundaries. As a figure that exists outside of traditional biological origins, it does not need to be gendered, raced or sexualised.

7.3. Cyborg Feminism as an Analytical Tool

The concept of cyborg feminism has developed from Haraway's (1991) "Cyborg Manifesto", originally published in 1985, in which she argues that the modern woman is more cyborg than "goddess". Her seminal essay considers issues of technology and capitalism alongside intersectional concerns regarding women. She argues that the intersections of technology, capitalism and science - which she terms "technoscience"- are of increasing relevance and importance to women. Haraway (1991) considers the blurring of boundaries between technology and humanity as directly relevant to a new definition of "woman", or indeed "human", and essential to progressive societal advancement. In her "ironic political myth", she considers all humans in the late twentieth century to be chimeras and cyborgs and regards female identity as a multitude of identities which departs from binary, simplistic definitions of "woman" (Haraway 1991, p.2). Through her metaphor of the cyborg, Haraway (1991, p.8) discusses the advancement of Western society, in what she terms a "political-fictional analysis". She states that in order to progress, women need to embrace technology and engage more with technological developments. While Haraway's manifesto is largely theoretical and metaphorical it has spawned a strand of critique, namely cyborg feminism. Cyborg feminism sometimes becomes more literal in its explorations, nevertheless it stands true to Haraway's (1991) essential arguments, in considering women in intersectional terms as a multiplicity of categories rather than as gendered one-dimensional subjects defined primarily through a set of binary oppositions.

Building on Haraway's (1991) metaphor, Melzer (2006, p.19) summarises the importance of theorisations of the intersection of science and feminism:

In general, feminist science and technology critiques in Western discourse problematize the gendered, classed, and raced relations women inhabit in economic, social, and cultural terms. They are concerned with women's position regarding structures of scientific inquiry and the impact of new technologies.

As the previous section explains, definitions of the cyborg essentially consider it as a figure that combines elements of technology with biology, and as a subject that theoretically should transgress boundaries and be free of societal prejudices. These traditional boundaries include race, sexuality and gender - all nodes of identity that are also considered in intersectional feminist analyses.

The prism of cyborg feminism allows for these intersectional concerns to be addressed in this chapter through the metaphor of the cyborg, a figure that is present in the science fiction film. This is not an entirely new mode of analysis as theorists including Holland (1995), Short (2005) and Melzer (2006) have applied this approach to their readings of historical filmic representations of female cyborgs. Whilst Holland (1995) and Short (2005) do not explicitly reference cyborg feminism in describing their methodological approaches, Melzer (2006, p.25) defends its use as an analytical tool:

Issues of representation and the production of meaning are central to cyborg feminism. Cultural texts are thus part of cyborg feminism's analyses of oppression, and science fiction is its main site of theory production.

Each of these theorists consider the problematic issues that can arise when dealing with the cyborg character and its potential for transcending traditional binary dualisms: mind/body, male/female, white/non-white etc. As Melzer (2006) argues, the main sites for understanding the cyborg figure are science fiction films, where the boundaries and definitions of such a figure are negotiated.

Melzer (2006, p.22) defines cyborg feminism as a theoretical field of study where the categories of humanity, feminism and technology intersect and overlap with the metaphorical cyborg figure:

Cyborg feminism is a field within Western feminist theory that focuses on identity formation, embodiment, and political resistance in relation to high technology and science. Unlike cyberfeminism, whose theoretical interventions are mainly focused on digital culture, cyborg feminism is concerned with the ways in which corporate capitalism, technoscience, and cyberspace, as social, economic, and political factors, affect women's lives and reshape subjectivities.

Balsamo (2000) also argues for the intersection of categories, however, like Holland (1995) and Short (2005), she does not explicitly reference cyborg feminism as a tool. Holland's (1995, p.157) paper is primarily concerned with "films (that) foreground questions of dualism and personal identity...highlight[ing] contemporary concerns about the effects of technology on the human "self" in the present and the future". As she focuses her arguments on identity utilising the figure of the cinematic cyborg, without explicitly referencing cyborg feminism she is indeed drawing on the concept. Similarly, Short (2005, pp.1-2) examines cyborg cinema more broadly, and attends to issues of identity and subjectivity that are central to cyborg feminism's tenets:

the question of what it means to be human is now seemingly filled with greater complexity and conflict than ever. Identity politics and contemporary criticism appear to have compounded this situation, attacking any universalistic notion of humanity as a totalising and inexact means of addressing differences between people – differences that are held to be crucial in understanding human subjectivity. The cinematic cyborg has not only been used to formulate many of these arguments, but also enables an important means of refuting them.

Melzer (2006, p.25) argues that cyborg feminism undermines "binary hierarchies" and utilises the metaphorical figure of the cyborg as a "feminist tool of resistance". It's ability to do this, she argues, relies on the figure's ability to render obsolete the traditional structural categories of gender, race and class.

In a similar manner to the way in which understandings of the cyborg are created and negotiated in science fiction cinema, theorisations of the role played by cultural texts in creating social meaning have been present within the disciplines of Film Studies, Sociology and Communications for decades. Goffman (1976, p.8) through an analysis of advertisements explores the construction of gender in his work: “Gender expressions are by way of being a mere show; but a considerable amount of the substance of society is enrolled in the staging of it”. In this quote, Goffman is referencing the complicity of society in creating and circulating constructed meanings in the form of gendered representations, something which is extremely relevant to this work on female representation within science fiction cinema. Similarly, Hall (1997, p.1) argues that “representation through language is central to the process by which meaning is produced”. The idea of cultural texts as creating meaning has more recently been accepted in the fields of Sociology and Communications:

How individuals construct their social identities...is shaped by commodified texts produced by media for audiences that are increasingly segmented by the social constructions of race and gender. Media, in short, are central to what ultimately come to represent our social realities. (Brooks and Hebert 2006, p.297)

These theorisations inform the present research and bolster the idea that representation is of the outmost importance, by illustrating the manner in which depictions of women on-screen drive and inform cultural meaning. In this chapter the analysis conducted focuses on the symbol of the female cyborg and the meanings created through the representations of this figure presented by contemporary popular cinema.

7.4. Discourses and Representations of Cyborgs in the Twentieth Century

Theorisations of science fiction films featuring the figure of the cyborg consider the figure as a site on which patriarchal hegemonic norms are projected. Science fiction films often draw on the moral questions raised about futuristic technology, consciousness and life by the creation of self-aware cyborgs. Holland (1995) considers the cyborg in these narratives as a symbolic tool to centre philosophical debates concerning questions of identity. She points to the cinematic cyborg as a device that reduces philosophical debates on identity politics to traditional dualisms. Similarly, Melzer (2006, p.103) argues that contemporary cyborg cinema bolsters traditional, patriarchal ideologies through the representation of women:

While, historically, scientific discourse and popular belief have relied on biology to construct and create sexual difference, in science fiction narratives technologies are central to this process of ‘othering’ women’s bodies.

The cyborg character has always been a fixture of the science fiction cinematic landscape, beginning as early as *Metropolis* (Lang 1927) where the social anxieties created by industrialisation were played out on the robotic body of Maria, a female cyborg. The later twentieth century ushered in a renewed interest in the cyborg figure. Some renowned cinematic examples include: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick 1968); *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982); *Star Trek: Generations* (Carson 1994); *Short Circuit* (Badham 1986) and *I Robot* (Proyas 2004). It is interesting to note that these popular examples which consider philosophical issues of identity all feature male examples of the cyborg. The *Star Trek* series does include one film, *Star Trek: First Contact* (Frakes 1996) that features a female Borg queen.²⁸ However,

²⁸ The Borg are a species who appear repeatedly in the *Star Trek* universe. They are an amalgamation of machine and human. Those who are assimilated into their network lose their human identity.

philosophical questions are addressed through the integration of Captain Picard, the male protagonist in the series, into the Borg and the Queen becomes a hypersexualised and reductionist symbol.

The previous decade to this study, 2000 to 2010, saw iterations of the female cyborg figure in films such as *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (Mostow 2003), *The Stepford Wives* (Oz 2004), and *Aeon Flux* (Kusama 2005). These examples tend to highlight femininity in the representation of female cyborgs. The new iteration of the terminator in *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* possesses the ability to turn to liquid and then mimic any person they wish. The terminator sees a poster featuring a beautiful female model and as a result chooses this form throughout the text. Numerous instances in the film feature commentary on the female character's sexual attractiveness. Similarly, *The Stepford Wives* focuses on a small town in America where the men have turned their wives into obedient feminised robots. *Aeon Flux* follows Aeon, an assassin whose body is inscribed with technological enhancements and who is consistently objectified on-screen throughout the film.

This decade, 2000 to 2010, also witnessed an abundance of male cyborg characters and much academic writing from this period focuses on representations of masculinity. Filmic representations of male cyborgs, traditionally, emphasise the masculinity of the cyborg and they are often featured in antagonistic roles: e.g., *Terminator* (Cameron 1984) and *Alien* (Scott 1979). Tomas (1995, p21) identifies a trend where male cyborgs take on militaristic qualities. This identification of stereotypical gender traits based on the sex of the cyborg is expanded on by Melzer (2006, p.128) who argues that representations of cyborgs are symbolic metaphors

for gender in certain texts: “Representations of technology are linked to metaphors of gender: hard, muscular, armed masculine bodies oppose fluid, morphing, unstable feminine forms”.

Since 2010, the period relevant to this study, the cyborg has featured in the following examples of the dataset for this study: *Lucy* (Besson 2014) where the protagonist evolves from her human form into a supercomputer without corporeal form; *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015) which features Furiosa as a female protagonist with a robotic arm; *Ghost in The Shell* (Sanders 2017) which revolves around a human brain having been implanted into a “perfect” robotic body; *Captain Marvel* (Boden and Fleck 2019) which features a protagonist that has been merged with alien technology and *Alita: Battle Angel* (Rodriguez 2019) which follows a teenage cyborg on a path of self-discovery.

Prometheus (Scott 2012), *Alien Covenant* (Scott 2012) and *Mortal Engines* (Rivers 2018) all feature male cyborgs which exist to provide a contrast with the female protagonists. The women in the *Alien* franchise are usually tasked with saving others, often by sacrificing themselves. They, in the most recent iterations of the franchise, are contrasted with the hard, cold, and calculating male cyborgs. However, the manner in which their stereotypical gendered attributes are highlighted in these texts through their juxtaposition with male cyborgs is worth noting here. *Mortal Engines* features an assassin cyborg, Shrike, who raised Hester and is unrelenting in hunting her down. The use of the male cyborg in these cinematic texts reinforces the overall analysis put forth in this chapter, that the primary function of the cyborg figure in contemporary cinema is to reinforce traditional patriarchal norms, in this case gender norms.

Some notable iterations of the female cyborg which fall outside the main remit of this study, as mentioned in section 7.1., but within the relevant decade include: *Her*, a love story about a man who falls in love with his A.I. organiser; *Ex Machina* where a male genius invents the first A.I. robot, Ava, who despises her creator and plots to escape; and *Blade Runner 2049* which features two prominent cyborg characters: Joi, an A.I. hologram and Luv a new iteration of the old “replicants” - artificial humans with implanted memories. In order to present a thorough and comprehensive study of the contemporary female cyborg figure from 2010 to 2019 these textual examples are included in the following analysis.

It is pertinent to consider cinematic theorisations on cyborgs in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of cyborg representations in the decade spanning from 2010 to 2019. As pointed out by various scholars, theorisations of the figure of the cyborg as a site for the projection of fears and anxieties relating to advances in technology are common within academia (Telotte 1990; Holland 1995; Pringle 2013; Redmond 2004). Holland (1995) regards cyborg narratives as being parables of fear of either our being eradicated by or becoming cyborgs. This notion is similarly echoed by Redmond (2004, p.157) who argues that they represent a fear of technology more generally: “The cyborg articulates the terror of letting too much technology into everyday life”. The separation of films into these two categories is worth exploring when analysing the textual examples considered within this chapter. This assists in determining whether or not narratives concerning cyborgs have evolved beyond the terms of this pattern.

Further theorisations of the cyborg include considerations of existential questions surrounding what makes one human and of the separation of mind and body. Short (2005) acknowledges a

divide amongst theorists in relation to these existential themes. She separates theorists into two categories: “Vitalists”, who believe in a vital spark unique to humans and, “Mechanists”, who believe that no essential difference exists between humans and cyborgs (Short 2005, p35). Holland (1995) regards this recurring existential theme as reiterating the traditional philosophical questions surrounding identity and binary dualisms.

Other theorisations of cyborg characters in cinematic narratives centre on the representation of masculinity and, to a lesser extent, femininity. The lack of scholarly writings about representations of femininity in this context may be attributed to the abundance of male cyborg characters in late twentieth century cinema in comparison to the smaller number of female cyborgs. However, some theorists interpret the gendering of these human/machine hybrids as reflecting discourses on gender as a social construct as opposed to a naturally occurring phenomenon (Holland 1995; Short 2005). Other analyses which focus on the gendering of cyborgs discuss the often-androgynous nature of their appearance. Bergstrom (1991, p.36) argues that filmic narratives featuring androgynous androids draw on the presentation of androgyny as fashionable by the worlds of fashion and advertising. She considers cinematic androgyny as a complex phenomenon, sometimes representing the eradication of sexual difference and while at other times underpinning sexual difference. Discourses on gender more broadly feed into these theories, particularly where ideas of masculinity and femininity within the action genre are discussed (Tasker 1998; Schubart 2007; Butler 2004; Brown 2011).

Scholarly studies on gender and cyborg characters often focus on the traditionally masculine appearance of the cyborgs found in staples of the genre, for example, the *Terminator* series and *Robocop* (Verhoeven 1987) (Holland 1995; Penley 1991). Holland (1995, p159) considers the

gendering of these male cyborgs as an ironic response to the perceived threat they represent to the patriarchy:

The cyberbodies are represented in such a highly gendered way to counter the threat that cyborgs indicate the loss of human bodies, where such a loss implies the loss of the gendered distinctions that are essential to maintaining the patriarchal order (which is based on exploiting difference).

Expanding on Neale's (1983) and Springer's (1991) work, Holland (1995) considers these textual examples featuring extreme examples of masculinity as addressing a crisis in the construction of masculinity. This crisis is created by the threat the "onslaught of femininity" represents to the patriarchal order. This threat is appeased in these narratives through their portrayal of an essential masculinity that transcends the male body and thus reinforces traditional philosophical dualisms concerning gender (Holland 1995, p.165).

This idea of the cyborg as a tool to displace the traditional dualisms of gender continues in further cinematic theorisations, where the cyborg becomes the 'other'. As such, the binary dualisms of male/female is rendered more complex by the dimension of otherness represented by the dichotomy human/non-human (Holland 1995; Penley 1991; Bergstrom 1991). This point will be analysed in detail within this chapter.

Some studies on the female cinematic cyborg focus on the construction of femininity and the gendered manner in which these characters can appear. Short (1995, p. 83) notes that the cinematic female cyborgs of the time perpetuated existing stereotypes of female behaviour thus sustaining a patriarchal view of femininity. One area she briefly looks at is the abundance of male directors in this genre and the fact that these cyborg women are mostly constructed by men.

If historical examples of these cyborg narratives as discussed above work to reinforce essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity, then how does this compare with contemporary examples of the cyborg? When considering issues of identity, it is worth exploring whether these reductionist notions of gender emerge in contemporary narratives.

7.5. The Modern Cinematic Cyborg: A Transgressive Figure?

“Female cyborg” as a term is oxymoronic: a cybernetic organism does not necessarily need a gender, a sexuality or a race to exist, yet the film industry continues to produce representations of this figure that are gendered and raced and also often hypersexualised. The cyborg, as defined by cyborg feminism, has the potential to transgress boundaries. As a consequence of their existence outside of the organic world, often without the need for biological parentage, there is no necessity for traditional societal boundaries being applied to these figures. They do not need genitalia to exist, as they are artificial. Similarly, they do not need a race or indeed a sexuality.

The female cyborg presents an opportunity to present a female character free from the objectification and clichéd tropes traditionally applied to women on-screen. This section aims to discover if, as per the principles of cyborg feminism, any boundaries are transgressed in the representations of female cyborgs under the remit of this study. This will be investigated in terms of (i) racial boundaries, (ii) boundaries surrounding sexuality and (iii) representations of gender.

7.5.1. Transgression of Racial Boundaries

This section interrogates the cinematic cyborg from a racial perspective. As this chapter has argued thus far, cyborg characters possess the potential to transgress boundaries, including racial boundaries. This section argues that the cinematic female cyborg is a symbol of white, hegemonic patriarchal ideals and that when it comes to the representation of cyborg characters - women of colour are marginalised and disregarded. The texts discussed in this section are *Ex Machina*, *HER*, and *Ghost in the Shell*. A series of key scenes relevant to cyborg identity and representation are discussed briefly before the theoretical aspects are explored in detail.

Ex Machina revolves around two human males, Nathan and Caleb and two female cyborgs, Ava and Kyoko. The narrative unfolds in the home of billionaire Nathan, the CEO of Bluebook, where Caleb work as a programmer. Nathan is attempting to create the world's first A.I. Under the guise that Caleb has won a prize to test Ava, the A.I. in question, Nathan introduces Caleb to Ava. Ava successfully manipulates the two men. She causes Caleb to fall in love with her and she ultimately kills her creator, Nathan, escaping into the world.

In one key sequence, relevant to the consideration of racial boundaries concerning cyborgs, the pulsing mechanical soundtrack builds indicating imminent danger. Caleb waits for Nathan to get drunk and then steals his key card to gain access to his private quarters. Here he hacks into Nathan's computer system. The entire scene is lit with cold light, in contrast to the warm light previously used. Caleb searches through Nathan's files to find footage of the earlier iterations of Ava. The camera displays three of Ava's predecessors on a monitor through Caleb's eyes. The first A.I., Lily, is a beautiful white, blonde woman who paces inside her room like a caged

animal. The second, Jasmine, is a lifeless black woman who never gets fully completed - she has a full female body but a faceless head and never moves. The third is called Jade. She is an Asian woman and is fully complete with a human likeness. She only utters one phrase repeatedly to Nathan: *Why won't you let me out?* She asks this question in an increasingly agitated manner as the scene proceeds. She attempts to beat the door down so as to escape, eventually beating her arms off her body while screaming maniacally. Each of these cyborgs is completely naked in this sequence and, unlike Ava, they all have the natural appearance of being human. The music is grating and mechanical connoting an inhumane and cruel quality to the scene. The monitor has a black and white image of the mountains in the background which, when contrasted with the beautiful naturally lit landscape scenes intercut throughout the film, represents a move away from warm natural beauty to cold manufactured technology.

Caleb moves away from the monitor and enters Nathan's adjoining bedroom where Kyoko, a silent Asian cyborg, lies completely naked on the bed staring into space. Caleb searches through five mirrored wardrobes which face Nathan's bed and discovers discarded unused parts of the failed cyborg prototypes. Multiple reflections of Kyoko observing Caleb are visible in the mirrors. Kyoko approaches Nathan and peels two layers of skin off her naked body to reveal her cyborg identity.

These secondary robots in *Ex Machina* are early failed iterations of Nathan's A.I. invention and are depicted as disposable. He is shown literally dismantling their bodies and dumping the unwanted parts. Presenting these earlier iterations of Ava as different races reinforces the idea that Ava, the white heterosexual cyborg, is superior. This point is further reinforced by the fact that Ava's counterpart, Kyoko, is a servile robot. Kyoko was designed by Nathan to follow

orders and perform as a housekeeper and she also functions as an object for Nathan's sexual gratification. Kyoko's appearance as an Asian woman again underpins the idea of Ava as the superior character. This notion of Asian bodies as disposable is explored by Nishime (2017) who regards the proliferation of whitewashing in contemporary cinematic narratives as indicative of Western fears of the economic superiority of Asian countries. Arguably, a similar point could be made about *Ghost in the Shell* which created controversy for casting a Caucasian actor in the role of Major. According to Nishime (2017, p.35):

Ava's liberation is neither a story of men who foolishly underestimate the females they exploit nor a tale of the duplicitous nature of women, even robot women. Instead, we see the dependency of white female empowerment on the disposition of Asian bodies.

Nishime's (2017) claim can be applied to the background characters who preceded Ava. Any woman of colour can be seen as disposable in this narrative. This reinforces hooks' (1996) analysis of cinema as having patriarchal and white supremacist tendencies. The failed iterations of female cyborgs are shown hanging in pieces in Nathan's wardrobe, most often as a naked torso. Nishime's (2017) argument is strengthened by the scene that depicts Ava selecting her desired body parts from these unwanted, disposable ones. In fact, Ava's empowerment literally relies on discarded bodies of colour. Arguably, this points towards racist tendencies, whether consciously intended or not, similar to those identified by theorists like hooks (1996).

In a similar vein to *Ex-Machina*, *HER* prioritises the male protagonist over the female cyborg character and the film displays a clear lack of racial diversity on-screen. *HER* follows Theodore's life. He is depressed, lonely and isolated after the end of his marriage. When he installs a new A.I. organiser he starts to fall in love with it. Samantha, the organiser, also begins to experience and explore life. The contrast between his life with and without love (and the AI

in question) is conveyed through the cinematography: the warm, saturated scenes of Ted in love contrast with the desaturated grey scenes featuring the city and public spaces where people are ignoring each other in favour of interaction with their phones. Similarly, the camera movements reinforce this contrast. Handheld close-up shots of Theodore's face with shallow depth of field convey the intimacy and warmth of relationships when in love as compared to the feeling of being alone and isolated. The mise-en-scène in these two textual examples, *HER* and *Ex Machina* conveys the way in which technology changes every-day life. In *Ex Machina* the mise-en-scène works to convey the danger posed by technology. This contrasts with *HER* where the mise-en-scène works to convey the feeling of companionship technology can bring to one's life.

In a similar vein to *Ex Machina*, a privileging of white voices and stories occurs in *Her*. As a digital organiser, Samantha is without corporeal form and as such has no race. However, she is played by the instantly recognisable Scarlett Johansson whose voice connotes sexuality and desirability to the audience. The conscious decision to cast a renowned actor in this role negates any possibility of the character transgressing boundaries. The audience is aware of who is playing the role of Samantha. By utilising Johansson, Samantha is instantly raced and sexualised. hooks (1996, p.16) explores the idea of the disembodied black female voice in Spike Lee's work suggesting that white beauty is constantly portrayed as the most desirable, even when a physical body is not displayed:

Even though *Girl 6* overtly deals with the issue of racism, everyone understands that in the world of representations whiteness is the essential ingredient necessary for ultimate fulfilment.

Here, hooks' (1996, p.16) argument is especially relevant as she is analysing a text where black women work on a phone sex line and are aware of the need to make their voices sound white: "The head of the agency reminds all the women that they must all describe themselves as 'white'". The disembodied voice of Samantha is immediately recognisable to audiences as white and this bolsters hooks' (1996, p.18) argument that:

Femininity is constructed, not natural. Femininity, like phone sex, was invented to satisfy male fantasy. It is there to affirm the realm of the masculine, of phallic power. The bodies of real women must be sacrificed on the patriarchal altar.

While the notion of femininity is expanded on further in this chapter, here the idea of race informing hegemonic patriarchal desires is clearly outlined.

Importantly, all of the cyborg characters in the relevant films included in this chapter are played by young, beautiful Caucasian women. There is no racial diversity in these representations. The only examples of cyborgs of colour are the background characters in *Ex Machina*. The scenes involving these background cyborg characters represent them as disposable and position them as functional objects.

In contrast to the texts discussed above, *Ghost in the Shell*, which coincidentally also features Johansson as the protagonist, Major, presents a transgression of racial boundaries in the fact that an Asian teenager's brain is transplanted into a synthetic Caucasian female body. This is a retrogressive move as the story is based on a Japanese manga comic and anime and thus has roots in Asian culture. This reinforces the notion that Western beauty ideals are hegemonic, and the ideal body is that of a thin, blonde, blue-eyed American woman. While the cyborg

should represent an ideal post-racial, post-gendered transgressive figure, in this instance its representation reinforces traditional Western hegemonic imagery.

The dominant message being conveyed through these representations supports hooks' (1996) contention that Hollywood tends to privilege white hegemonic beauty ideals and to marginalise women of colour within cinematic narratives. The privileging of white women's stories at the expense of the stories of women of colour is regressive and ignores the possibilities presented by cyborg feminism. By consistently representing women of colour as background characters, or by covering their blackness when they are on-screen, the cinema industry relegates women of colour to the status of secondary characters. The dominant message conveyed by these representations is that women of colour are less important than their white counterparts.

This idea of the marginalisation and downplaying of women of colour on-screen contrasts with the findings of Melzer's (2006) work where she reads *Alien Resurrection* (Jeunet 1997) through a cyborg feminist lens. Melzer (2006, p.124) notes a tendency to align racial and class differences with human/non-human binaries:

Just as racial and gender passing are threatening to the social order, technological passing undermines hierarchies and denaturalizes categories by disclosing them as constructed...Once she is known to be an android she is re-categorised as un-human.

Melzer (2006) considers the creation of this new 'other', the human/non-human category, as assisting in deconstructing traditional binary otherness. Melzer (2006) argues that it works to deconstruct issues of otherness traditionally associated with sex and race. Considering the lack of women of colour in science fiction cinema more generally, along with the privileging of white cyborg bodies, this research argues that rather than working to deconstruct other binary

categories, the cyborg figure works to reinforce these traditional dualisms. The human/non-human category thus reinforces the othering of sexed and raced bodies.

Other theorisations of cinematic cyborgs present similar contentions that this new category of 'other' - human/non-human - renders previous binary dualisms obsolete (Bergstrom 1991; Jancovich 1992). Given the textual examples discussed in this section and the conclusion drawn - that the privileging of white women's stories emerges through these cyborg narratives - the contention that racial boundaries are rendered obsolete by cinematic cyborgs is quite reductionist and naively optimistic. When the textual examples are analysed as a whole it is clear that white hegemonic characters and stories remain privileged.

The decade 2010 to 2019 has shown racial diversity, as discussed previously, either being completely ignored or covered up, as in the case of Saldana in *Guardians of the Galaxy* and Nyong'o in *Star Wars*, or as simply absent from any narratives. The female cyborg in films released between 2010 and 2019 is consistently portrayed as white, and as a product of hegemonic normative desires. As Negra (2001, p.6) observes: "whiteness (is) an identity rubric around which social and economic power has been consolidated". Negra (2001) argues that ethnic differences are ignored within Hollywood narratives so as to create a broad image or representation of "whiteness" as constituting order and empowerment. The arguments made thus far in this chapter support this contention. Whiteness, within science fiction cinematic narratives, is consistently represented as superior and desirable.

7.5.2. Transgression of Boundaries of Sexuality

This section demonstrates the manner in which contemporary cyborg narratives perpetuate hegemonic standards of sexuality. The opportunities available to transgress boundaries of sexuality are not taken by the science fiction films featuring female cyborgs which are of concern to this research. In order to confirm the absence of a transgressive approach to boundaries of sexuality within contemporary cyborg cinema key sequences from the following textual examples are discussed in this section: *Ex Machina*, *Lucy* and *Ghost in the Shell*.

Melzer (2006) argues that issues of sexuality should be dealt with in a more inclusive manner in feminist debates. She regards Western theorisations of sexual difference as lacking when it comes to homosexuality in particular:

the construction of gendered subjects in terms of language and desire does not account for homosexual desire. Homosexuality does not correspond with the dichotomous psychological and economic relations between 'man' and 'woman'. (Melzer 2006, p.14)

Likewise, Springer (1996, p.12) is critical of 1980s and 1990s science fiction literature for utilising stereotypical and regressive representations of gender and sexuality as compared to radical texts of the 1960s and 1970s:

In cyberpunk and other techno-erotic texts from the 1980s and 1990s, conventions are both overturned and re-established. Sexuality and gender are freed from biological constraints when they enter the domain of technology, but cultural conventions continue to exert an influence on how scientists and cyberpunk authors imagine their future worlds.

She considers cyborg imagery as offering the possibility of representing more transgressional sexualities. It should be noted, however, that the examples she relies on are drawn from science fiction literature and not from filmic texts:

Even though cyborg imagery in popular culture often exaggerates conventional gender difference, it does not always conform entirely to traditional sexual representations. Whereas most sexual imagery has been designed for a male gaze and has privileged heterosexual encounters, cyborg imagery, taken as a whole, implies a wider range of sexualities. (Springer 1996, p.68)

In contrast to these theorists Balsamo (2000, p.155) considers the cyborg to be a regressive figure, arguing that Haraway (1991) neglected to acknowledge that representations of female cyborgs have already been “fashioned in our cultural imagination”. She argues that female cyborg characters reinforce traditional stereotypical notions of sexuality and gender.

The issue of cyborg sexuality is explicitly raised in *Ex Machina* when Caleb asks Nathan, the creator of Ava, why he chose to give her a sexuality and a gender when she does not need one. Nathan’s reply indicates that he believes that experiencing pleasure and belonging to a specific sex with specific heterosexual desires makes one more human: *Can you give an example of consciousness at any level, human or animal, that exists without a sexual dimension?* Nathan continues by nonchalantly adding: *Besides sexuality is fun man.*

This sequence opens with a close-up shot of Kyoko carefully slicing fish. The scene is set in a living area of Nathan's facility and the mise-en-scène conveys a mixture of naturalistic elements with harsher manmade ones. The glass windows separate the characters from the wild forest outside as they converse in front of a large concrete fireplace. These production design elements reinforce the theme of the ubiquity of modern technology. The mid-shots of the two men talking feature stone walls in the background. These elements represent the complex conversation they are having regarding whether sexuality is a product of environment or a naturally occurring phenomenon. Nathan suggests that sexuality is programmed in humans and is *a consequence of accumulated external stimuli*. As the two men discuss this topic, the

audience is shown through a variety of cut-aways that Kyoko, the only female in the room, is listening in silently. The mise-en-scène conveys the exclusion of the woman in this instance from a discussion of female sexuality. The silent secondary character merely listens in as the two men discuss a topic that should include a female point of view. Nathan has created a being that is programmed to experience pleasure through penetration alone, thus removing any possibility of her discovering her own sexuality in her own way.

In a similar vein *Lucy* closes with a sequence where Lucy transcends her human body and literally becomes a computer. *Lucy* features a young woman who is kidnapped and forced, as a mule, to transport an experimental drug. The drug explodes within her abdomen and she absorbs its power. This allows her to unlock the full potential of her brain, and in doing so she becomes a machine. In the opening scene, Lucy is wearing leopard print and strong colours. Her costume changes throughout the film until eventually she is wearing a simple black dress. This represents the stripping away of her human weaknesses: the insecurities and simple pleasures that she experienced as a human are represented as becoming more and more inconsequential.

Sexuality is represented in both of these textual examples as one dimensional. Lucy is a heterosexual woman up until the point where her human body disappears. She tells Detective Del Rio that she needs him to accompany her *as a reminder* of her sexuality and humanity. Ava has been programmed by Nathan to be heterosexual also. The case can be made that Nathan created Ava for his own pleasure. He enjoys Kyoko for sexual gratification and all of the instances of the cyborg he has created are female. He has gone so far as to give Ava *pleasure sensors* in her genitals that are stimulated during heterosexual intercourse. This theme is all the

more disturbing when you discover Ava's intense hatred for her creator and the inference by Nathan that he has experienced having sex with her. By creating these two cyborg characters, Lucy and Ava, so as to satisfy hegemonic heterosexual desires, any possibility of boundaries being transgressed is lost. Furthermore, this presentation of sexuality as a one-dimensional element ignores the possibility of bisexuality or homosexuality. The only reason to programme the cyborgs in *Ex Machina* as straightforwardly heterosexual is that this choice will benefit Nathan. This idea of programming a cyborg to have a predisposed sexuality assumes that she would not have had the agency herself to discover her sexuality, like a human being, but rather needed this predisposition in order to identify as human. This is in conflict with Nathan's supposed goal of determining whether Ava is indeed a successful AI., capable of agency and free will.

The climax of *Lucy* echoes the sentiment in *Ex Machina*: that it is our sexuality that makes us human. Though her human form is eventually transgressed in this example, the portrayal of Lucy as a heterosexual woman and the reinforcement of her femininity as the narrative develops is quite regressive. This is reflective of the idea that sexuality is a key component of humanity. This ignores the possibilities available to cyborg characters as per the principles of cyborg feminism, which strives to transgress boundaries and traditional binary definitions. Lucy's insistence on keeping the detective around as a *reminder* highlights the emphasis on femininity and sexual desire as being fundamental to notions of female identity. Stevens (2018, p.25) reads this as "condition(ing) Lucy's accumulation of knowledge with a commensurate loss of desire and 'natural' feminine qualities". In other words, in order for Lucy to transcend as a posthuman subject, all elements of femininity, desire and sexuality must be surrendered. This process climaxes with the disappearance of her physical body.

In contrast, the only arguably progressive element of *Ghost in the Shell* as a text is the scene where Major visits a human female prostitute, the most intimate scene in the film. However, the same-sex kiss that was featured in the trailer for the film never materialises in the film itself. This is particularly troubling considering that the film is based on an original Manga and animé where Major is portrayed as gay. The erasure of her gay identity once again predictably reduces this character to being a standard product of the patriarchal film industry: she is a white, heterosexual, beautiful character who appeals primarily to the “male gaze”. This ambiguous scene resonates with Miller’s (1991) analysis of the portrayals of homosexuality in film as often utilising purely connotative suggestion as opposed to explicitly representing homosexuality.

By consistently representing these characters as heterosexual women the representational opportunities presented by cyborg characters are ignored. In the same way that women of colour are relegated to being background characters in science fiction cinema, or are absent from the screen entirely, lesbians and bisexual women are absent from these textual examples. Through the dominant representations of heterosexual female characters this hegemonic patriarchal norm is sustained.

7.5.3. Transgression of Gendered Boundaries

An emerging theme within the science fiction cinematic genre over the last decade is the juxtaposition of androgynous human women with highly feminised cyborgs. This has become a common trope within cyborg narratives and it particularly highlights the feminisation of

female cyborgs. The feminisation of these machines can be seen most clearly in *Ex Machina*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Lucy* and *Blade Runner 2049*. These representations challenge traditional gender stereotypes, by inferring that gender is a social construct and more likely to be applied intentionally to a machine then appropriated naturally by a human. This reflects Butler's (2004) contention that gender is performative. However, the application of these gendered attributes to female cyborgs results in the underpinning of traditional patriarchal ideologies regarding gender.

Femininity and androgyny are juxtaposed in *Blade Runner 2049* and *Mad Max: Fury Road* most explicitly through the costume design. When the female cyborg characters in *Blade Runner 2049* are contrasted with the human female characters the artificiality of femininity is emphasised. Similarly, Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road* is juxtaposed with the brides in order to present this stark contrast.

In *Blade Runner 2049* the main female character in K's life is his superior officer, Lieutenant Joshi. As K's commanding officer, she is in a position of power and dresses in an androgynous manner throughout the film. Her hair is short and gelled back and she wears simple, black uniforms throughout. In contrast to this androgenised human character the A.I., Joi, who lives with K as a companion and Luv, the "replicant", are both highly feminised cyborg characters. They wear feminine dresses and heavy makeup throughout the film. Joi can be read as a loving, nurturing, feminine character while Luv can be read as more of a femme fatale. Both archetypes traditionally are presented as highly feminised characters. Joi supports K throughout the text, going so far as to sacrifice herself for him while Luv is the archetypal femme fatale, presented as being violent and erotic throughout the text.

Similarly, the theme of androgyny emerges in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. The protagonist, Furiosa, adopts a traditionally masculine appearance in this text. Her head is shaved, and she wears dirty trousers, a leather corset, a vest and heavy boots. Her appearance is in stark contrast to the feminine, clean, white presentation of the five “bride” characters. Bergstrom (1991) investigates this theme of androgyny in the representation of androids in two science fiction films: *Liquid Sky* (Tsukerman 1982) and *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982). She finds that androgyny in these examples can be read in multiple ways: as a means of communicating the eradication of sexuality or as a way of indicating more sexuality. Read through Bergstrom’s (1991) theorisations, Furiosa’s androgynous look can be read as underpinning her sexuality rather than negating it.

Other scholarly studies on female action heroes, and more generally on the theme of androgyny, discuss the multiplicity of readings made possible by androgynous representations (Bergstrom 1991; McCaughey and King 2001; Schubart 2007; Brown 2011). These theorists have a tendency to be cautious in their interpretations. They argue that the androgynous archetype can be read in both ways - as a progressive symbol of agency and as a symbol of objectification. Yet, if we reject postmodern feminist ideals, in the vein of Negra and Tasker (2007), then she can really only be read in one manner: as an objectified figure. She becomes a problematic character as she possesses agency, yet through the consistent objectification of her body and the one-dimensional reduction of her sexuality, she becomes quite a regressive figure. To illustrate this point, the objectification of Furiosa is further analysed in section 7.6.

In a similar vein to the treatment of cyborg characters in *Blade Runner 2049* and *Mad Max: Fury Road* the feminisation of machinery is a prominent theme in *Ex Machina*. Ava, the world's first AI device, is initially depicted with her machine parts visible: her transparent midriff exposes her mechanical inner workings, and her skin is completely hairless. When she performs her reverse striptease - putting on a dress with a floral pattern and stockings for Caleb in order to show him what she would wear *on a date* - she is expressing her desire to become a human woman. This infers that real women are highly feminised and reinforces the notion of gender as a performative act. Ava, by acting in the manner in which she believes men want her to, manages to seduce and manipulate Caleb. This is only possible through her taking on and emulating what she perceives to be elements of femininity.

The two cyborgs in *Ex Machina* have stereotypical gendered attributes consistently applied to them. Ava is soft-spoken, beautiful and ultimately manipulative and Kyoko is more of a “bimbo” stereotype. Kyoko is beautiful, simple-minded and lives to serve Nathan. She is programmed to take the clothes off of whoever touches her and she responds to dance music by performing a perfectly choreographed dance routine. Her existence seems to solely revolve around responding to Nathan's domestic and sexual needs: she cooks, cleans and performs sexual acts. The projection of stereotypical gendered characteristics onto cyborgs has been previously explored by Yeeh (2017, p.86): “When gender is applied to a machine, often its stereotypical attributes are emphasized... The mechanization of women has become a fetish, a new branch of voyeuristic gaze”.

These representations are reflective of the manner in which gender is understood as a social construct by certain theorists (Butler 2004). These films reflect the idea that gender is a societal

construct by impressing upon artificial characters the stereotypical attributes that traditionally would have been imposed upon women. The human women, in contrast, are represented in a more androgynous manner. This is also true when considering the male characters in *Ex Machina*. While the female cyborg characters have stereotypically feminine traits applied to them, two very different and complex representations of masculinity are presented by the two male characters.

The mise-en-scène, costuming and dialogue position Nathan as a domineering, powerful man throughout the narrative. His masculinity is reflected in his surroundings - he lives in a large, impressive home with state-of-the-art technology. His estate is massive, including a mountain range, glaciers and thick forests. Nathan wears simple dark colours, his head is shaven, and he has a full beard which suggests that he puts little effort into his appearance. Caleb, in contrast, is depicted in patterned clothing, and is clean-shaven with styled hair. He is consistently depicted in positions of submission on-screen with Nathan usually positioned above him in the frame.

When Nathan is first introduced on-screen he is seen from Caleb's perspective. Caleb struggles to navigate the terrain surrounding Nathan's house. He jerks a wheelie bag behind him as his unease at the surroundings becomes obvious. The camera follows him into Nathan's home where Nathan is outside on a wooden veranda hitting a punch bag. The river flows under the house connoting raw, naturalistic elements and this conveys the suggestion that Nathan's masculinity is inherent. The consistent contrasting of the two male characters, which highlights the stark difference in their masculinities, comes to a climax in a key scene. Nathan flips a switch on the wall which prompts Kyoko to begin her choreographed dance routine. The lights,

which were soft white lights until this moment, turn red and disco music fills the room. Nathan joins in with Kyoko and they perform a dance routine in perfect sync with each other. The surreal nature of this scene is underpinned by the sudden change in lighting and the inclusion of dance music - the soundtrack up until this point has been confined to simple non-diegetic tones. The camera zooms slowly in on Caleb's face depicting his discomfort at, and fear of, what is taking place in front of him. This scene hints at the fact that Nathan's masculinity may, in fact, also be a construct. The ease with which he slips into the dance routine conveys the amount of practise and thought that must have gone into perfecting the moves. Although we never see him grooming himself, the fact that his head is so closely shaven and his beard is so perfectly groomed suggests that these are daily tasks that he must perform in order to maintain his rugged look.

Similarly, the juxtaposition of femininity and masculinity is relied upon in *Lucy*. As Lucy adapts and begins to evolve, as discussed in section 7.5.2., her costuming changes from patterned feminised outfits to simple black clothes. In addition, her demeanour becomes more posthuman- she starts to speak in a monotonous tone "signifying a loss of emotion that is also reflected in Lucy's sudden indifference to life" (Stevens, 2018 p.24). Stevens (ibid.) considers this shift as reflecting stereotypical beliefs regarding femininity as being incompatible with science: "in gaining access to (masculinised) knowledge and expertise, Lucy must then also distance her feminine self". This is similar to Carol's representation in *Captain Marvel*. Carol, having absorbed energy from the alien technology begins to speak in a deadpan, monotonous tone. The scene where she is performing karaoke with her friend, Maria Rambo, is the only scene where we see her dancing and singing. This takes place before her transformation into a cyborg character with exponentially increased powers.

As demonstrated thus far contemporary science fiction cinema, by ignoring the representational possibilities presented by cyborg characters, fails to challenge patriarchal stereotypes. The objectives of cyborg feminism are to transgress boundaries and move definitions of “woman” beyond gendered, sexualised and raced representations. This should be all the more possible when it comes to the characterisation of female cyborgs in a speculative genre like science fiction. However, as a genre, science fiction seems to reflect common issues found across all genres and thus reflects the patriarchal nature of Hollywood as a whole. The key message emerging through these representations is consistent with dominant discourses on female representation in cinema more broadly. This homogenous one-dimensional depiction of women is confirmed by Radner and Stringer (2011, p.4):

To fail to question the models of femininity that cinema produces and circulates would be to subscribe to a postfeminism that posits the second wave modalities as outmoded and unnecessary...The relative homogeneity exhibited by the protagonists (most are “white”, young, thin, and middle class) ... demonstrates that cinema continues to rely upon established stereotypes in generating popular narratives.

Despite being a figure that has the potential to be more evolved and transgressive, the textual examples analysed here confirm that filmmakers have yet to use this cyborg figure to her full potential. The homogenous portrayal of these female cyborg figures ignores the potential to evolve and transcend dominant messages about women through their representations. The next section of this chapter takes this idea of homogeneity further, examining a well-established principle within film studies, the objectification of women in cinema, and illustrates how this systematically manifests itself in the treatment of technological bodies.

7.6. The Objectification of the Cyborg

Theorisations of the objectification of female characters on-screen have been present in Film Studies for decades, with specific theories on objectification often being in contention with one another. Theorists like Mulvey (1975), Tasker (1998), and Brown (2011) regard the objectification of action heroes as often damaging. Studies on the female action hero deal with how the patriarchal film industry manages threatening female characters - often citing psychoanalysis as a theoretical underpinning. Other theorists like Schubart (2007), consider the counterargument that some of these women are empowered by their objectification.

Theorists who see positive aspects to processes of objectification often fall into the postfeminist category, which has elements within its roots that are troublesome, mainly the fact that postfeminists proceed under the assumption that equality has been achieved. McCaughey and King (2001), Brown (2011), and Schubart (2007) all focus on the duality of the female hero and the resulting potential to read her both ways: as a progressive symbol and as an objectified symbol. These readings are generally cautious and tentative. As discussed in Section 7.5.3, taking into account criticisms of postmodern feminism (Negra and Tasker 2007), the female action hero can only be interpreted in one way - as objectified. She is a problematic figure as she possesses agency and willpower, yet her objectification on-screen cannot be denied and should be analysed separately from issues of agency. It is not a feminist endeavour to create a character that possesses agency while at the same time objectifying her body on-screen.

Almost all of the female cyborgs present in the textual examples between 2010 and 2019 are objectified on-screen at some point during the narratives of the films in which they appear.

This is done through costume design, the choices of camera angles and shot types and an emphasis on the characters' sexuality. This is an established pattern within classic Hollywood narratives and confirms that the cinema industry is largely still a patriarchal system with women seen as subordinate to men, and as existing primarily to facilitate the "male gaze" (Mulvey 1975). Two exceptions to this trope are *Captain Marvel* and *Alita: Battle Angel*. These exceptions are discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight. In this section, the following texts are analysed in terms of the objectification of the female cyborg: *Ghost in the Shell*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Ex Machina*, and *Blade Runner 2049*.

Ghost in The Shell, as previously stated, is the most troubling of these texts. Major is played by Scarlett Johansson and throughout the film wears a skin-tight latex type suit that emphasises her body and her sexual attractiveness. Both *Ghost in the Shell* and *Ex Machina* objectify the characters on-screen through a combination of costume design and camera shot choices. Major's body is presented to us as an object from the outset: the film opens with a series of shots of her "shell" being prepared for the brain transplant. The shots build to show the finishing touches being applied to her synthetic shell until her entire naked body is on display. These shots position her body primarily as an object for consumption and enjoyment. The factory-like assemblage of her body which positions her as a product is similar to *Blade Runner 2049* and the shots used to portray Joi on a large interactive billboard, advertising her as being available for mass consumption. The shot types utilised in these texts position female cyborg bodies as objects. Brown (2011, p.93) sees the objectification of female action heroes in conjunction with technology as a troubling phenomenon: "the action heroine is often specifically fetishized as a technological figure in order to justify a complete eradication of her subjectivity". When considering Brown's (2011) point along with theorisations of science

fiction narratives that include themes of capitalism and consumption (Byers 1990), it is apparent that these cyborg characters are being represented primarily as objects.

Similarly, in *Ex Machina* Ava is objectified in two ways by the audience: the audience views her through the eyes of Caleb and also through her own eyes, as she observes her naked body in a mirror. This matches Mulvey's (1975) description of the "male gaze": the camera fetishises her character on-screen for both the audience and the male characters. Kyoko also, unable to speak, functions solely as a tool for pleasure, both for Nathan's personal sexual gratification and for the audience's viewing pleasure. The voyeuristic depiction of these "machines" reinforces their function as objects defined by their "looked-at-ness" in Mulvey's (1975) terms.

Like the opening of *Ghost in the Shell*, there are a variety of scenes featuring naked female cyborgs in *Ex Machina*. In a particularly disturbing sequence of shots Nathan assembles and disassembles various prototypes that predated Ava (this is discussed in detail in Section 7.5.1 above). These examples display the naked female body as existing separately from any consciousness. This narrative theme encourages the audience to consider the female body as an object devoid of any self-awareness. These scenes are constructed so as to portray these naked forms in a purely objectified manner.

One key scene in *Ex Machina*, is particularly relevant to a discussion of objectification. Ava performs a reverse striptease for Caleb, adding layers of human clothing over her mechanical parts and then stripping back to her cyborg form. All of this is done for Caleb's benefit. In a series of intimate shots accompanied by soft, delicate music, she puts human clothes on over her robotic body in order to pass as a human woman. She insists that Caleb close his eyes while

she does this, though he, of course, does not and watches her constantly. This point is noted by Yeeh (2017, p.90): “the female robots of *Ex Machina* are in constant states of dressing and undressing for the male characters and the audience”. The fact that this is done for the benefit of the male characters is further underpinned when Ava strips back down to her mechanical parts after Caleb leaves. Ava strips in front of the camera in her room surreptitiously glancing at it, showing the audience that she is aware of being watched and hinting at her manipulation of Caleb. The audience can see Caleb watching Ava again on the monitor in his bedroom, thus both characters are aware that she is being watched. Here Mulvey’s (1975) male gaze is very much at work: Ava is stripping for the audience, but also for Caleb as a means of manipulating him. This suggests that this type of sexuality is an inherently feminine trait. Ava could not have learned such performative techniques, yet she uses them to her advantage. Not only does this suggest that hypersexuality and femininity are inherent traits, but that the ability to deceive and manipulate men is also an essential quality of women.

The narrative ends with Ava murdering Nathan and escaping the facility after selecting body parts like new clothes so as to blend into the world. Once again, the scene where Ava creates a human disguise for herself is shot in an intimate manner. She chooses parts from the various naked decommissioned robots in Nathan’s wardrobes. This scene starts with shots which include multiple reflections of Ava - suggesting her duplicitous nature - and finishes with the camera panning over the mirrors to show one reflection, where she finally appears to be completely human.

These scenes feature Ava completely naked. The audience is presented with the image of Ava through her own eyes for the first time, while simultaneously Caleb spies on her through the

glass window. Thus, she is functioning exactly in the manner described by Mulvey (1975), as an object for Caleb and an object for the audience. This perfect exemplar of the male gaze works to reinforce the classic patriarchal nature of cinema by identifying these female cyborgs as objects first and foremost. Importantly, their primary role in the film narrative is to provide visual pleasure, in spite of the film's attempt to explore their self-awareness.

The shots in *Ghost in the Shell* also consistently present Major as a desirable object to-be-looked-at. The camera angles consistently privilege her body in the frame and this is reinforced by the use of slow-motion shots that linger on her curves.

Ghost in the Shell and *Ex Machina* are both emblematic of Soukup's (2009) "technoscophilia", the fetishisation of technology in combination with the fetishisation of women. The various shots of the different naked AI prototypes in *Ex Machina*, as previously discussed, exemplify this idea. In particular, this is true of the scene where the naked cyborg beats the door until her mechanical arms are destroyed. The scene displays at once her desirability and the strength she possesses as a result of her technological advancement. *Ghost in the Shell* represents Major's body as being that of the perfect cyborg soldier with her technological elements fetishised for the audience (Soukup 2009). She is able to camouflage herself and can penetrate walls with her vision. These scenes, where her technological enhancements are displayed, are shot so as to fetishise these elements. They are privileged on-screen through the use of slow-motion and close-ups. Scenes highlighting Major's technological advantages are all shot with her dressed in a skin-tight latex suit: Johansson's attractive form and the technologies used to enhance her abilities reinforce each other throughout the film. In this manner, she becomes technology and technology becomes her: "This marks the further

development of the techno-scopophilia code – the character’s body is inscribed with technology; technology is inscribed with sexuality” (Soukup 2009, p28). This is apparent in various scenes, but one key scene which exemplifies this process of inscription features Major utilising her camouflage technology to disappear in ankle-deep water. When she reappears, she is dripping wet and the imagery is reminiscent of sexually suggestive advertising.

The background characters in *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders 2017) enhance their human bodies with technological additions. For example, when Batou loses his eyes he is refitted with robotic eyes. A scene in the police station involves a discussion between the officers about the enhancements they are planning on purchasing for their own bodies. This is reflective of a Capitalist society where workers constantly crave consumption. This kind of representation of Capitalism is common in science fiction films and is often present in theorisations of cyborg feminism (Melzer 2006; Short 2005). Soukup’s (2009) theory of techno-scopophilia relies on theories regarding advertising, with theorisations of consumerism and capitalism informing his work.

According to Soukup (2009) and Schubart (2007) the representations of female action heroes are often reflective of a dominatrix-type character. Soukup (2009) argues that the combination of semiotic codes regarding technology and regarding female empowerment create an interesting contradiction when it comes to the female hero, one where she represents both passivity and activity concurrently. She is at once the strong active hero and the sexual object on-screen functioning for the audience’s pleasure: “She is a machine that can at once embody tremendous sexual gratification and simultaneously tremendous control and dominance” (Soukup 2009, p.30). This combination is definitely present in the representation of Major’s

character in *Ghost in the Shell* where on-screen, in her world, she is the strongest police officer, capable of taking on multiple adversaries at once. She is also, without doubt, an object for the audience's pleasure, as her body is objectified throughout the narrative. As argued previously, however, it is not possible for a character to be both objectified on-screen and a progressive symbol. A given character must be understood as either progressive or objectified. In these textual examples, the consistent objectification of the character's bodies undermines any attempt at creating progressive representations of female cyborgs. The notion that a character can be objectified but, somehow, also represented in a progressive manner, is counterintuitive and somewhat naive.

The female cyborgs in these texts are depicted as having detachable and interchangeable body parts. The cyborgs' limbs are easily dismantled and interchangeable in *Ex Machina*; *Ghost in the Shell* represents Major as a mechanical body with technological additions; *Alita: Battle Angel* depicts Alita as possessing the ability to change body parts, and *Mad Max: Fury Road* features Furiosa's arm which is easily detachable. This pattern of bodily fragmentation is evocative of Mulvey's (1975, p.25) psychoanalytical reading of Hitchcock's work as voyeuristic with the female characters representing threats of castration: "women in representation can signify castration and activate voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent this threat". Through the literal fragmentation of women's bodies and through their objectification on-screen this castration threat is appeased.

In psychoanalytical terms, Furiosa's mechanical arm can be interpreted as a symbol of castration. The fragmentation of the female protagonist on-screen, by way of a severed arm, appeases her threat to the male voyeur. Despite her being the protagonist, depicted as a superior

warrior to the male characters and driving the action, she cannot be a serious threat to masculinity as she is incomplete, lacking a full human body. This fetishisation invokes: “the darker implications of male scopophilia, namely they (the female protagonists) enact the threat of castration anxiety that necessitates their being fetishized in the first place” (Brown 2011, p.132). This is quite relevant to Furiosa’s character as she is not objectified on-screen in the same manner as the previously discussed protagonists here. She adopts a more androgynous look which contrasts with the bride characters whose beauty and desirability is emphasised.

Notably, the perspective in *Mad Max: Fury Road* shifts in the final scene and Furiosa is depicted from Max’s perspective. This subtle shift has larger connotations that place the emphasis of the story on Max. Soles (2019, pp.193-196), argues that while Furiosa is the “key player” in *Mad Max: Fury Road* and a “gender-bending protagonist”, the audience is consistently invited to adopt Max’s perspective:

While neither film truly unseats Max as the protagonist whose point of view the viewer shares, *Beyond Thunderdome* and *Fury Road* place women in charge of key narrative developments, casting Max in the role of a partner helping Imperator Furiosa achieve (her) goals.

This highlights a reluctance with regards to, or perhaps unconscious bias against, truly privileging Furiosa’s perspective. The need to position Max as the main protagonist at the climax of the film suggests an anxiety with regard to positioning a female protagonist as the sole protagonist in the franchise.

In contrast to the more progressive representation of Furiosa, the female cyborgs in *Blade Runner 2049* are objectified and sexualised on-screen. *Blade Runner 2049* features two main female cyborg characters: one is an AI hologram, and the other is a robotic machine with

transplanted human memories, following on from the “replicant” theme in the original *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982). Once again Yeeh’s (2017) argument that stereotypical attributes are applied to female cyborgs is relevant here. The AI device, Joi, is a popular product sold citywide and marketed as a perfect companion. K’s version of this holographic character welcomes him home with a holographic dinner and represents the ideal of domestic harmony. She creates an outfit that resembles 1960s fashion, and she epitomises the idea of a traditional housewife in this sequence, creating a warm and welcoming environment for the bleak K. Joi is literally a product that is revealed to the audience as available for mass consumption. In a key scene a giant billboard with a naked Joi that promises *everything you want to hear* fills the screen overshadowing K in a prominent shot. Here, Joi is presented as a literal product. She is fully objectified on-screen and her body is marketed as an object that will fulfil one’s every wish or desire.

Though they are not represented in the traditional manner of a highly sexualised protagonist, the androgynous appearances of Furiosa, *Mad Max: Fury Road* and Joshi, *Blade Runner 2049* can be interpreted in the manner of Bergstrom (1991) who argues that in some cases androgyny works to connote more sexuality. She posits that stories surrounding female androgyny are usually parables of castration, primarily stories of male sexual identification. Similarly, Joshi is the lieutenant in charge of K within the *Blade Runner 2049* narrative, a role traditionally filled by a man.

Another interesting theme present explicitly within *Ghost in the Shell* and *Ex Machina* is that of revelation. Theorists concerned with female cyborgs have touched on this theme previously (Telotte 1990; Kakoudaki 2014). A revelation scene involves the cyborg character stripping a

layer of its “skin” off to reveal its inner machinery. This happens in *Ex Machina* when Kyoko, to Caleb’s abject horror, peels off two layers of skin and reveals herself to be a cyborg. *Ghost in the Shell* opens with a reworking of the primal scene which serves as a reverse example of revelation scene. This scene depicts the artificial outer layer covering the inner mechanics of Major’s body as she is assembled in cyborg form (see a detailed analysis of this in Chapter Six). In another early scene, Major is distressed to find that her injured arm has revealed her inner wiring and seems to see this as a reminder that she is a cyborg. Kakoudaki (2014, p.1) reads these scenes as working to enact a “foundational gesture of revelation as well as of implicit seduction”.

The textual examples discussed in this section largely prove that the female cyborg functions as a site for desire and objectification. The modern cinematic cyborg is one-dimensional in this sense and reflects the patriarchal nature of cinema. In all instances, she is utilised as an eroticised object to be fetishised on-screen and functions as a site for the projection of heteronormative desires. The prevailing message being circulated through these representations is that women are objects to be utilised for men’s desires. This ultimately suggests that the level of objectification of women has not changed in this last decade, at least not within the depictions of female cyborgs. Brown (2011, p.93) claims that this insidious problem is engrained on society’s subconscious: “images of women in western culture have been so thoroughly fetishized that it has become an unquestioned norm”.

Finally, these textual examples prove that the cyborg character is objectified on a double level: her human elements are often hypersexualised and objectified on-screen and her technological elements are also objectified and function as a tool for pleasure. Even when a character like a

cyborg who exists outside of the realm of normality, where biological laws do not apply, she is depicted according to patriarchal norms. It is now pertinent to discuss the female cyborg in terms of agency. Can the fact that these cyborgs are portrayed as possessing agency and drive be seen as a progressive move?

7.7. The Cyborg and Agency

This research argues that an increase in the number of depictions of female protagonists on-screen should go hand in hand with the presentation of more positive representations of women. The superficial response to the problems of inequality and lack of representation perpetuates existing stereotypes and continues to produce one dimensional, clichéd characters devoid of agency and of fleshed out attributes. Warner (2017) displays a concern for similar issues in her paper that deals with race on-screen. She believes that racial diversity has become “plastic”, and that any moves towards more racially diverse casts are artificial and transparent in the absence of a prioritisation of black voices and stories. This is particularly interesting to consider in the case of the female cyborg when the same argument is applied to female representation. As a figure who usually has been deliberately created, the question of the female cyborg’s agency is one worth considering.

It is interesting, while contemplating the question of agency, to consider an example of the male cyborg within the dataset of relevant films to this study. In the *Alien* series of films, a male cyborg has always been central to the narrative. The earliest example of this is Ash in *Alien* (Scott 1979) who betrays the human crew members as he is infatuated with the “perfect” alien specimen. The later films in the series, *Prometheus* (Scott 2012) and *Alien Covenant*

(Scott 2017) feature Michael Fassbender as David and Walter, two identical cyborgs with very different views. David holds the same reverence for the alien creature as his counterpart Ash. He sees himself as a God creating the perfect lifeform. This is in stark contrast to the female cyborgs in the corpus of films of concern to this research, who are mostly concerned with their own freedom. This contrast provides an interesting insight into the stereotypical manner in which gendered androids are presented in terms of agency. In these examples the male cyborgs are capable of creating life, playing God, while the female cyborgs simply desire their own freedom from oppression. Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road* seeks freedom from Immortan Joe. In *Ex Machina* Ava seeks freedom from Nathan. Samantha in *HER* seeks freedom from the constricting physical world. Major in *Ghost in the Shell* was a runaway in her human life and as a cyborg seeks freedom from her makers. *Lucy* seeks freedom from human nature and finally, in *Captain Marvel* Carol is held hostage by an alien race who have lied to her about her origins.

A central theme of both *Ex Machina* and *Ghost in the Shell* is the agency of the female cyborg figures. In *Ex Machina*, after Nathan creates Ava, he wants to test her cognitive abilities using the Turing test. He believes that a true test of her awareness is to ascertain if she is capable of using Caleb as a means to escape. In Nathan's words, in order to escape, she would need to use *self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality and empathy*. Ava's agency is demonstrated at the end of the film when she murders Nathan, her creator, and takes charge of her own destiny. Yeoh (2017, p.92) reads this narrative as an embodiment of Haraway's (1991) manifesto:

Ava is a literal product of patriarchy: men who have the power, means, and money to construct a female robot for their own pleasure. She is also "exceedingly unfaithful" to her origins in leaving Nathan and Caleb behind.

Yeeh (2017) argues, however, that the final few scenes that portray Ava as gaining control over her own destiny are simply not enough to excuse the objectification and fetishisation of her character present throughout the narrative. Yeeh's (2017) point is a well-considered one, especially since the final scenes include a naked Ava trying on the different body parts for the visual pleasure of both Caleb and the audience. Up until this point in the film, Ava has only been viewed through Caleb's eyes, or on the monitors that constantly record her being held in a prison-like room. Insight into her motivations and her intentions are withheld from the audience throughout the narrative. A sense of her thought processes or her determination to change her circumstances is never conveyed. Thus, this textual example does not explore her agency in any detail. It does not prioritise this crucial element despite it being relevant to the main theme of the film.

Similarly, in *Ghost in The Shell*, Major is depicted as being unaware of the fact that she has fake memories of a fake life implanted in her mind. She believes that she was rescued from an accident and only given a robotic body in order to save her life. In fact, she was a runaway Asian teenager who was captured and dissected in order to create the perfect soldier. Her agency as a young teenage girl was removed and she was transformed into a cyborg. As a cyborg soldier, she responds to orders and works as a government agent, constantly following the directions of others. After she discovers the truth about her past she has an opportunity to return to her mother and her home, yet she chooses to continue serving as a soldier for the government. This narrative ending paradoxically implies that to be devoid of agency is, in itself, a kind of freedom.

Furiosa is the strongest character in terms of agency, as she is taking on what traditionally would be a man's role in an action film. She herself decides to save the brides of Immortan Joe, risking her life in the process. She fights her way through the film, first with Max, then with the various "war boys", trying to make it to the "green place" where she believes the women will be free. The background characters in this example, the brides, all have been held captive for years to breed for Immortan Joe. In one suggestive scene that references Stockholm Syndrome, one of the brides wants to go back to Joe as she fears life away from the comfort of her prison. The brides are all characterised by a lack of agency and consistently look to Furiosa to save them.

In a similar manner to *Ex Machina*, *Her* ultimately sees the AI device, Samantha, decide to leave her human master so as to explore the world in the company of other AI devices. This is an explicit display of agency. Yeeh (2017) points out that the choice of a narrative centred on Samantha as opposed to the lonely Theodore would have provided an interesting depiction of a female character. However, she is instead used as a plot device intended to assist the male protagonist through his loneliness: "the whole film could have been an opportunity to follow and experience Samantha's unique journey into autonomy and ask questions linked to the female experience" (Yeeh 2017, p.93). Yeeh (2017) interestingly points out that both *Ex Machina* (Garland 2014) and *Her* (Jonze 2013) end with the female characters deciding to leave the male protagonists and calls for more narratives with female cyborgs as the protagonists, focusing on their voices and stories. These two textual examples defer the female cyborg's freedom until their final scenes. This clearly demonstrates that female agency is not prioritised in these narratives.

Lucy (Besson 2014), in contrast to the other examples, features a female protagonist who, only through the process of the evolution of her humanity, gains agency. However, before she absorbs the chemical drug that enhances her brain, she is at the mercy of men: first her boyfriend forces her to bring a suitcase of drugs into a hotel by handcuffing her to the case, then she is forced to mule for Mr Jang after he inserts drugs into her abdomen after which her captors sexually assault and beat her. It is only when she absorbs the drugs into her bloodstream that she begins to act out of her own agency. In this manner, the narrative seems to support the idea that women typically do not naturally possess agency.

Similarly, *Captain Marvel* focuses on Carol Danver's story and the narrative unfolds from her perspective. In the same vein as *Ex Machina* and *Ghost in The Shell* the main theme of the film is that of agency. Carol was captured by an alien race, the Kree, after being infused with alien technology making her one of the most powerful beings in the universe. Her life as a Kree soldier is a complete lie and unbeknownst to her she is, in fact, a captive. This textual example is discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight. This text was co-written and co-directed by a woman, Anna Boden, and a deliberate effort was made to create an empowering protagonist to join the Marvel Cinematic universe as the first female protagonist in a total of twenty-one films.

Agency seems to be one area in cinematic iterations of the female cyborg that has undergone a transformation when compared to twentieth century examples. Short (2005) notes that these twentieth century female characters often paid for their agency with their lives, with very few surviving their narratives. While the textual examples here all survive, some even murdering their creators in the process, the issue of agency remains underexplored in these narratives.

7.8. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated, through drawing on cyborg feminist discourses (Springer 1996; Short 2005; Melzer 2006), that the female cyborg is a potentially liberatory figure. A cyborg character offers opportunities for narratives to evolve beyond the use of the type of constructed social boundaries that are typically enforced upon female characters on-screen. As described in section 7.2. above, for the purposes of this research, the definition of a cyborg refers to a figure that combines elements of human biology and/or emotionality with technology, and that exists as an autonomous being. The textual examples discussed above confirm that there are sustained issues with the cinematic representation of female cyborg characters. The cinematic female cyborg in these examples does not transgress boundaries in a way that theoretically, given her technological advancements, she has the potential for. By focusing initially on three key areas where social boundaries could potentially be transgressed, this chapter has demonstrated that transgressions of these boundaries rarely, if ever, take place when portraying female cyborg characters.

The first potential area where boundaries might be transgressed by cyborg characters investigated in this chapter was race. As demonstrated in section 7.6.1. women of colour only ever feature as secondary characters in cinematic cyborg narratives. The systematic positioning of white women at the centre of the narratives created means that women of colour are marginalised. This results in a dominant discourse in contemporary cyborg cinema, and science fiction cinema more broadly, that women of colour are of lesser importance, and their stories are not worthy of foregrounding in popular filmic narratives.

The second boundary investigated in this chapter that held potential for transgression by a cyborg is sexuality. The analysis of texts presented above demonstrates that the female cyborg is a retrogressive figure, a site for the projection of heteronormative desire. The cyborg characters discussed in this chapter are systematically positioned as fetishistic objects for heterosexual male pleasure.

These textual examples are mostly big-budget studio films and the dominant message being communicated through these representations is that films that play to and reflect hegemonic desires are more marketable and accessible to audiences. This communicates the idea that otherness does not belong on-screen. This again privileges hegemonic ideals. As Hollinger (2012, p.133) states in relation to homosexuality on-screen:

The open portrayal of lesbianism has been seen to pose a significant threat to the heterosexist, patriarchal status quo...(It) represents an alternative to the patriarchal heterosexual couple and challenges female dependence on men for romantic and sexual fulfilment.

Considering the position of these characters as cyborg women this becomes all the more problematic. While the underrepresentation of lesbianism and bisexuality on-screen is troublesome and regressive, the fact that these cyborg characters, who do not need sexuality to exist, are continually portrayed as heterosexual reinforces traditional hegemonic heterosexual ideology.

The third section above explored whether any transgression of gendered norms occurred in the corpus of cyborg texts. This section argues that rather than subverting traditional gender roles, the female cyborg character usually has stereotypical feminine attributes projected onto her. A trend has emerged in the last decade where these feminine attributes are often reinforced

through the juxtaposition of the cyborg characters with more complex human characters. The modern cinematic cyborg is a symptom of the sustained patriarchal nature of cinema and consistently reinforces damaging, clichéd and regressive gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, this chapter argues that the female cyborg, an objectified, sexualised archetype in contemporary science fiction cinema, is generally devoid of agency. Agency emerges as a key theme in many female cyborg narratives with the female cyborgs struggling to achieve independence or freedom. However, the texts fail to satisfactorily deal with this theme with many of them shifting their focus onto male characters once the female cyborgs have achieved their independence or freedom. What could and should be a progressive figure that diffuses boundaries and represents a new diverse world of opportunity has instead become a figure that reinforces the patriarchal nature of cinema.

Section 7.4. above highlights the trend in twentieth century cyborg narratives to foreground two types of anxiety: the fear of either becoming cyborgs or of being replaced by them. Reflecting on the findings of this chapter reveals that a new trend has emerged in twenty-first century cinema, particularly from 2010 to 2019. This new trend highlights a crisis of gendered representations. The proliferation of the female cyborg in combination with the hyper-sexualisation and hyper-feminisation of such characters suggests the need for an appeasement of perceived threats to hegemonic norms. The female cyborg has become a site on which to project patriarchal ideals as a means of coping with shifting social attitudes to sex and gender roles.

Images of the female cyborg are proliferating at the same time as ideas of gender as performative evolve within academia and as the understanding of gender as a social construct becomes part of societal consciousness. Applying gendered attributes to a machine appeases any perceived threat to the patriarchy presented by the changing attitudes surrounding gender. Some attempts have been made in cinema to address the performative nature of gender. A particular example is *Blade Runner 2049* where the androgynous appearance of the human women contrasts with the highly feminised appearance of the cyborg characters. However, the application of these attributes to female cyborgs in fact perpetuates gender stereotypes and results in sustained clichéd representations.

Matthews (2018, p.7) considers these posthuman females (cyborgs) as functioning to address a crisis in masculinity. This crisis, he argues, is a response to posthuman theories. These texts superficially appear to address both the move towards posthumanism, and towards female empowerment, but in reality, end up reinforcing traditional patriarchal hierarchies:

The films begin with female ascendancy, only to conclude with the deterioration of the female character and with the reassertion of the very foundations of the male hegemony they originally poised to dissolve. In other words: the visual rhetorical tools employed in putting these female characters on pedestal are the same tools used to knock them back down. (ibid.)

This is relevant to all but two of the texts in the remit of this research: *Lucy* climaxes with the disappearance of her corporeal form at which point the male characters take over the narrative, *Ghost in the Shell* ends with Major embracing her technological form and jumping off a building to disappear into a sequence of computer code, *Her* ends with Samantha abandoning humanity and the film concludes from Theodore's perspective. However, *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *Captain Marvel* both position their female cyborgs as being in power and control by the end of their respective narratives. *Captain Marvel* concludes with Carol leading the Skrull race,

endangered refugees, in search of a new home. *Mad Max: Fury Road* concludes with Furiosa overturning the despotic rule of Immortan Joe so as to lead her people in a more egalitarian manner.

There is no doubt that these cinematic depictions of the female cyborg are in no way related to or cognisant of cyborg feminism and its concerns. There is a need for stories that prioritise this figure and explore the possibility of the dissolution of boundaries she opens up. The potential of this figure as a progressive site for focusing on the female voice cannot be ignored.

A review of theorisations of cinematic female cyborgs reveals two strategies that have potential to create a more progressive figure. Yeeh's (2017) contention that focusing narratives on women's stories as opposed to creating these characters as secondary to their male counterparts is an excellent starting point. Her argument is also germane to Short's (2005) brief discussion of the abundance of male directors in this genre. This is particularly relevant considering the fact that one of the most progressive representations of the female cyborg, *Captain Marvel*, comes from a female writer and director. This point is further bolstered by the findings of the Chapter Four which deals with objectification and stages a comparative analysis of *Wonder Woman* and *Justice League*. An increase of female input throughout the production process could potentially yield more progressive and interesting results. Out of all the textual examples cited in this chapter only one, *Captain Marvel*, features a female (co)director. Not only are women in the minority of protagonists but their representations remain mostly one dimensional and reflective of heteronormative male desires.

This chapter reveals a figure that has the potential to transgress boundaries being utilised as a tool to reflect hegemonic heteronormative ideology and functioning primarily as an object for the male gaze. In order to progress as an industry and create more meaningful and socially reflective representations, the inclusion of women in a diversity of roles in film production needs to be considered. This chapter demonstrates that even when given the opportunity to transgress social or racial boundaries, the texts conform to hegemonic standards. Particularly in a genre like science fiction, where reality can be suspended and alternative futures explored, the consistent gendering, sexualising and homogenising of female cyborgs is especially perplexing and damaging.

Ultimately, the figure of the female cinematic cyborg is a troublesome one. Her emergence in an unprecedented number of iterations in the science fiction films of the last decade suggests that these representations reflect larger social and cultural concerns.

Chapter Eight - Exceptional Female Characters: A Shift Towards Positive Representations of Women

8.1. Introduction

The findings of the research thus far have been rather negative, concluding that patriarchal ideologies concerning gender are largely upheld by contemporary science fiction cinema. This final chapter provides a more hopeful and positive conclusion to the thesis by investigating a series of representations of women that are not predominately defined by stereotypical gendered traits.

Appendix A of this thesis documents the oscillating trend in the numbers of female protagonists since the start of the decade. Comparing the number of texts featuring male protagonists to those featuring female protagonists reveals an increase in the number of female protagonists over the period 2010 to 2015. Female protagonists made up zero per cent of protagonists in 2010 and this rose to thirty-three per cent of protagonists in 2015. The percentage of female protagonists then starts to decline from 2016 to 2018. 2016 saw female protagonists featured in twenty-seven per cent of the science fiction films produced. By 2018 this percentage had declined to a mere seventeen per cent. 2019 marked the biggest proportional increase in female protagonists featured with forty-three per cent of the science fiction films produced being led by female protagonists. This fluctuating trend finishes with an impressive forty-three per cent of female protagonists in 2019 and reflects a positive shift overall.

In addition to the promising tendencies acknowledged above there has been an appearance of a series of positive representations of teenage girl protagonists which transgress hegemonic norms and display progressive traits. These characters are not subject to objectification, their abilities are highlighted and there is an emphasis on their natural beauty. In addition, there is an emerging pattern of female characters being positively associated with STEM subjects. This is a trend that is particularly pronounced in the texts featuring young adult female protagonists. It is also increasingly visible in films featuring adult female protagonists. These characters are proficient in one or more of the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Moreover, the absence of objectification of young adult female protagonists is significant and positive. This chapter interrogates whether the emergence of these positive representations is linked to the inclusion of women in key production roles in the films concerned.

As discussed in Chapter Four, in the course of a comparative analysis of the character of Wonder Woman, it is demonstrated that the portrayal of the character was more empowering in the female directed film than the male directed film. This chapter develops on these claims and examines the manner in which film language is utilised in other relevant textual examples that attempt to create progressive, powerful female representations.

This chapter discusses the *Hunger Games* series (Ross and Lawrence 2012 to 2015), the *Divergent* series (2014-2016), *Ghostbusters* (Feig 2016), *Bumblebee* (Knight 2018), *A Wrinkle in Time* (DuVernay 2018), the *Star Wars* trilogy (Abrams and Johnson 2016-2019), *Captain Marvel* (Boden and Fleck 2019) and *Men in Black: International* (Gray 2019). *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) falls outside of the remit of this research as it features a male protagonist. However, it does feature three secondary female characters whose representations have been

received as positive and progressive and are of relevance here. This is particularly important as this research has demonstrated that secondary female characters in the superhero genre of films are more usually objectified and presented in a one-dimensional manner. Also, as the superhero corpus of films has featured heavily in this research thus far, and as these films tend to dominate box office numbers, it is worth examining potentially positive representations of women when they do occur in this genre.

The next section discusses some relevant contemporary research into, and theorisations of, positive representations of female characters on-screen. This is followed by textual analysis of the films listed above.

8.2. Key Hypotheses on the Shifting Representation of Women in Twenty-First Century Cinema

Contemporary theorists have repeatedly highlighted the regressive influence of neoliberal feminism on gendered representations on-screen (Sherman 2011; Meehan and Tudor 2013; Brown 2016). These theorists argue that while they masquerade as progressive representations, on closer inspection neoliberal feminist representations are, in fact, rather regressive, and work to sustain patriarchal notions of gender. Rottenberg (2018, pp.4-5) argues that the twenty-first century has been marked by “the mutual entanglement of neoliberalism with feminism”. She considers this phenomenon as being linked to:

the all but total disappearance of key terms that had traditionally been inseparable from public feminist discussions and debates, namely, equal rights, liberation, and social justice. In their stead, other words, such as happiness, balance, responsibility, and lean in, began to appear with stubborn consistency (ibid.).

Rottenberg (2018) links neoliberalism and feminism by pointing out the way in which language has changed around the intersection of these social forces. The drawbacks to neoliberal feminism that she highlights are the same pitfalls that theorists have identified as present in postfeminism (Negra and Tasker 2007). These drawbacks include the privileging of issues unique to middle-class women and the erasure of issues of race. Rottenberg (2018, p.2-3) regards the current political situation in America as representing a troubling development of neo-liberalism. After making liberal gains in the mainstream: the Marriage Equality Act, the privileging of LGBTQ rights and the nomination of the first “woman and feminist-identified presidential candidate”, America has moved into a new and turbulent period since Donald Trump was elected President in 2016 (ibid.). Rottenberg (2018, p3) argues that the Trump administration “literally emod(ies) neoliberal principles in their most extreme form, namely, intensified deregulation, privatization, and capital enhancement”. She argues that neoliberalism functions as:

a dominant political rationality or normative form of reason that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as capital-enhancing agents. (Rottenberg 2018, p.7)

Rottenberg (2018) demonstrates that neoliberalism, at its core, it is at odds with traditional feminist values. She traces the evolution of feminism and dismisses the notion of a meaningful third or fourth wave, arguing that these iterations of feminism have been “taken up by the media as virtually indistinguishable from a postfeminist sensibility” (Rottenberg 2018, p.13). Her claims are interesting and relevant to some of the arguments made in earlier chapters, particularly those made in Chapter Four which explored the thematic linking of femininity to capitalist concerns in a sub-selection of the corpus of films of interest here. However, some shifting representations of femininity as discussed in this chapter foreground the terms that

Rottenberg (2018) argues are disappearing from feminist discourses. This perhaps marks a turn back towards a more progressive feminist movement.

In a similar vein to Rottenberg (2018), Sherman (2011) questions the valorisation of neoliberal ideals in twenty-first century cinema. Her analysis of *Miss Congeniality* (Petrie 2000) echoes Tasker's (2011) reading of *Enchanted* (Lima 2007). These theorists discuss the ironic tendency to represent femininity as artificial while simultaneously narratively rewarding characters who embrace it. Sherman (2011, p.90), like Rottenberg (2018), considers the ideals presented by this neoliberal feminist text as being at odds with traditional feminist values:

Where neoliberalism is fundamentally selfish, sisterhood is about reaching beyond your individual self. Neoliberal femininity may seem vaguely feminist but is, at heart, an antifeminist ideal, based on our disregarding structural inequality and embracing competition as the solution to all problems. Neoliberal femininity promises that it will enable subjects to better compete in all spheres of life.

Sherman's (2011) work highlights the importance of maintaining an intersectional feminist approach which considers issues of race, class and ethnicity when conducting textual analysis. The two texts discussed by Sherman (2011) and Tasker (2011), *Miss Congeniality* and *Enchanted*, are both from the first decade of the twenty-first century and it is possible that the neo-liberal ideals they foreground are unique to this period. Both of these films are romantic comedies, a genre which Kaklamanidou (2015) argues has grown in popularity in the new millennium, and which is particularly suited to the presentation of a neoliberal feminist critique of gender politics. Certainly, the teenage female protagonists discussed below manage to avoid some of the pitfalls of these representations, in particular the ironic deployment of hegemonic beauty ideals, through make-up and fashion. However, the tendency to deliberately present portrayals of femininity which simultaneously highlight the artifice of femininity, as discussed in Chapter Four, is also visible in some of the texts in the corpus of films.

Other theorists who approach their analysis in a similar manner are Meehan and Tudor (2013). They examine *Star Trek* (Abrams 2009) and *Star Trek: Into Darkness* (Abrams 2013) with an attentiveness to their valorisation of neoliberal ideologies. They consider neoliberalism as functioning to disguise the upholding of traditional gender inequalities by these texts:

The new Star Trek franchise exemplifies the textual operations of gender in neoliberal, postfeminist media, which frequently make the female roles seem more significant than they are. These transformations reveal the ways in which neoliberal media disguise gender representations as progressive cultural positions, thus allowing neoliberal masculinity to appropriate certain formerly feminist positions to present a far more egalitarian relationship. (Meehan and Tudor 2013, p.131)

They discuss the choice to include Uhura, who may be read as a progressive female character, while simultaneously limiting her screen time and omitting her from the plot development. Though Uhura is represented as unquestionably intelligent, this relegation of her character upholds traditional gender ideologies:

The simple presence of a female supporting character here should not be mistaken for feminist progressivism; in fact, Uhura signifies the way in which contemporary neoliberalism attempts to legitimate unequal gender relations as natural. (Meehan and Tudor 2013, p.133)

This supports the findings of Chapter Four, which argues that supporting female characters are often presented in a one-dimensional manner, functioning to support either the main female or male protagonist, and are often objectified on-screen. The inclusion of Uhura as a secondary character in the new iterations of the *Star Trek* series can be read as a token gesture. Uhura's main narratives in the franchise focus on the romantic relationship she has with Spock, a character with a comparatively complex narrative trajectory. Elements of Spock's past and his origins as a half-Vulcan half-human man are explored in detail, highlighting the racial discrimination he faced as a child. This makes the relegation of Uhura's character all the more regressive. An actual mixed-race woman is portrayed in these texts as existing primarily to

support her white male partner. These narrative strands demonstrate what Meehan and Tudor (2013) refer to as neoliberal ideals and work to naturalise and legitimate gender inequalities. In this instance they also function to obscure racial inequalities.

In contrast to these scholars, Brown (2016) argues that neoliberal values have influenced a more progressive trend in young adult fiction films featuring female protagonists who are linked to revolutionary narratives involving their fighting for their lives. Drawing on the overlap of ideals between postfeminism and neoliberal feminism Brown (2016, p.171) suggests that the progressive nature of these representations of teenage action heroines comes as a result of an attempt to appeal to these very ideals:

the current wave of girl revolutionary heroines in action genres manages to avoid the limiting pitfalls of postfeminist characters while still appealing to young female audiences informed by postfeminist sensibilities.

He argues that some of these young female revolutionaries avoid the traditional overt sexualisation and objectification of action heroines on-screen. Instead their representations foreground issues of choice and highlight the need for an active feminism. This chapter, cognisant of Brown's (2016) contributions, conducts a series of textual analyses so as to determine whether objectification is indeed absent from these texts and so as to specify how these teenage protagonists are in fact represented. Furthermore, Brown (2016) considers the heroines of *The Hunger Games* series and the *Divergent* series as functioning to highlight systems of oppression. This is achieved by:

allow(ing) young female audience members to experience heroic female empowerment without aligning with feminism, to identify with romantic desirability without being pressurised to capitulate to standard postfeminist beauty makeovers, to vicariously fight a totalitarian state safely displaced in time and space, and to witness the efficacy of personal choices as heroic and rewarding actions. (Brown 2016, p.173)

Brown (2016, p.178) argues that these neoliberal feminist texts hold the potential to mobilise young viewers: “the popularity of these formulaic storylines might shift viewers’ understanding of feminism from an implicitly neoliberal and postfeminist assumption to an active feminist belief”. He considers these stories of “girl revolutionaries” as working to reinforce second wave feminism’s message of “the personal is the political”. This is a significant shift. These texts move from representing femininity in an ironic manner through the deployment of postfeminist ideals (Tasker 2011; Sherman 2011) to a more engaging and alternative set of representations of femininity.

Young (2017) discusses the good girl/bad girl dichotomy found in more traditional narratives centring on “bad” women, where they are inevitably punished for their transgressions. She considers the bad girl archetype as being pervasive in twenty-first century cinema. However, in some cases she regards a process of evolution at work in these representations:

We can find evidence across the pop-culture landscape of supposed resistance to gender norms that actually exploits and commercializes the bad-girl image. We can locate bad girls being tamed—or destroyed—by heroic male protagonists at the center of an antifeminist backlash. At the same time, we can discover a renewed feminist drive to address the continued existence of gender inequity. And we can catch glimpses of ambiguous figures who simultaneously support and subvert the often contradictory stereotypes of both women and men. (Young, 2017, p.3)

Young (2017) is identifying a shift in these representations in a similar manner to Brown (2016). She regards the shifting representations as occurring in tandem with a renewed interest in feminist ideologies regarding gender inequality, as opposed to the ideals of postfeminism. Loreck (2016) also recognises a shift, yet argues that it is to be found in smaller, independent productions, rather than in Hollywood blockbusters. However, her work focuses on examples of counter-cinema that deliberately question and interrogate representations of violent women. Whether more considered approaches to representing violent women in mainstream film have

been adopted in the second part of this decade is something that has yet to be determined. This chapter attempts to determine if this is indeed the case.

In a similar vein, Lavin (2010, pp.4) identifies a shift in the representations of aggressive women, seeing this as reflective of changing attitudes towards women more generally. She considers the 1990s as being marked by new attitudes regarding aggressive women being presented by the media. Lavin sees the emergence of attitudes that celebrate rather than punish aggressive women. Purse (2016) argues that representations of female physical violence in the period since the new millennium are contradictory. She acknowledges two categories of female action heroine. Heroines in the first category convey traditional markers of femininity. Heroines in the second category are transgressive ‘others’, represented as being outside of hegemonic normative femininity. Purse (2016) argues that dissonance occurs in the representations of the characters that subscribe to traditional markers of femininity. This is usually elided by utilising genres like fantasy or comedy to ensure that these characters are not taken seriously while also ensuring that “physical markers of exertion and injury are virtually absent” (Purse 2016, p.185).

Purse (2016) regards oppositional female characters as being present in a minority of films. In contrast to the highly feminised women who are often found in comedies and fantasies, these women are often depicted in high-stake dramas. Purse (2016) also considers the use of film language, particularly the use of cinematography as integral to creating naturalistic effects when representing transgressional female characters. She points to the use of framing and shot composition in the creation of realistic portrayals of violent women. These transgressional women also are depicted without traditional feminine markers, in particular the

“untouchability” of the face: “sweat, blood, involuntary body convulsions, appearance-warping injuries that are far removed from mainstream conventions of presentation” (Purse 2016, p.195). Purse’s (2016) arguments when applied Hester’s character in *Mortal Engines*, may lead to a reading of the scarring of her face that differs from that presented in Chapter Five. Chapter Five argues that the scarring of her face marks her as traumatised and this functions to justify her violent actions. Reading Hester through Purse’s (2016) argument presents an alternative interpretation, one where she is separated from femininity through this scarring, thus positioning her closer to danger and action.

These theorists, despite their differing readings, all argue that shifts have occurred in representations created since the new millennium. This section attempts to be cognisant of the differing interpretations and theorisations of both neoliberal feminist ideals and twenty-first century female representations in cinematic texts while reading them through the critical lens appropriated for this study, conscious of intersectional feminist concerns and attempting to answer the research question: Are there any shifting trends or patterns emerging from the corpus of films of concern? It does this by focusing on a specific subset of films with the potential for positive readings to occur, as evidenced by audience theory, through the use of film reviews and backed up by critical analysis.

Another element of the analysis conducted in this chapter is a consideration of the gender of key members of the crews involved in the films that are analysed, and of whether the presence of female directors and/or writers can assist in creating more progressive representations of women on-screen. French (2012, p.35) argues that women’s voices are integral to creating more diverse representations:

The understanding of being a woman is central to female experience, and it follows that women filmmakers might find gestures, enactments, and significations to explore that experience. Thus what women represent in their films, and the modes of representation, may well differ to that constructed by men (and vice versa).

The next section examines what can be read as more hopeful representations of female protagonists while drawing on the theorisations discussed in this section.

8.3. Young Adult Representation: Progressive Images of Younger Women within the Genre

One notable trend visible within the corpus of films of relevance to this research is the proliferation of younger female protagonists. Of the thirty-one films which fall within the scope of this research, eighteen feature tween/young adult protagonists. These include the four texts of *The Hunger Games* (Ross and Lawrence 2012-2015) franchise, the three texts of the *Divergent* (Burger and Schwentke 2014-2016) franchise, the four texts of the *Star Wars* (Abrams, Edwards and Johnson 2015-2019) franchise, *The Host* (Niccol 2013), *Bumblebee* (Knight 2018), *A Wrinkle in Time* (DuVernay 2018), *Mortal Engines* (Rivers 2018), *Alita: Battle Angel* (Rodriguez 2019), and *Dark Phoenix* (Kinberg 2019). *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders 2017) also technically features a female teenage protagonist, as the protagonist is an adult cyborg character with the brain of a teenage girl. However, none of the issues of young adulthood are explored in that text, and its overt objectification of the adult cyborg body is expanded on and analysed in detail above in Chapter Seven.

Within this subsection of the corpus of films, with the exception of *Ghost in the Shell* and *Dark Phoenix*, the young adult protagonists tend to be represented in a more progressive manner. The typical phenomenon of objectification and hyper sexualisation discussed in Chapter Four and Chapter Seven above are not generally present within these texts. Instead the films often adopt, through the shot types utilised, the perspective of the protagonist. The trope of including flashback sequences to childhood, as discussed in Chapter Five, is employed in these texts in a different manner. Rather than functioning as a mode of explaining violence as a result of childhood trauma, here the trope is used to depict strength. Furthermore, these young female protagonists are often represented in leadership roles. They generally embrace their natural beauty over the artificiality of make-up and fashion and their representations are linked to STEM subjects as discussed in section 8.4.. Narrative threads with particular relevance to young women are found in these films. These include bullying by peers, the need to fit in with other young people, and questions of choice, consent and agency. A conscious effort to portray strong, independent protagonists is visible throughout the films discussed here.

Another link between these positive representations of young adult female characters is the presence of women in key roles in their production processes. *A Wrinkle in Time* is the only relevant film directed by a female director, Ava DuVernay. It is based on a novel written by a female author, Madeleine L'Engle and the script was co-written by a female writer, Jennifer Lee. Similarly, *The Host*, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* are all based on young adult fiction written by female authors: Stephanie Meyer, Suzanne Collins and Veronica Roth. The adaptation of *Mortal Engines* was written by two women, Philippa Boyens and Fran Walsh. *Alita: Battle Angel* was co-scripted by a female writer, Laeta Kalogridis, and *Bumblebee* was written in its entirety by Christina Hodson. The other two relevant texts featuring female young

adult protagonists, *Ghost in the Shell* and *Dark Phoenix*, which have already been discussed above in terms of the objectification of their protagonists and the linking of on-screen violence to emotional vulnerability, are the only two texts that do not feature any women in key creative roles.

Drawing on reports from various Western countries into gender inequality in the film industry

French (2012, pp.9-10), determines that:

if film industries increase diversity (not just in terms of women's participation, but the participation of other minority groups), national cinemas will be less heterogeneous, and international cinema will be richer.

These richer representations are certainly present in this subsection of science fiction films featuring young adult protagonists.

In comparison to the films discussed in Chapter Four, where the camera angles were generally found to reflect an implicitly male gaze, the texts featuring young adult protagonists tend to foreground their perspectives. They thus invite audiences to adopt the perspectives of a series of empowered young females. A number of key scenes from *The Hunger Games* privilege Katniss's perspective and as such provide the opportunity for audience identification with the female protagonist. This is achieved by presenting medium close-ups and close-ups of Katniss's face, followed by wide-shots of her perspective and field of view. Similar shot sequences are used in *The Host* so as to privilege the protagonist's perspective. *The Host* features an alien race that invades Earth and inhabits human bodies. The narrative follows Melanie Stryder, who resists this invasion. After Melanie is inhabited by Wanda, one of the alien species, they work together to form a friendship and reunite Melanie with her family.

A lot of the shots in this text are mid-shots, close-ups and medium close-ups of Melanie's face, connoting the idea that Melanie/Wanda struggles with the presence of two internal voices. Their (her) perspective is privileged throughout this text. In a key scene towards the climax of the film where Wanda leaves Melanie's body, the camera adopts Wanda's perspective. A medium close-up shot lingers on Melanie's face as Melanie and Wanda say goodbye to one another. When Wanda awakes in a different body the camera shot allows light in slowly, imitating the opening of eyelids as blurred figures eventually become shapes. This reinforces the invitation to the audience to adopt Wanda's perspective.

This same privileging, through shot choice and sequencing, of the protagonists' perspective is present in *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Divergent*, *Alita: Battle Angel* and *Mortal Engines*. Similar shot sequences are also found in the *Star Wars* texts in scenes featuring the female protagonists, Rey and Jyn. *Alita: Battle Angel* is set in the year 2563. Dr Ido, a robotics surgeon by day and bounty hunter by night, finds Alita's torso in a dump and gives her a new body, adopting her as a daughter. The film follows Alita as she discovers her origins as a warrior and fights against the oppressive Nova, leader of Zalem, the wealthy city that literally floats above the lower classes in the city below.

The film opens with Dr Ido searching a scrap heap where he discovers Alita's discarded head and shoulders. Wide-shots and medium close-ups depict Ido selecting body parts before he notices Alita. Her severed body is shown in centre frame, lying in a large pile of rubbish. The camera slowly pans towards her body as Ido approaches. The next scene depicts Ido and his assistant attaching Alita's head to a new body. The final shot in this scene is a close-up of Ido's

face as he operates on Alita. The shot fades to black and the next scene presents the audience with Alita's perspective as she awakens. A close-up of her face bathed in warm sunlight shows Alita opening her eyes and her pupils dilating, followed by a medium shot of her wiggling her fingers and inspecting her new body. A wide-shot portrays her unsteadily approaching a mirror which is quickly edited with a reverse shot revealing her perspective to the audience.

These texts that present the perspective of their protagonists, invite audiences to identify with and empathise with those protagonists. This is in direct contrast to some of the texts discussed in Chapter Four, where the camera was found to facilitate the male gaze and objectify the female protagonist's bodies. It is worth mentioning that more progressive representations are also possible through texts presented from a male director's perspective, with films like *Mad Max: Fury Road* in particular, responding to the zeitgeist and calls for more progressive female protagonists. This is in line with audience reception of the character Furiosa, described by critics in terms like: "fearsome" (Anderson 2016), "equally badass" (Roeper 2015), and "a powerful woman" (Tallerico 2015) reflecting the positive reading conducted of her characterisation in Chapter Four.

Another trope that has emerged in the texts featuring more progressive female characters is the use of flashbacks to convey growth. As discussed in Chapter Five above, often the plot device of introducing a younger version of a given female character is used to convey childhood trauma. This is a trope employed in *Ant Man and the Wasp*, *Dark Phoenix* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*. However, this device is used in a different manner in *Wonder Woman*, *A Wrinkle in Time* and *Captain Marvel*. A key scene in *Wonder Woman* features a young Diana, who has run away from her lessons, watching the training of the Amazon soldiers. This scene emphasises

the importance of positive representation to young women. Diana, from a balcony, observes the soldier's training and begins to imitate their moves. In a sequence utilising medium close-ups of her face she is shown observing one soldier grabbing a shield from horseback, a move that she will later use as an adult. The camera then tracks back to a wide-shot of Diana as she starts to punch and kick the air, practising the moves she is observing. This scene conveys the manner in which the environment she experienced as a young girl has shaped her as an adult. The positive example provided by these female soldiers heightens her desire to become the best warrior she can be.

A similar device is used in *A Wrinkle in Time*. The film opens with a flashback sequence portraying a younger Meg and her father doing science experiments. Shots which utilise shallow depth of field convey the intimacy that exists between them. Meg is shown, in medium close-ups and close-ups, to be fascinated by the scientific experiments they are conducting. One particular close-up focuses on her face as she removes her safety goggles and stares in awe at the results of one of the experiments. This reinforces the notion that a love of science and knowledge was instilled in her at a young age and emphasises the importance of positive role models.

Similarly, in *Captain Marvel*, Carol, through flashbacks, revisits various times when she failed as a young girl. *Captain Marvel* is the first Marvel superhero text featuring a female protagonist. It follows Carol Danvers in the 1990s, a fighter pilot, who uncovers her past and embraces her superhero powers. She possess powers that the Kree, an alien race, want to control for their benefit, as they invade planets and attempt to wipe out another alien race, the Skrulls. Once Carol unlocks the full potential of her powers she is able to defeat her enemies

with ease. In a key scene where she is confronted by a series of memories of failing as a child, she realises that each of these failure made her stronger and fuelled her progress in life.

Each memory features Carol overcoming an iteration of gendered oppression. The first flashback sequence is set in the 1980s when, as a female pilot, she was unable to fly combat with the men. The sequence features her friend Maria Rambo telling her that she is: *about to show these boys how we do it*. A flashback to her racing her brothers on go karts as a child depicts her brother telling her: *You're going too fast, you need to go slow*. A close-up shot of her face shows her anger at his insistence that she slow down and her subsequent determination to instead speed up. After she crashes, her father runs over and starts to shout down at her. The camera angles used in this sequence emphasise the power dynamic, depicting her father in a powerful position above her from a low camera angle. The shot-reverse-shot pattern then presents Carol's face in tears in a medium close-up shot from a high camera angle. Her father tells her: *You don't belong out here* to which she responds, referring to her brothers: *You let them drive*. The next flashback is to Carol in army training struggling on the training ropes of an obstacle course while a group of male soldiers gather beneath her laughing and jeering: *You're not strong enough, you'll hurt yourself*. This scene ends with her superior officer standing above her body after she falls to the ground saying: *They'll never let you fly*. This again, is shown from Carol's perspective, and again a low camera angle depicts her officer's power over her. This scene is followed by a scene featuring Carol in a bar being told by a fellow pilot that: *You're a decent pilot but you're too emotional, you do know why they call it a cockpit, don't you?* The narrative and the low-angle shot types underpin the subordination of her character and represent the gendered inequality that she has faced since she was a child.

Once Carol realises she has been manipulated and controlled a sequence unveils her reactions to all these memories of her being oppressed. The “supreme leader” of the Kree traps Carol and shows her the memories of her failing, in order to suppress and control her. The supreme leader tells Carol: *You’re weak, you’re flawed, helpless, without us you’re only human*. As Carol embraces her humanity, the aftermath of all the memories of her failing is presented to the audience. Various scenes of her as a child on the ground after having fallen down are shown. The camera pans towards Carol, showing her getting up after each fall. The music, featuring poignant strings, builds the emotion in the sequence as the panning shots transition to various close-ups of her face at different stages of her life. These reinforce the audience’s sense of her determination and resolve and also privilege her perspective. This sequence, through the use of close-ups and camera angles counters the previous sequence showing her subordination, challenges stereotypical notions of femininity, and portrays her as a woman capable of flying, driving and ultimately breaking free from Kree captivity.

Reflecting on audience reception of Carol’s character in *Captain Marvel* also points to a character perceived as empowering and one which speaks to contemporary anxieties. Numerous reviews touch on both the progressive characterisation of a female superhero and the film’s ability to reflect contemporary social and cultural concerns: “Everything in its DNA, from representation (in front of and behind the screen) to its notions of empowerment, radiates our moment right now” (Travers 2019); “This is not another cheap girl-power cliché; it’s an explicitly feminist apotheosis” (O’Hara 2019); “‘Captain Marvel’ manages to work in themes both obvious (the empowerment of women) and not so expected (the plight of refugees, the shared humanity of people perceived as the other)” (Turan 2019).

An awareness of the importance of positive role models and of progressive representations to young women is demonstrated by this text in a similar manner to *Wonder Woman* as discussed above. Maria's child, Monica, insists her mother accompany Carol to space to save Skrull lives. The Skrull are alien refugees in this text. In a medium close-up Monica excitedly expresses her belief that her mother should go with Carol: *I just think you should consider what kind of example you're setting for your daughter*. Her idolisation of Carol also works to emphasise the importance of positive representations and female role models to young women while highlighting contemporary social injustices: the refugee narrative reflecting the tense situation in America at the time of production, and the use of ICE camps at the Mexican border.

Another feature of these texts is the inclusion of narrative elements that focus on young adult concerns; consent, body image, bullying etc. *The Host* features a key scene where Jareth tells Melanie that, even if they were the last two humans on earth, she would not be expected to sleep with him. Similarly, *Divergent* includes a key scene where Tris is confronted with one of her fears in a simulated training experience; the fear that Four, her boyfriend, will rape her. Tris fights him off in the simulation and overcomes this fear.

This theme of resisting violation is handled in a similar vein, in a key scene in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. This is the seventh film in the *Star Wars* franchise, the first of the new phase of films. Rey is a young woman living on a scrap planet, Jakku, after her parents abandoned her there as a child. Rey possesses the abilities of a powerful Jedi, and once she leaves the Jakku to help the resistance her powers begin to awaken. She is pursued by Kylo Ren, the antagonist in the texts. He has abandoned his family and his Jedi training to become a Sith. The

Sith are a despotic evil order that are behind the “First Order”, a totalitarian regime that invade planets. In a key scene Rey is kidnapped by Kylo Ren who uses his abilities to attempt to penetrate her mind.

This scene opens with a close-up shot of Rey’s restrained wrists. The camera then pans up her torso to reveal her unconscious face. When Kylo Ren begins to interrogate her he tells her: *You know I can take whatever I want*. He is positioned above her face in the frame, in a low-angle shot, emphasising his power over her. As he moves towards her a low rumbling sound indicates that he is using his powers to attempt to penetrate her mind. As their roles are reversed, and Rey begins to use her Jedi powers on Kylo Ren, the camera zooms in on Kylo Ren’s face, thus reversing the previous low-angle shots where he loomed over her. Rey resists Kylo Ren and manages to penetrate his mind. The close-up reverse shots here denote a subtle change of perspective. Though both characters are still presented in close-up shots, Rey is now shot from a low camera angle while Kylo Ren is shot from a high camera angle. This works to convey that the power dynamic has shifted and that Rey has managed to resist his attempt to violate her mind.

A Wrinkle in Time foregrounds issues that are relevant to even younger women. Meg, the protagonist, is being bullied at school by her former friend. Her father, a renowned scientist, disappeared years earlier and Meg has as a result become withdrawn and “difficult”. Meg, her brother George Wallace and Calvin, a boy from Meg’s school, travel across the universe in order to find her father. Meg is one of only two mixed-race protagonists in the corpus of films of relevance to this research. *A Wrinkle in Time* is directed by Ava DuVernay, a black female director. In a key scene Calvin compliments Meg’s hair, which she is wearing naturally around

her shoulders. Discourses on black women's hair reflect the racist and oppressive manner in which it has been treated previously (Banks 2000; Dabiri 2019). This key scene celebrates the protagonist's natural hair and highlights the importance of embracing and loving yourself, a positive narrative message for young women, especially young black women. Similarly, *Men in Black: International* features a key scene of the female protagonist as a child. Both Molly and her mother wear their hair in a natural fashion, again presenting a positive representation of black female characters.

A similar narrative thread occurs in *Bumblebee* with the protagonist, Charlie, grieving for her father. *Bumblebee* is part of the *Transformers* franchise, which, until this iteration, had typically followed a male protagonist. The transformers are an alien robotic species that are at war with the "decepticons". When they come to Earth as refugees they transform themselves into a variety of vehicles in order to disguise their identities. Charlie is struggling with her mother's new relationship with her step-father Ron, while also dealing with being bullied by the popular girls in school. In her spare time, she works on the car she was working on with her Dad when he was alive. In a key scene set on Charlie's birthday Ron gifts her with a book called "Smile More". This has similarities to a key scene in *Captain Marvel* where a man on a motorbike pulls up beside Carol and tells her to smile. These narratives emphasise the societal pressure brought to bear upon women to appear amicable and approachable. These scenes foreground the gender inequality and misogyny embedded in such expectations. These narrative themes encapsulate what Brown (2015, p.168) argues are combinations of "progressive idea(s) of adolescent girlhood with a cultural critique of patriarchal systems of oppression".

Consulting reviews of this particular text also presents an audience reaction that considers Charlie's representation in a positive light, with some reviewers contrasting her representation to earlier, more damaging examples in the franchise: "it puts a relatable, capable teenage girl at the center of a franchise that has hardly deigned to use them as more than decorative parsley until now" (Greenblatt 2018); "a fresh direction for the macho franchise" (Hans 2018); "Screenwriter Christina Hodson tosses aside the franchise's condescending pattern of using its female characters as accessories, and instead frames the entire story through Charlie's eyes" (Bishop 2018); "Charlie spends more time under cars than draped over them" (Harley 2018); "We haven't seen such a well-realized character in any of the other Transformers movies" (Berardinelli 2018); "it's nice to see the "Transformers" movies recognizing a woman as something more than a drool-inducing male fantasy" (Debruge 2018). The overwhelmingly positive reviews that highlight progress in terms of this representation marks how these types of characters are desired by audiences and how celebrated it is when female leads are more progressive and lack the typical objectification of their predecessors. This marks a positive change in the *Transformers* franchise and demonstrates the reaction more positive representations initiate.

The fact that these films were created with a teenage demographic in mind, and that some were written initially by female authors seeking to empower young women, means that they tend to lack the typical objectification of women found in mainstream cinema. Brown (2011, pp.171-172) argues with regard to this new category of teenage female heroes that:

These heroines eschew overt sexualisation, and their narratives offer sustained critiques of oppressive patriarchal systems under the guise of pure entertainment...(They) present a model of young women as agents of systemic change. They are powerful and strong, good with weapons and strategic thinking, and inspire those around them – all without sacrificing or relinquishing their femininity, and perhaps more importantly without having to rely on their femininity.

Brown's (2011) formulation here is troubling. He uncritically repeats the idea that femininity is inherent to young women. Femininity, in the context of this research, is understood as a social construct and Brown's (2011) manner of expression is problematic. It appears to support the notion that femininity is a naturally occurring rather than socially constructed phenomenon. However, his argument that these new heroines represent a progressive change in the genre is supported by the analysis conducted here.

The textual examples discussed in this section, which combine the inclusion of women in key production roles with the centring of young female concerns, demonstrate the progressive nature of young female adult narratives in contemporary science fiction cinema.

8.4. Positive Representations of Women as linked with STEM subjects

Contemporary research on women active in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields clearly highlights the lack of women in these areas (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration 2011; O'Dea et al. 2018; Kelly et al. 2019; McGuire et al. 2020). Reports like that of the US Department of Commerce (2011) highlight the lack of gender balance within STEM disciplines. O'Dea et al. (2018) argue that the discrepancies found in these areas have nothing to do with ability. Their research rather suggests that overall, girls achieve significantly higher grades than boys in academia. Other researchers, Kelly et al. (2019) and McGuire et al. (2020), argue that it is gendered stereotypes that most impact the number of girls pursuing STEM subjects.

A positive trend that has emerged in the decade relevant to this study is the attempt to link progressively represented female characters with STEM subjects. Three female characters in *Ghostbusters* are scientists. Dr Banks from *Arrival* is a talented linguist who manages to communicate with an alien race after other scientists fail to do so. *Gravity* features Dr Ryan Stone, an engineer on her first shuttle mission. *Mad Max: Fury Road* features Furiosa, a strong military leader who is technically savvy and capable of maintaining and rigging large trucks. *Captain Marvel* is the origin story of fighter pilot turned superhero, Carol Danvers. *Terminator: Dark Fate* follows three women, one of whom is Sarah Connor who featured in the earlier iterations of the franchise. Sarah becomes the saviour in this narrative and is shown to be proficient with technology and weaponry.

This trend also includes the young adult characters briefly discussed in the previous section. Katniss from *The Hunger Games*, Tris from *Divergent* and Rey and Jyn from *Star Wars* become leaders of, or key figures in, rebellions. The female characters in *Bumblebee*, *Star Wars* and *A Wrinkle in Time* are also proficient at STEM areas. Charlie from *Bumblebee* is capable of fixing cars and shown to be a competent engineer. Meg from *A Wrinkle in Time* is a talented scientist and child prodigy while Rey from *Star Wars* is a brilliant pilot who is technically adept at maintaining, flying and fixing ships.

The manner in which these female protagonists are linked with STEM subjects represents a progressive shift. It points to an attempt on the part of contemporary filmmakers to address the gender disparities in the STEM industries outlined above. These representations address the reality that stereotypes of women discourage their pursuit of careers in STEM fields (O'Dea et al. 2018; Kelly et al. 2019; Maguire et al. 2020). These positive representations may help to

counteract this phenomenon and inspire younger women to ignore societal prejudices and embark on STEM careers.

Though the film lies outside of the remit of this research as it features a male protagonist, it is worth also considering the female characters featured in *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) in this section. *Black Panther*, which draws on elements of Afrofuturism, features positive, progressive representations of black women.²⁹ T'Challa, the protagonist of the text, inherits the throne of Wakanda after his father's death. He is forced to defend his right to the throne when his cousin, Killmonger, returns to stake a claim on it. The two main female characters are Okoye and Shuri. Okoye is the leader of the all-female Wakandan special force the "Dora Milaje". T'Challa's sister Shuri is Wakanda's lead scientist. She creates weapons and is proficient with technology, and is even capable of healing people who are beyond Western medicine's help. Shuri's passion and enthusiasm for science is made clear through the shot choices and mise-en-scène. She is depicted as whooping with joy when helping T'Challa with a remotely controlled car and is consistently portrayed as revelling in her involvement with technology and science.

The linking of Shuri with STEM subjects, and the positioning as Okoye as the leader of Wakanda's special forces are exceptionally progressive moves. Further to the argument made above with regard to the importance of linking positive representations of women to STEM subjects so as to counter stereotypes and inspire societal change, the linking of black women

²⁹ Coined by Dery (1994) the term Afrofuturism refers to the reimagining of a future through a black lens, weaving black identity and African traditions into science fiction narratives.

specifically to these areas addresses issues of racial inequality. While black women have been notably absent from, or marginalised in, science fiction cinema (Mafe 2018), the representations of these two mainstream Marvel heroines serve to forcefully confront issues of racial inequality and gender imbalance.

The association of STEM subjects with female characters in science fiction cinema is a positive shift which addresses the traditional absence of such characters in cinema. Steinke and Tavaréz (2017, p244) through an analysis of female STEM associated characters in American cinema from 2002 to 2014 found that:

female STEM characters were outnumbered by male STEM characters in speaking roles by 2 to 1. Female STEM characters appearing in lead, co-lead, and secondary roles typically were cast in co-lead or secondary roles in the films, and the typical female STEM character was a Caucasian scientist employed as a biologist or astronaut who worked as a member of a research team, was attractive, was equally as likely to be in either a romantic relationship or single and was not a mother.

Steinke and Tavaréz (2017) rely on social cognitive theory to emphasise the importance of representations in influencing audience's perceptions. Their conclusions highlight the need for the on-screen circulation of positive images of women as STEM characters. It is outside the scope of this research to review all science fiction films from the chosen decade so as to determine an exact gender breakdown of STEM characters. However, a shift with regard to more progressive representations of female protagonists can certainly be acknowledged. Where Steinke and Tavaréz (2017) note the trend of typical female STEM characters being Caucasian, characters like Shuri from *Black Panther*, Molly from *Men in Black: International* and Meg from *A Wrinkle in Time* provide representations of strong women of colour in STEM roles.

With only two protagonists within the corpus of films relevant to this research being women of colour the lack of racial diversity cannot be denied. However the shift in contemporary science fiction cinema to include more female STEM characters is a positive one. The representations present within the corpus of films under the scope of this research portray women's relationship with STEM subjects in a positive manner.

8.5. Adult Female Protagonists: The Exceptional Women

There are a number of adult female protagonists in this dataset who are not primarily defined by their sexual attractiveness or objectified through the use of film language. These protagonists feature in: *Arrival*, *Gravity*, *Ghostbusters*, *The Shape of Water*, *Men in Black: International* and *Captain Marvel*. These films often feature relatively complex narrative structures, and are sometimes the product of a determination, present in production stages or on the part of specific directors, to represent women in an empowering manner. The trope of referencing and directly commenting on gender inequalities is something that often arises in these examples, something that is discussed in relation to *The Hunger Games* and *Wonder Woman* in Chapter Four.

Those films that do not treat the female protagonist in the traditional patriarchal manner of Hollywood tend to make heavy use of close-ups. This generally serves to emphasise the female protagonist's drive and autonomy. *Arrival*, for example, constantly privileges Dr Banks's face in close-ups and medium close-ups. This same trend is present in *The Shape of Water*, *Captain Marvel* and *Men in Black: International* where the protagonist's bodies are rarely, if ever, objectified through the shot types used.

The shot choices used in *Arrival* work in such a manner that Dr Banks' point of view is consistently privileged. Her thought processes are foregrounded through the use of close-ups and medium shots as she strives to solve the puzzle that the aliens have provided. The shot types used to privilege a female protagonist's point of view, and their connotations, are discussed by theorists like Kuhn (1984), Haskell (1987) and Cook (2005) whose work focuses on melodrama and "gynocentric" genres. Cook (2005, p.65) sees mise-en-scène as functioning to highlight the protagonist's emotions, thus encouraging audiences to identify with them:

In tragic melodrama, the expressive visual codes of mise-en-scène are used to heighten the intense emotional suffering of the protagonists...in women's melodrama, the visual code can also be used to express the feelings of the heroine, and to offer her point of view as a focus for identification.

This type of use of mise-en-scène is particularly visible in *Arrival* which features aspects of tragic melodrama. One of the main themes of the film is that of loss and grief, with the female protagonist dealing with her daughter's premature death. The scenes in the hospital are depicted in cold blue desaturated lights and we see Dr Banks wandering off down a curved corridor after her daughter dies. This curved corridor can be read as connoting the idea of grief as a constant presence in one's life. The entire text privileges Dr Banks's view and presents the audience with an opportunity to identify with her character, conveyed through the close-ups and mise-en-scène utilised throughout.

The use of particular shot choices in the presentation of more positive representations of women on-screen is also relevant to *The Shape of Water*. Elisa, the protagonist, is often depicted masturbating as part of her daily routine. This is not shot in a degrading, objectifying manner. The shot choice rather presents an intimate representation of an adult woman living

alone. The camera pans around her body in the bath until the sink rests in the foreground, blurring her body in the background. The effect of this camera movement is to present her sexual activity to us as a natural banal part of her daily existence rather than as an erotic act staged for the audience's scopophilic pleasure. The bland treatment of this scene works to normalise the act and present her character to the audience in a raw manner- the audience are invited to experience her daily routine in all its mundane normality.

Identification is also encouraged in *Captain Marvel* which focuses on Carol Danvers discovering her true origins and becoming aware of the fake memories that the Kree have implanted in her brain. The opening sequence invites the audience to identify with her, through the use of close-ups of her face, her eyes and then of her clenched fist enveloped in a glowing energy current which conveys the power she has absorbed. The combination of these shots explicitly presents the narrative as being from her perspective and avoids objectifying her on-screen. Furthermore, in a similar vein to the shot types used to convey Diana's (Wonder Woman's) powers, as discussed in Chapter Four above, the shots that depict Carol in fight sequences highlight her strength and abilities rather than objectify her body. In these sequences wide-shots function to display her raw power. This is reflected in audience reception of her character, with reviews commenting on the lack of objectification with her character and her empowering representation: "she lays the foundation for a character who defies male objectification" (Travers 2019); "the girl-power narrative the MCU needed" (O'Neil 2019); "in its messaging of female empowerment" (Wolfe 2019). This demonstrates the effect that positive representations of women can have on an audience and it is created through cinema language, mise-en-scène and narrative themes.

Similarly, when the women of *Black Panther* are depicted fighting on-screen, the shot types used tend to also be wide-shots. In a key scene Nakia and Okoye accompany T'Challa to Busan where a fight between Klaue's (an antagonist that has appeared in previous iterations of the Marvel cinematic universe) men breaks out. The women are wearing formal dresses so as to blend into their casino surroundings. Rather than their being objectified on-screen, they instead directly comment on the artificiality of the costuming. Okoye, referring to the wig she wears, says: *Willing this will go quickly and I can get this ridiculous thing off my head...it's a disgrace*. As with *A Wrinkle in Time* and *Men in Black: International* this piece of dialogue promotes the idea of natural female beauty. When the violence starts, Okoye utilises her fashion items as weapons. She hurls her handbag at an assailant's face while simultaneously materialising a staff from it. She then rips the wig off of her head and throws it in another's face. The shots used in this scene are mid-shots and wide-shots which work to emphasise her prowess and agility. Furthermore, the manner in which she transforms the wig and the handbag, items linked to hegemonic ideas of beauty, into weapons portrays them as artificial and superficial. Similarly, Nakia removes a heel and uses it to slash the face of one of Klaue's guards.

The use of items of fashion as weapons and the emphasise on the artifice of more Western fashion trends (the heels, wig and formal dress) help to celebrate the African clothing and hairstyle portrayed when the characters are in Wakanda. This is something present in readings of reviews of the films also, critic Margolis (2018) reads the use of traditional African hair and fashion as empowering:

Camille Friend, the Head Hairdresser, made all the actors grow their hair natural for the film: hair styles, like many other aspects of the film, are about paying dues to ancestry, history, and authenticity, and showing the audience that pride in those things is empowering

Drawing on the foregrounding of these African styles as empowering, other theorists comment on the neglect of such characters by the Marvel Cinematic Universe for so long which speaks to the reception of this text as empowering to so many. Abad-Santos (2018) in his review blatantly calls Marvel out for its tendency to forefront and privilege white men in their cinematic texts:

Marvel, for whatever reason, hasn't been in a particular rush to bring that fantasy to the screen. Its sprawling cinematic universe currently spans a full decade, 17 films, and 2,000 or so minutes of white men becoming demigods, iron-armored geniuses, incredible hulks, captains of America, spider-men, sorcerers supreme, and star lords. Women and people of color have represented an increasingly larger part of the equation in recent years, but still primarily as sidekicks, love interests, and supporting characters.

The palpable excitement for the portrayal of typically marginalised characters can be felt in Abad-Santos's review and supports the arguments presented in earlier chapters here, that women of colour are typically marginalised in contemporary science fiction cinema. The films excels in its portrayals, in particular the empowering manner in which the secondary female characters have been received by audiences. Key phrases describing the female characters include: "a formidable line of women" (Macdonald 2018), "Okoye, T'Challa's right-hand woman, is also a force to behold... Nakia, a warrior in her own right" (Margolis 2018), "this is probably the first movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe in which women drive the story and plot as much as their male counterparts" (Bouie 2018).

The shot types that focus on Molly are portrayed in a similar empowering manner, in *Men in Black: International*. After the audience has been introduced to Molly/Agent M as a child, the shot lingers on a medium close-up of her young face and this slowly dissolves into a medium close-up of her adult face. This transition, in a similar manner to that found in the previously discussed texts, invites the audience to adopt her perspective and signifies that she is the

protagonist of the narrative. The shot types used to present Molly throughout this text also are predominately mid-shots or wide-shots with no lingering close-ups of her curves or objectifying shots of her body being presented on-screen. In fact, before she becomes an agent, she is consistently shown dressed in oversized, baggy clothes without any concession being given to artificial beauty standards.

It is also important, as discussed in Chapter Four, to attend to the use of the female voice when considering the objectification of female protagonists. As discussed previously, text titles and male voice-overs are often used to distance the spectator from a female protagonist. *Arrival*, however, begins with a voice-over from Dr Banks, which reinforces the privileging of her perspective. Other texts from the main dataset that feature an opening voice-over narration by their female protagonists include *Dark Phoenix*, *The Divergent* series, *Lucy*, *Jupiter Ascending*, and *Wonder Woman*.

The privileging of the female protagonists' voices in this manner reinforces the idea that these are stories told from their perspectives. This invites the spectator to consider them as authoritative figures. When a narration is delivered from a female character's perspective, a sense of agency is linked with her character.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, the analysis of costume design is integral to identifying the objectification of female protagonists. In the films dealt with in this chapter, where we identify exceptions to the rule of objectification, the typical pattern of sexualisation through costume design is largely absent. *Ghostbusters* and *Star Wars* are both new iterations of older popular franchises with the newer versions featuring female heroes in

what were traditionally male roles. Rey and Jyn are the female protagonists in the *Star Wars* franchise and the all-female cast in *Ghostbusters* replace the original all-male cast. In both of these textual examples efforts have been made to stay faithful to the original costume design. The women in *Ghostbusters* wear the traditional uniform of tan boiler suits, while in the *Star Wars* franchise Rey's attire is similar to that of the young Jedi's in the prequel films; woven fabrics in natural colours with long legs. *Men in Black: International* similarly presents Agent M/Molly wearing a black suit which is identical to those of her male counterparts. As discussed in Chapter Four, *Star Trek* and *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* both, rather, objectify female soldiers/crew members through costume design. These characters wear uniforms, yet their costuming differs from that of the male members of their crews as the female character's uniforms include mini-skirts. *Men in Black: International* and *Ghostbusters* have made a concentrated effort to put their female characters on the same level with their male counterparts through their costume design choices.

Arrival, similarly, features the female protagonist Dr Louise Banks wearing baggy army clothes when on the military base surrounded by men. She is shown as equal to her male counterparts through the presentation of her character in similar clothing to theirs. Likewise, *Gravity*, features a female scientist, Dr Ryan Stone, in a spacesuit identical to that of her male counterpart. However, as the narrative progresses in this textual example we do eventually see Dr Stone shed her spacesuit and float in zero gravity in her underwear.

It is pertinent to note an emerging trend within some of these narratives where a textual self-referential awareness of their attempts to tackle gender inequality is demonstrated. *Captain Marvel* for instance features a soundtrack entirely made up of female vocal led songs from the

era in which it is set, the 1990s. In a key scene Carol is standing outside an internet cafe reading a map when a man on a motorbike pulls up beside her. He revs his engine at her and says to her: *Lighten up honey, huh? Got a smile for me?* When he fails to provoke a response he utters: *Freak*. The quick edits that follow convey that Carol steals the man's motorbike once he leaves the scene, and he is thus punished textually for his misogynistic actions.

Men in Black: International is not nearly as explicit in its attempts to reference gender inequality within the text. However, this type of referencing is deployed in one key scene. Agent M/Molly is being briefed by her superior officer, Agent O, also a woman, when O says: *We are the men in black*. Molly responds by saying: *The **men** in black?* Agent O, exasperatedly says: *Don't. Don't start. I've had that conversation and they don't seem to be able to let that go. It's a process*. Agent O is played by Emma Thompson, an older actress, and thus this exchange can be read as a direct comment on the history of inequality in Hollywood and the process of achieving gender equality in film.

Ghostbusters, which faced an extreme online backlash at the mere announcement that the franchise was being rebooted with an all-female cast, deliberately included some of the abuse the project received in the script. In a key scene, after having experienced the apparition of a ghost, Abby posts video of the group's reaction to the internet, points to the comments and tells Erin to read them. Erin reads aloud: *Ain't no bitches gonna hunt no ghosts*. This self-reflexive commentary on the real-world reaction to this new iteration of the franchise serves to highlight the absurdity of the online trolls who, feeling threatened by the casting choices, worked to have the film's trailer made the most down voted trailer of all time on YouTube.

Another area of interest is the dynamic between the female protagonists discussed in this chapter and their male counterparts. Historically in science fiction cinema women mostly featured as side-kicks, or as secondary characters to male protagonists, as Kac-Vergne (2019, p.84) puts it: “the mainstream narrative [is] where the woman’s role is to help and support the *male* hero while remaining a subordinate sidekick”. The examples discussed in this chapter feature strong, intelligent women leading the action without succumbing to traditional stereotyping. In *Black Panther*, where Okoye, Shuri and Nakia are indeed side-kicks, these characters, while they support the male protagonist, are never depicted as inferior to him. One key scene features Okoye in a confrontation with her romantic partner, W’Kabi. She confronts him on the battle field and demands: *Drop your weapon*. He replies: *Would you kill me my love?* To which she answers: *For Wakanda? Without question*. Okoye subverts romantic stereotypes by appearing as a strong powerful woman, the leader of an army who is willing to sacrifice the man she loves for her country.

Similarly, in *Arrival*, Dr Banks is depicted as falling in love with a fellow scientist, Dr Donnelly. When she gains the ability to experience time as non-linear from the “Heptapods” she becomes aware that she is destined for a future with Dr Donnelly, a future where they marry and have a daughter who will ultimately die of cancer. Despite her knowing that Dr Donnelly will leave them once he discovers the truth, and that she will be alone when raising her daughter, she chooses to embark on that future. This inverts social expectations in a similar manner to *Black Panther*. Dr Banks is willing to lose her husband so as to have the opportunity to raise her daughter. Moreover this portrays the relationship between the women in the text as being of greater importance than that with the man, thus highlighting the love between mother and daughter.

Another interesting example of the subversion of a typical male/female on-screen relationship is found in *Bumblebee*. This text features Memo, the male side-kick to Charlie, who is infatuated by her. Where typically a female love interest would be present in a high-stakes action film featuring a male protagonist, this trope is subverted in this textual example. Similarly *A Wrinkle in Time* features Meg who is searching for her father in the company of her brother George-Wallace and a boy from her school who appears to be infatuated with her. At various times throughout the text Meg is depicted as being full of self-doubt while the men in the text consistently champion her and encourage her. They are portrayed as supporters, a role more usually reserved for female side-kicks, and this choice works to highlight the importance of including men in attempts to achieve gender equality.

The textual examples discussed in this section demonstrate that there has been a marked shift in the representation of female protagonists on-screen in the science fiction genre over the last decade. Each features a narrative that involves the female protagonist in some way trying to overcome inequality or objectification: in *Arrival* Dr Banks must prove her worth in comparison to a male scientist who she is in competition with, in *The Shape of Water* Elisa is fetishised by a male superior in her workplace, and *Ghostbusters* actively references the online vitriol targeted at the casting of the film. The patterns of textual self-reflexivity which have been identified here highlight the fact that these texts actively seek to create progressive representations of female protagonists while commenting explicitly on the reality of social and cultural inequality.

8.6. Conclusion – Women as Rebels, Leaders and Scientists.

The representations discussed in this chapter suggest that a shift is beginning to occur with regard to female representation in science fiction cinema. Young adult characters are more likely, in this decade, to be portrayed in a positive manner, rather than in an objectified, sexualised way. This is achieved through young adult narratives that focus on patriarchal systems of oppression and which address the inequalities of these structures. Audience reception of some of the key texts reveal more empowering representations of adult women being found in the genre also, linked to the lack of objectification and highlighting of sexist practices. Additionally, the emerging emphasis on female characters being relating to STEM subjects suggests that efforts are being made to create empowering and positive representations of women. This development suggests that the belief that representation drives meaning is being taken seriously by those producing science fiction narratives featuring female protagonists. Furthermore, the dynamics at play between the male and female characters in these texts tend to subvert stereotypical tropes typically present in cinema. Another key argument made by this chapter is that the inclusion of women in key production roles in film is sometimes associated with richer and more positive representations of women.

Chapter Nine - Conclusion: The Discursive Formation of Women as Positioned by Science Fiction Cinema

9.1. Introduction

This thesis reveals that the majority of representations of women in science fiction cinema remain regressive. It also however, more hopefully, points to some positive shifts that are beginning to occur in a subset of these cinematic depictions. These texts that can be read in more positive terms include women in key roles in the production process, something that holds the potential for exciting future research. Two important patterns of representation are emerging at once from the corpus of films examined. One pattern is rooted in the patriarchal problems of the past: women are represented as objects, and hegemonic Western beauty standards present the most desirable image of women. The second pattern is one of representations that portray future generations of women as holding the potential to overcome the problems of the past, as embracing STEM subjects and as transcending traditional gendered stereotypes.

9.2. Sustained Objectification, Racial Inequality and Stereotypes of Femininity in Science Fiction

The regressive tendencies of the films of the last decade are present in various themes in the science fiction cinema of concern here. Some films position femininity as an inherent or essential trait and a source of weakness, linked to consumerism and to violent acts rooted in a nurturing predisposition. A subset of the texts objectify their female protagonists in line with

previous filmic discursive formations (Mulvey 1975; Brown 2011; 2016), and others consistently deploy regressive iterations of “monstrous feminine” imagery.

An important finding of the research is the marked increase in the number of female cyborgs in the science fiction films of the second decade of the twenty-first century. This figure has become a site onto which hegemonic gendered and sexualised attributes are projected. As Chapter Seven argues, this use of a potentially liberatory figure reveals a possible crisis at play in relation to the changing notions of gender and identity presently circulating in society. These shifting ideas of gender disrupt traditional hegemonic norms and represent a threat to social norms. This also resonates with Kuhn’s (1990) notion of the genre’s “cultural instrumentality”. Science fiction narratives about cyborgs present a means of appeasing these anxieties.

The positioning of women of colour in the genre is another serious issue highlighted by this research. Women of colour feature as a minority of protagonists, appearing in only two out of the thirty-one films of primary concern here. They more usually appear as secondary characters, or are depicted as disposable and unimportant. This is in line with what Nama (2009, p.164) notes is a staple of science fiction cinema in general: “the second in command or generic helper has historically been a role assigned to blacks or other people of color”. More troubling, perhaps, is the fact that many of the background female characters in the texts under the remit of this research have their race disguised or covered up. This works to convey that these cyborgs of colour are inferior to the white cyborgs of their texts, and this positioning perpetuates the privileging of white hegemonic narratives.

It is beyond the scope of this research, yet pertinent to analyse representations of race as they appear in other science fiction films: texts with male protagonists and texts outside of the most commercially popular films. This is an important area of research and more concentrated, comprehensive studies are needed particularly when it comes to representations of women of colour found in the science fiction genre as a whole.

Stereotypical notions of femininity have emerged in the analyses conducted in this thesis. Some texts position femininity as an essential or inherent trait, rather than as a social construct: *Jupiter Ascending*, *Ex Machina*, *The Hunger Games*. This is achieved in a number of ways. Sometimes the violence women engage in within these narratives is rooted in a maternalistic drive to nurture and protect. Other examples align female violence with nature, especially those films that feature women with some form of supernatural power. These powers are often linked to nature in some way. Furthermore, certain examples of Creed's (1993) "monstrous feminine" perpetuate the negative positioning of elements of femininity within a variety of these texts: *Prometheus* (Scott 2012), *Lucy* (Besson 2014), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015), *Ghostbusters* (Feig 2016), *The Shape of Water* (del Toro 2017), *Alien Covenant* (Scott 2017), the *Star Wars* franchise, *Dark Phoenix* (Kinberg 2019). The sustained association of femininity with otherness and monstrosity in these films perpetuates the patriarchal positioning of women as subordinate to men in popular cinema.

The regressive portrayal of these heroines which aligns their femininity with weakness and/or monstrosity works to alleviate societal anxieties surrounding the increasing number of heroines present in big budget Hollywood films. Blodgett and Salter (2018) attribute male anxiety in this decade to discourses surrounding the presidential race between Hillary Clinton and Donald

Trump. They argue that the vitriolic online responses to the rebooting of *Ghostbusters* with an all-female cast mirror misogynistic responses to a potential female president. Ging and Siapera (2018) also investigate the rise in misogynistic abuse targeted at women online over the last decade. They argue that these targeted attacks demonstrate the manner in which “online misogyny becomes a punitive means of violent reinforcement of gendered power relations” (Ging and Siapera 2018, p.519).

The sustained regressive positioning of women on-screen in twenty-first century cinema is an alarming phenomenon. While positive shifts are beginning to occur, as outlined in the previous chapter, the fact remains that women remain in the minority of on-screen protagonists, and that many of their depictions, in those cases where they do appear as protagonists are troubling. This phenomenon can have real-world implications, driving societal understandings of women as other, as lesser and as objects. Women should be included in key roles across the film industry, from executive positions to crew positions, which may help in presenting more rich, diverse representations. Racial diversity should also be reflected across roles in the industry so as to ensure people of colour are also presented in more progressive ways.

9.3. Positive Shifts in Twenty-First-Century Science Fiction Cinema: Linking Women On-Screen to Women in Production and to Real-World Issues of Inequality

This research has demonstrated that shifts are beginning to occur in the representations of young women, and that efforts are being made to associate women with the STEM subjects, as opposed to framing them as sidekicks or assistants as has been the pattern historically (Kac-

Vergne 2019). Furthermore, this research demonstrates that when women feature as key members of production crews more considered representations of women tend to be created. Though the analysis conducted in the thesis mostly identifies regressive tendencies regarding the representation of women, some positive exceptions have been uncovered.

One such positive example emerges from the utilisation of Creed's (1993) "monstrous feminine" framework in the process of analysing the corpus of texts of concern here. While the "monstrous feminine" remains visible in its purest form in numerous texts, an interesting and positive shift has occurred in relation to the "archaic mother" archetype. Where before she was an all-encompassing figure to be feared, her iterations now demonstrate more positive connotations. Her association with hope and with depictions of rebirth convey a powerful shift in this archetype which aligns femininity with a more positive set of meanings.

One possible reading of this shift is that anxieties surrounding sex and gender that previously were associated with Creed's (1993) theories as observed by Chare et al. (2019) are beginning to be alleviated. While this shift is found in a minority of representations of the "monstrous feminine" present in the corpus of films it nevertheless represents a positive development.

Another emergent positive thematic pattern found in a subset of the texts is that of female rebellion and leadership. This theme is present in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the *Star Wars* franchise, the *Divergent* franchise, *Mortal Engines*, *The Hunger Games* franchise, *Ghost in the Shell*, and *Captain Marvel*. The positioning of female protagonists as leaders and rebels is a progressive theme and points to a deliberate attempt on the part of the industry to engage with female audiences while addressing the gender imbalances historically present in cinema. These

gender imbalances, and the stereotyping of women, are often directly commented on by some of the protagonists. This acknowledges to audiences that filmmakers are aware of problematic issues with regard to the representation of women within the film industry as a whole.

Significantly, younger female protagonists in the corpus of films are not objectified on-screen in the manner that their older counterparts are. The film language and *mise-en-scène* utilised rather positions them in authoritative roles, presents the narratives of these films from their perspectives and invites audiences to adopt their points of view. This contrasts with some of the texts featuring adult protagonists which consistently objectify them.

Another important finding regarding progressive representations of female protagonists reveals a developing trend of associating them with STEM subjects. This is an important shift, considering the importance of representations in shaping understandings. McGuire et al. (2020, p.1) argue that an absence of such representations can have real-world impacts: “Stereotypes about science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) are associated with reduced STEM engagement amongst girls and women”. This development reveals an attempt to address real-world issues of gender inequality through the presentation of these female characters as being involved with STEM subjects.

Drawing on literature that claims that when women are involved in production roles more progressive representations of women occur (Lewis 2020; French 2012), the research conducted here has demonstrated that the texts featuring women in key production roles can be read as portraying more diverse and progressive representations of women. As discussed in detail in Chapter Eight, the majority of the texts featuring exceptional female protagonists

featured women involved in their production, and some of the young female protagonists were created initially by female novelists.

When considering the issue of racial inequality, mentioned in the section 9.2., it would be worth determining whether racial diversity in key roles of production might also assist in creating more progressive and inclusive representations moving forward. Based on the findings presented here, there is a strong possibility that it would have a positive impact on representations created.

9.4. Looking Towards the Future: Further Areas for Research

The research conducted in this thesis was limited to a predetermined subset of the top grossing science fiction films, released between 2010 and 2019, as outlined in the methodology chapter. It would be interesting to broaden this analysis. One way of doing so would be to expand the dataset so as to include texts outside of the chosen corpus of films. This could allow for an examination of relevant examples of independent science fiction cinema and European science fiction cinema. Some notable films featuring female protagonists, that fell outside of the remit of the research include: *Colossal* (Vigalando 2016), *Annihilation* (Garland 2018), *Fast Colour* (Hart 2018) and *I am Mother* (Sputore 2019). Furthermore, it would be useful to examine all of the science fiction films from 2010 to 2019, including male-led films, so as to determine how the secondary female characters in those texts are portrayed in comparison to the findings here.

As this research has pointed to some significant shifts within science fiction cinema with regard to its portrayal of female protagonists, it would be pertinent to examine the portrayal of male protagonists and the representations of masculinity across the genre also. This would be worth conducting so as to ascertain whether shifts in the representation of gender are unique to female characters. Again, this would be worth investigating both in terms of the dataset dealt with in this thesis, and in terms of relevant examples of independent science fiction cinema and European science fiction cinema.

Furthermore, drawing on one of the notable findings of this thesis – the positive shift in certain iterations of Creed’s (1993) “archaic mother” archetype – it would be very interesting to apply her framework to high grossing examples of the horror genre released over the last decade. This could be done with the aim of uncovering any similar shifts in female representation in that genre. Creed’s framework was developed in the context of theorising the horror genre so the results of this mode of analysis would present a rich, comprehensive addition to the work presented here.

Similarly, it would be interesting to build on another important finding of this research process: the proliferation of female cyborg figures that are hypersexualised and hyperfeminised in comparison to their human counterparts. It would be a worthwhile endeavour to build on this conclusion by analysing female cyborg narratives from their inception through to the end of the first decade of this century. This would allow for a more thorough mapping of the evolution of this figure.

Finally, we are only one year into the second decade of the twenty-first century and it has been a remarkable year in terms of global news. The Covid-19 pandemic has gripped the world this year in a collective anxiety. The films that will be produced during and after this period of unrest will most likely be marked by concerns and anxieties relating to this pandemic. This period in science fiction cinema will inevitably prove fascinating for Film Studies researchers.

9.5. Towards Gender Equality and Beyond

Importantly this research concurs with contemporary studies on the importance of female representation and the real-world implications of on-screen representations (Oliver 2016; Karlyn 2018; Blodgett and Salter 2018). It is thus of the utmost importance not only that gender parity be achieved on-screen, but that future representations of women be informed by the types of concerns raised by this research.

This thesis makes an important contribution to the field of Feminist Film Theory and the topic of female representation in particular. It provides a significant addition to the field of Film Studies, combining Feminist Film Studies with Genre Studies through a poststructuralist approach during the textual analysis process.

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Appendix A

Complete List of Science Fiction Films, Demonstrating Gender Breakdown, 2010 to 2019.

Male Protagonists	Female Protagonists
2010 <i>Inception</i> (Nolan) <i>Iron Man 2</i> (Favreau) <i>Tron Legacy</i> (Kosinski) <i>The Book of Eli</i> (The Hughes Brothers) <i>Predators</i> (Antal) <i>Piranha 3D</i> (Aja) <i>Skyline</i> (The Brothers Strause) <i>Hot Tub Time Machine</i> (Pink)	2010
Total: 8	Total: 0
2011 <i>Transformers Dark of the Moon</i> (Bay) <i>Rise of the Planet of the Apes</i> (Wyatt) <i>Thor</i> (Branagh)	2011

<i>Riddick</i> (Twohy) <i>Snowpiercer</i> (Joon Ho) Total: 15	 Total: 3
2014 <i>Transformers: Age of Extinction</i> (Bay) <i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i> (Gunn) <i>X-Men: Days of Future Past</i> (Singer) <i>Captain America: The Winter Soldier</i> (Russo Brothers) <i>Dawn of the Planet of the Apes</i> (Reeves) <i>The Amazing Spider-Man 2</i> (Webb) <i>Interstellar</i> (Nolan) <i>Godzilla</i> (Edwards) <i>Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles</i> (Barron) <i>Edge of Tomorrow</i> (Liman) <i>The Maze Runner</i> (Ball) <i>RoboCop</i> (Padilha) Total: 12	2014 <i>The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1</i> (Lawrence) <i>Lucy</i> (Besson) <i>Divergent</i> (Burger) Total: 3

<p>2015</p> <p><i>Jurassic World</i> (Trevorrow)</p> <p><i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i> (Whedon)</p> <p><i>Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice</i> (Snyder)</p> <p><i>The Martian</i> (Scott)</p> <p><i>Ant-Man</i> (Reed)</p> <p><i>Terminator Genisys</i> (Taylor)</p> <p><i>Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials</i> (Ball)</p> <p><i>Tomorrowland</i> (Bird)</p> <p><i>Fantastic Four</i> (Trank)</p> <p><i>Chappie</i> (Blomkamp)</p> <p>Total: 10</p>	<p>2015</p> <p><i>Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens</i> (Abrams)</p> <p><i>The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 2</i> (Lawrence)</p> <p><i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i> (Miller)</p> <p><i>Insurgent</i> (Schwentke)</p> <p><i>Jupiter Ascending</i> (The Wachowskis)</p> <p>Total: 5</p>
<p>2016</p> <p><i>Captain America: Civil War</i> (Russo Brothers)</p> <p><i>Deadpool</i> (Miller)</p> <p><i>Suicide Squad</i> (Ayer)</p> <p><i>Doctor Strange</i> (Derrickson)</p> <p><i>X-Men: Apocalypse</i> (Singer)</p> <p><i>Independence Day: Resurgence</i> (Emmerich)</p>	<p>2016</p> <p><i>Rogue One: A Star Wars Story</i> (Edwards)</p> <p><i>Ghostbusters</i> (Feig)</p> <p><i>Arrival</i> (Villeneuve)</p> <p><i>Allegiant</i> (Schwentke)</p>

<p><i>Star Trek Beyond</i> (Lin)</p> <p><i>Passengers</i> (Tyldum)</p> <p><i>Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows</i> (Green)</p> <p><i>Assassin's Creed</i> (Kurzel)</p> <p><i>Shin Godzilla</i> (Anno and Higuchi)</p> <p>Total: 11</p>	<p>Total: 4</p>
<p>2017</p> <p><i>Spider-Man: Homecoming</i> (Watts)</p> <p><i>Guardians of the Galaxy: Volume 2</i> (Gunn)</p> <p><i>Thor: Ragnarok</i> (Waititi)</p> <p><i>Justice League</i> (Snyder)</p> <p><i>Logan</i> (Mangold)</p> <p><i>Transformers: The Last Knight</i> (Bay)</p> <p><i>Kong: Skull Island</i> (Vogt-Roberts)</p> <p><i>War for the Planet of the Apes</i> (Reeves)</p> <p><i>Blade Runner 2049</i> (Villeneuve)</p> <p><i>Get Out</i> (Peele)</p> <p><i>Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets</i> (Besson)</p> <p><i>Geostorm</i> (Devlin)</p>	<p>2017</p> <p><i>Star Wars Episode VIII: The Last Jedi</i> (Johnson)</p> <p><i>Wonder Woman</i> (Jenkins)</p> <p><i>Alien: Covenant</i> (Scott)</p> <p><i>The Shape of Water</i> (del Toro)</p> <p><i>Ghost in the Shell</i> (Sanders)</p>

<i>Power Rangers</i> (Israelite) <i>The Dark Tower</i> (Arcel) <i>Life</i> (Espinosa) Total: 15	 Total: 5
2018 <i>Avengers: Infinity War</i> (Russo Brothers) <i>Black Panther</i> (Coogler) <i>Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom</i> (Bayona) <i>Aquaman</i> (Wan) <i>Venom</i> (Fleischer) <i>Deadpool 2</i> (Leitch) <i>Ant-Man and the Wasp</i> (Reed) <i>Ready Player One</i> (Spielberg) <i>The Meg</i> (Turteltaub) <i>Rampage</i> (Peyton) <i>Solo: A Star Wars Story</i> (Howard) <i>A Quiet Place</i> (Krasinski) <i>Pacific Rim: Uprising</i> (DeKnight) <i>Maze Runner: The Death Cure</i> (Ball) <i>The Predator</i> (Black)	2018 <i>Bumblebee</i> (Knight) <i>A Wrinkle in Time</i> (DuVernay) <i>Mortal Engines</i> (Rivers)

Total: 15	Total: 3
2019 <i>Avengers: Endgame</i> (Russo Brothers) <i>Spider-Man: Far From Home</i> (Watts) <i>The Wandering Earth</i> (Gwo) <i>Godzilla: King of the Monsters</i> (Dougherty) <i>Shazam!</i> (Sandberg) <i>Glass</i> (Shyamalan) <i>Gemini Man</i> (Lee) <i>Ad Astra</i> (Gray) Total: 8	2019 <i>Captain Marvel</i> (Boden and Fleck) <i>Alita: Battle Angel</i> (Rodriguez) <i>Men in Black: International</i> (Gray) <i>Dark Phoenix</i> (Kinberg) <i>Terminator: Dark Fate</i> (Miller) <i>Star Wars Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker</i> (Abrams) Total: 6
<u>Total over the decade: 121</u>	<u>Total over the decade: 31</u>

Over the entire decade a total of 152 films from the top 100 grossing films worldwide can be categorised as science fiction.

20% featured female protagonists, 80% featured male protagonists.

4 films featured female directors or female co-directors = 2.6%.

Appendix B

Entire Corpus of the Thirty-One Science Fiction Films from 2010-2019 Featuring Female Protagonists

<i>Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker</i>	(Abrams 2019)
<i>Captain Marvel</i>	(Boden and Fleck 2019)
<i>Men in Black: International</i>	(Gray 2019)
<i>Dark Phoenix</i>	(Kinberg 2019)
<i>Terminator: Dark Fate</i>	(Miller 2019)
<i>Alita: Battle Angel</i>	(Rodriguez 2019)
<i>Bumblebee</i>	(Knight 2018)
<i>A Wrinkle in Time</i>	(Duvernay 2018)
<i>Mortal Engines</i>	(Rivers 2018)
<i>The Shape of Water</i>	(del Toro 2017)
<i>Arrival</i>	(Villeneuve 2017)
<i>Wonder Woman</i>	(Jenkins 2017)
<i>Star Wars: The Last Jedi</i>	(Johnson 2017)
<i>Ghost in the Shell</i>	(Sanders 2017)
<i>Alien: Covenant</i>	(Scott 2017)
<i>Rogue One: A Star Wars Story</i>	(Edwards 2016)
<i>Ghostbusters</i>	(Feig 2016)
<i>The Divergent Series: Allegiant</i>	(Schwentke 2016)
<i>Star Wars: The Force Awakens</i>	(Abrams 2015)

<i>The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 2</i>	(Lawrence 2015)
<i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i>	(Miller 2015)
<i>The Divergent Series: Insurgent</i>	(Schwentke 2015)
<i>Jupiter Ascending</i>	(The Wachowskis 2015)
<i>Lucy</i>	(Besson 2014)
<i>Divergent</i>	(Burger 2014)
<i>The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1</i>	(Lawrence 2014)
<i>Gravity</i>	(Cuarón 2013)
<i>The Hunger Games: Catching Fire</i>	(Lawrence 2013)
<i>The Host</i>	(Niccol 2013)
<i>The Hunger Games</i>	(Ross 2012)
<i>Prometheus</i>	(Scott 2012)