



HAL
open science

Introduction to 'From the Margins to the Mainstream: Women in Film and Television' (2022)

Marianne Kac-Vergne, Julie Assouly

► To cite this version:

Marianne Kac-Vergne, Julie Assouly. Introduction to 'From the Margins to the Mainstream: Women in Film and Television' (2022). From the Margins to the Mainstream: Women in Film and Television, 2022, 9781788312677. hal-04418650

HAL Id: hal-04418650

<https://hal.science/hal-04418650v1>

Submitted on 26 Jan 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Copyright

**Introduction to *From the Margins to the Mainstream:*
Women in Film and Television (2022)
Marianne Kac-Vergne and Julie Assouly**

From the Margins to the Mainstream: Women in Film and Television is a collective volume which considers how women's status has progressively evolved within the film industry using independent films as a steppingstone to new career and representational possibilities, thus paving the way for changes within mainstream productions. The book logically follows the same trajectory. It opens with an interview with emblematic experimental director Vivienne Dick and then examines the ways in which female directors, critics, actors and characters gradually opened the male-dominated mainstream industry to new perspectives on gender, behind and in front of the camera. As a result, we have recently witnessed the feminization of traditionally masculine mainstream genres like superhero films, with the glass-ceiling-shattering release of Wonder Woman, directed by female director Patty Jenkins. This introductory chapter proposes to analyze this movement towards the mainstream via the specific case of Wonder Woman which also closes this volume.

The release of Wonder Woman in 2017 seemed to signal that women had finally made it into the heart of mainstream Hollywood: the industry was at last bringing to the screen the most famous comic book heroine and releasing a female-led "superheroine" movie directed by a woman (Patty Jenkins). Until then, superhero films (always directed by men) featured women mainly as love interests or in ensemble casts, even in the post 9/11 wave of superhero blockbusters triggered by the success of Sam Raimi's Spider-Man trilogy (2002, 2004, 2007) and the X-Men franchise. While Mary Jane (Kirsten Dunst) remains a typical damsel in distress in Spider-Man, the women in the X-Men's ensemble cast were sidelined in a series that pitted two white male leaders against one another and developed a spin-off to focus on the quintessentially muscular white male who had become the main protagonist of the films, Wolverine (X-Men Origins: Wolverine, 2009; The Wolverine, 2013; Logan, 2017). Characteristically, it took ten X-Men films to finally focus on Jean Grey, in X-Men: Dark Phoenix (Kinberg, 2019), but the film mainly emphasized her destructive power and became the least profitable film of the series, supporting the thesis that superheroines are more often than not 'box office poison', as evidenced by the relative failures of Catwoman (Pitof, 2004) and Elektra (Bowman, 2005).

By contrast, Wonder Woman was a major box office success, ranking third in the domestic box office results of 2017 after two other female-led blockbusters (Star Wars: the Last Jedi and Beauty and the Beast) and becoming the highest-grossing superhero origin film. In 2017, it was the highest-grossing woman-directed film, until it

was topped by *Captain Marvel* in 2019, the first superheroine movie in the Marvel universe, co-directed by a woman (Anna Boden with Ryan Fleck) with female screenwriters (Anna Boden and Geneva Robertson-Dworet) and a female composer (Pinar Toprak). *Wonder Woman* can thus be seen as a major advance in women's presence both on screen and behind the camera, since Patty Jenkins was only the second woman to direct a film budgeted at over \$100 million (after Kathryn Bigelow's *K-11: The Widowmaker*, 2002) (Smyth, 2017). The film also drew in many more female spectators than the average superhero movie, reaching unprecedented parity between male and female viewers as early as its third opening week (McNary, 2017). But can such an example of women entering the commercial mainstream be seen as a feminist victory?

On a textual level, *Wonder Woman* has been mostly celebrated for its challenge to male domination anchored in an exploration of feminine subjectivity. Even if the film was criticized for its casting of a supermodel, revealing costumes and heteronormative approach, it does provide a still-too-rare example of a dominant female gaze (Zitzer-Comfort and Rodríguez, 2019), adopting Diana's (Gal Gadot) point of view on a world dominated by men that arouse, in turn, her curiosity, indignation and empathy. The female gaze is especially apparent in the only nudity scene of the film, where it is in fact the male protagonist who appears naked, closely scrutinized by Diana, who debunks the phallic mystique by bringing attention, through her insistent and questioning gaze, to the embodied and corporeal nature of the penis. The dialogue further detaches women's sexual pleasure from male intervention, so that the all-female matriarchy Diana grew up in appears as a self-contained haven of peace where men are neither needed nor desired. Furthermore, not only does the film reverse the gendered expectations of superhero fare by having a woman lead men into battle, but the love interest who repeatedly needs saving is now male, turning the damsel-in-distress trope into a stale cliché from the past. Yet, Diana is not masculinized as other action heroines have been, like Ripley and Sarah Connor, so that, in Jeffrey A. Brown's words, she 'provides a legitimate example of female heroism' (2004: 47). Indeed, *Wonder Woman* draws on traditionally feminine qualities like compassion, ability to express love and capacity for dialogue that, in Leigh Singer's words, 'avoids macho, fanboy-driven triumphalism' (2018) and makes Diana 'relatable for many women', according to Kathleen Rowe Karlyn (2017).

Reviewers indeed highlighted the film's 'feminist ethos' (Bastien, 2017), spurred by the actor's 'feminist fire' (Travers, 2017), as well as its focus on female empowerment [1] while Gal Gadot unabashedly identified as a feminist in a *Rolling Stone* interview: 'People always ask me, "Are you a feminist?" And I find the question surprising, because I think, "Yes, of course ... Because whoever is not a feminist is a

sexist” ’ (Morris, 2017). The film can thus be seen as an exemplar of what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) calls ‘popular feminism’, referring to the contemporary visibility of feminism in popular and commercial media, turning it into a fashionable trend as well as a contested terrain. While feminism came to have negative connotations in the post-feminist 1990s–2000s, with many women reluctant to identify with the term [2], many celebrities embraced feminism in the 2010s and incorporated it into their star image, be it Beyoncé sampling Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie’s ‘We should all be feminists’ TED talk in ‘Flawless’ (2013) and performing at the Video Music Awards in front of a screen emblazoned with the word ‘FEMINIST’ in 2014, or Emma Watson launching the HeforShe movement as UN Women Goodwill Ambassador in 2014. This new-found visibility has gone hand in hand with what some have seen as the emergence of a ‘fourth wave’ of feminism as early as 2012, thanks to social media activism around such issues as sexual harassment and rape culture [3], which gained broad recognition and cultural momentum after the Weinstein scandal of 2017 and the global traction it gave the #MeToo movement. In film, Valerie Estelle Frankel identifies *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012) as a (somewhat early) triggering point for ‘a new type of story’ that has brought ‘a new awareness and a desire to be more inclusive’, engaging with fourth wave feminism through strong female protagonists and a more diverse cast, with *Wonder Woman* as its epitome (2019: 4).

Wonder Woman can be considered as emblematic of these new strands of feminism not only because it represents the acme of commercial visibility for women but also because it remains a site of struggle. Indeed, the film challenges the boys’ club of Hollywood superhero productions by proving that female-led productions can widen the market with their specific appeal to female spectators – women-only screenings of *Wonder Woman* were organized in many US cities and sold out, despite the outcry (The Guardian, 2017). It participates in a wider transformation of the homogenized male-dominated film industry through the feminization of big-budget blockbusters and franchises as do *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Abrams, 2015), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015) and *Ghostbusters* (Feig, 2016). Indeed, both Warner Bros. and Disney are respectively expanding the DC and Marvel universes through female-led and female-directed productions: *Wonder Woman 1984* (Jenkins, 2020), *Birds of Prey* (Yan, 2020) and *Black Widow* (Shortland, 2021). Yet women’s entry into the commercial mainstream has not come without struggle: only in 2008 did the first woman receive an Oscar for Best Picture and Best Director (Kathryn Bigelow for the very male-centred *The Hurt Locker*), and the more recent feminization of famous male-centred franchises such as *Star Wars*, *Mad Max* and *Ghostbusters* has met with intensely sexist backlash. There is a growing polarization between openly feminist celebrities and a vocally anti-feminist manosphere that directs vitriolic

attacks on social media against films or events seen as hostile to men [4], including the women's- only screenings of Wonder Woman.

An exemplar of 'popular feminism', Wonder Woman is indeed contested terrain and has sparked many debates that highlight the tensions and contradictions between different strands of feminism. The first issue that can and has been raised is that of Wonder Woman's hypersexualization. While Gal Gadot's armoured outfit in the film is less tight-fitting and revealing than the original comic book heroine's costume worn so iconically by Lynda Carter in the television series (CBS, 1975–9), critics like Kyle D. Killian highlight the fact that her beauty is commented on by all the characters in the movie (2018: 59) and that she is repeatedly presented as a sexy woman who arouses men, be it Steve (Chris Pine), his friend Sameer (Said Taghmaoui) or the nefarious German general she seeks to eliminate. Gal Gadot was in fact a model who was crowned Miss Israel in 2004 and had a limited acting career before being cast as Wonder Woman, suggesting that her looks were more important than her acting experience. Wonder Woman's objectification raised further controversy after James Cameron denounced the character as 'an objectified icon' – as opposed to the more masculine Sarah Connor he featured in *Terminator 2* (Cameron, 1991), calling the film 'a step backward'.

Jenkins's reply suggesting that Cameron did not understand the appeal of the character because he is a man and that women should be allowed to be powerful while being attractive can be linked to the tensions that have continually run through feminist debates on the compatibility between femininity and feminism, glamour and empowerment, as well as who is allowed to speak in the name of women, as Jenkins nods to 'the massive female audience who made the film a hit' and 'can surely choose and judge their own icons of progress' (Lopez, 2017). By describing her protagonist as 'loving', Jenkins addresses another criticism directed at the film, the fact that it follows a traditional narrative of heteronormative romance (a central element of the franchise since it is reprised in *Wonder Woman 1984*). Furthermore, after leaving behind the matriarchal island of Themyschira, Wonder Woman is set in a world of men where the only other female characters are a fleeting secretary and Dr Maru, an evil disfigured mastermind, while Diana's ultimate power comes from her father, a God. The film thus does not break free from the dominant heteronormative patriarchal ideology. Yet, as Karlyn argues (2017), glamour and romance are typically enjoyed by female audiences so 'why should they be guilty pleasures?' Women's mainstreaming thus raises questions about what is acceptably feminist, bringing to the fore issues raised already during the 1990s and the 'Third Wave' of feminism by young feminist activists like Rebecca Walker (1995) and Naomi Wolf (1993), who rejected what they saw as the Second Wave's 'victim feminism' in favour

of 'power feminism' and celebrated women's sexuality, insisting that feminists could be feminine and should use the media to their advantage. However, Wonder Woman did not heed the call of the Third Wave for more intersectional representation, since the unnamed women of colour on Themyscira are given only a few lines and then vanish from the rest of the film. The lesbianism long associated with the character and the island also disappears, leaving Diana as a lone empowered woman during the second half of the film, where female solidarity is replaced by antagonistic relations with Dr Maru. The film could thus be seen as post-feminist, as it promotes individual female success and empowerment through a narrative of choice [5] – Diana's individual choices are repeatedly underlined throughout the film, when she decides to leave the island to help mankind or cross the No Man's Land to stop German fire, for instance.

Discourses of individual success also characterize the trajectory of female filmmakers like Patty Jenkins, whose box office hit was received with wonder from the general and industry press [6], as it went against the industry 'lore' according to which female directors cannot direct big budget productions (Donoghue, 2019: 4–6). Courtney Brannon Donoghue emphasizes the 'superhero expectations' placed on female filmmakers' shoulders, as they are expected to break the glass ceiling not only for themselves but also for others, while gendered obstacles in Hollywood are constantly played down in favour of narratives of individual female confidence and ambition (10). This type of exceptionalist feminism puts forward a narrative of trickle-down empowerment, as if one successful female director or female-led film could break Hollywood's glass ceiling. In fact, there are very few female star directors like Kathryn Bigelow or Sofia Coppola, and many independent female directors struggle to make it – in 2017, women directed 34 per cent of films screened at Sundance (Erbland, 2017) but only 11 per cent of the 250 top-grossing films (Lauzen, 2018). One may hope that independent filmmaker Chloé Zhao's recent Best Director and Best Picture Oscar wins for *Nomadland* in 2021 will pave the way for others, but her victories are as exceptional as they are rare. Indeed, in the 2010s, Kathryn Bigelow's victory in 2010 did not lead to more awards being given to female directors since women were excluded even from nominations – only one female director was included in the decade's Oscar nominations (Greta Gerwig in 2017). Several years (2018 and 2019) featured no women at all in the Best Director nominations for the Oscars, Golden Globes and BAFTAs. Moreover, the issue of the gender pay gap has not been resolved, with female stars still being paid less than males. According to a study reported in *The Guardian* (2019), male Hollywood stars earn \$1.1 million more per film than their similarly experienced female co-stars, with the gap being almost the same in 2015 as it was in 1980. Even in 2019, Scarlett Johansson received an

estimated total of \$56 million, while Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson was paid \$89.4 million; he topped the list of best-paid actors again in 2020 with \$87.5 million, while the best-paid female actor, Sofia Vergara, earned only \$43 million [7]. So if Wonder Woman helped Gal Gadot reach third place on the Forbes list of highest-paid actresses in 2020, the visibility and credit it gave to women as directors, actors as well as spectators may have been short-lived. As Donoghue argues, while Wonder Woman was acclaimed as the film that would save Warner Bros.'s floundering DC Extended Universe (Kelley, 2017), 'a pattern of recognition, celebration and forgetting emerges' (Donoghue, 2019: 11) in the trade coverage when it comes to the box office weight of women. While Wonder Woman has proved that women can make it into the mainstream and be commercially successful, it remains to be seen whether it will open wide the doors of Hollywood blockbusters to women or whether the film is yet another instance of an 'exceptional' (in every sense of the word) female-driven success.

As a specifically feminist enterprise, the film has its limits, although it does work towards some of the historic goals of the feminist struggle for visibility and institutional change. It has revived an icon of female empowerment and attracted a large mixed audience to see a woman challenge a century-old Hollywood tradition of absenting, punishing or sidelining physically active women and femmes fatales, as Mary Ann Doane underscored in her seminal work (1991). Superheroines are now firmly on the map. Indeed, the film defies and counters industry prejudice against trusting women with big-budget productions and franchises. Despite Wonder Woman 1984's disappointing box office results in its domestic opening weekend in December 2020, Warner Bros. still green-lighted a threequel pairing Gal Gadot and Patty Jenkins yet again (Lee, 2020), developing the first female-directed superheroine franchise. In the aftermath of the Time's Up movement and the pressure for gender parity, Warner Media also became the first major studio in September 2018 to announce a policy to address diversity and in September 2019 released the first studio report on diversity and inclusion in its corporate operations, as well as in the films, television series and digital content created by its various properties (Ramos, 2019).

The case of Wonder Woman can thus help us examine what can be gained and what has been lost when women leave the margins for the mainstream. Jenkins herself exemplifies such a career move. She achieved considerable success with a semi-independent, relatively low-budget (\$8 million) production, *Monster* (2003), which delivered a strong feminist message and an outstanding performance by Charlize Theron. Despite the film's critical acclaim and relative success at the box office (the film reached #85 in the 2003 worldwide box office with \$64.2 million), Jenkins was

only able to find work in television, and it took more than ten years for her to be hired to helm a big-budget Hollywood blockbuster, thus achieving fame and recognition in the mainstream. Yet, does Wonder Woman's huge box office success (\$822.3 million worldwide) mean that Jenkins's feminist message has become more widespread? Are blockbusters more likely to spread feminist messages than independent films or are they inherently constrained by conservative industry forces? What do women, as not only directors and actors but also spectators, have to gain (or lose) from going mainstream?

A collective book, *From the Margins to the Mainstream: Women in Film and Television* proposes to address these questions by following in Teresa de Lauretis's footsteps and 'traversing the space' between the 'oppositional terms', "mainstream" (Hollywood and derivatives) and "non-mainstream" (political-aesthetic avant-garde) and 'mapping it otherwise' (1987: 59). It adopts a diachronic structure, first considering films directed by women in the 'political-aesthetic avant-garde' during the 1970s and 1980s, who were often reluctant to move into the mainstream. It then examines how 'indie' productions offered a bridge for female directors and actors and ends by investigating how women are represented in mainstream productions, whether on television or in Hollywood. The book thus sets out to explore the tensions between the possibilities offered by the margins and the constraints placed by the mainstream, bringing new and varied perspectives to explore the trade-offs between speaking from the margins and entering the commercial mainstream. Contrary to other collective volumes like *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future* (Gledhill and Knight, 2015), *Women Who Kill: Gender and Sexuality in Film and Series of the Post-Feminist Era* (Roche and Maury, 2020) and *Independent Women: from Film to Television* (Perkins and Schreiber, 2021), *From the Margins to the Mainstream* applies a gender approach to topics that are less widely present in feminist film studies like the position of film critics, cosmopolitanism and the use of voice-over in TV series. The project of the book, to reprise de Lauretis's words, is 'not so much "to make visible the invisible" ... as to construct another (object of) vision and the conditions of visibility for a different social subject' (1987: 67). The collective volume explores women's increased visibility off screen and especially on screen in American and British film and television since the late 1970s without ever forgetting that, in Peggy Phelan's words, 'if representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture. The ubiquity of their image, however, has hardly brought them political or economic power' (1993: 10).

Indeed, women's mainstreaming also has drawbacks. By adhering to the requirements of the industry, women run the risk of losing their subjective voice and

their ability to tell a different story, which drove filmmakers like Vivienne Dick to work from the margins rather than enter the mainstream. In the interview that opens this volume, Dick indeed states that she has been trying 'to imagine a different way of telling stories', outside of narrative cinema. Her 'anti-cinema aesthetic' (Foster, 1995: 29) heeds the calls voiced by Claire Johnston (1973) and Laura Mulvey (1975) to break with conventional storytelling for a more radical feminist cinema to emerge. As Céline Murillo explains in the first chapter of this volume, *Guerillere Talks* (Dick, 1978) and, to a lesser extent, *Born in Flames* (Borden, 1983), can be linked to feminist guerrilla warfare in the way they challenge narrative conventions built up by Hollywood cinema in particular, where women are conceptualized as objects and parts of a unified story. Discontinuity and decentring are also used by filmmakers Michelle Citron, Su Friedrich and Sarah Polley to transform the patriarchal genre of home movies, as argued by Nicole Cloarec in the second chapter. Filming from the margins can thus help focus on what is around or outside the patriarchal narrative, spotlighting, for instance, the bonds of sisterhood (or motherhood) that tend to disappear from more mainstream productions, as exemplified by Héléne Charlery's analysis of *Strange Days* (Bigelow, 1995) in Chapter 4, Anne Sweet's Chapter 9 on action-drama TV female heroes and Charles-Antoine Courcoux's examination of female-led blockbusters such as *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* in Chapter 10. Finally, the costs of reaching the apex of the commercial mainstream are explored by Sara Pesce in her examination of *Marie Antoinette* (Coppola, 2006) in the context of the development of a specifically feminine celebrity culture (Chapter 7).

From the Margins to the Mainstream: Women in Film and Television

seeks to shed new light on some of the issues raised by feminist film theory through the prism of different methodological and theoretical approaches. The question raised, for instance, by E. Ann Kaplan in *Feminism and Film* (2000: 20) of whether women directors make films that are obviously different from those of male directors is tackled by Murillo and Cloarec through formal analyses that highlight the aesthetic singularity of female-directed films, while Charlery, Pesce and Yvonne Tasker (in her last chapter on *Wonder Woman*) highlight their respective female directors' engagement with debates that could be seen as specific to women – the male gaze, the trendsetting power of stardom, the meaning of glamour – but actually have a much wider impact on society at large, in a move from the personal to the political. This can be linked to the issue of women's spectatorial pleasure, which is raised directly by Anne Hurault-Paupe's chapter on female film critic Molly Haskell and connects with one of the paradoxes of feminist film theorists, who 'need films that construct women as the spectator yet do not offer repressive identifications' and are 'wary' about the fact that 'women can take pleasure in the objectification of women'

(Kaplan, 2000: 124). Identification and its limits are at the core of many of the chapters of this book, notably Celestino Deleyto's analysis of *It's a Free World...* (Loach, 2001) through the prism of our 'engagement' (Smith, 1995: 82) with a female protagonist who rises through the objectification of others. Deleyto's chapter highlights one of the current stakes in feminist film theory, that of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). *From the Margins to the Mainstream* pays specific attention to long-neglected intersections, that of gender and race, of course, which is at the heart of David Roche's chapter on Pam Grier in *Jackie Brown* (Tarantino, 1997), as well as Charley's chapter on *Strange Days*, where she highlights the implications of whiteness as well as Blackness. Yet, the book also focuses on the intersectionality of gender and class, remedying the lack of consideration given to working-class women's perspective thanks to Deleyto's chapter on *It's a Free World...* and Roche's on *Jackie Brown*, but also the gap on upper-class female status thanks to Pesce's analysis of *Marie Antoinette*. Finally, this volume takes into account the need for a relational approach; in effect, disrupting the gender order is only possible if both masculinity and femininity are reworked in tandem. The resulting fluidity can help transform media representations as a whole, as Anais Lefevre-Berthelot shows in her analysis of the influence of female voice-overs on male ones in television series.

The volume starts by examining women speaking from the margins as filmmakers and critics and their relationship with the commercial mainstream, whether they seek to challenge dominant patriarchal forms or/and create their own voice and aesthetics. An interview with filmmaker Vivienne Dick explores her journey as an experimental female filmmaker from the No Wave scene of 1970s New York to the art world of Ireland, her vision of women, as well as her relationship with feminism and her constant excitement at finding new connections that make up a voice of her own.

Céline Murillo further examines Dick's work through a comparison between Dick's *Guerillere Talks* (1978) and Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), two No Wave films based on Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1969) that challenge mainstream Hollywood conventions and the construction of woman as an object to be looked at. Both films depict characters looking, reappropriating the (male) gaze as a source of power for women. Both also deploy an aesthetics of fragmentation to deconstruct the patriarchal narrative and the 'visual pleasures' (Mulvey, 1975) afforded by the unified, transparent style of mainstream cinema while highlighting women's diversity in an intersectional approach.

Finding a new voice within a reworking of classical narrative tropes is also a common feature of the home movies analysed by Nicole Cloarec: Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1978), Su Friedrich's *The Ties that Bind* (1986) and *Sink or Swim* (1990), and Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012). These 'daughters behind the camera' reclaim

their place behind the camera, replacing their fathers, in an effort to find a voice of their own by exploring their lineage and questioning the gender roles traditionally inscribed in the genre. Like the No Wave films discussed by Murillo, these home movies emphasize discontinuity rather than control of the words and images, seeking to accommodate a plurality of voices in a hybrid form and exploring the meaning and limits of subjective filmmaking.

Anne Hurault-Paupe's chapter examines Molly Haskell's position as a feminist critic outside of academic film criticism from the 1970s to the 1990s. While often dismissed by the emergent feminist film criticism of the 1970s in Great Britain, with its psychoanalytical framework and focus on identification and the 'male gaze', Haskell was nonetheless key in bolstering the status of the woman's film, women directors and 'woman's directors', bringing European cinephiliac tastes to American audiences. While Haskell can be criticized for her lack of attention to racial issues, Hurault-Paupe interestingly demonstrates how she created a feminist persona in her writings that enabled her to speak to a female spectator, countering Mulvey's much-discussed emphasis on the male spectator.

The second part of the book moves into the mainstream as it centres on independent, semi-independent or 'indiewood' (King, 2009) films of the 1990s–2000s directed by men and women but featuring strong female protagonists. It focuses on four case studies: *Strange Days*, *Jackie Brown*, *It's a Free World...* and *Marie Antoinette*.

Hélène Charlery analyses *Strange Days* from an intersectional perspective that takes into account race to highlight the differences in the treatment of the white and Black female bodies, both in James Cameron and Jay Cocks's script and Kathryn Bigelow's directorial approach, and how those bodies can be seen as sites of resistance to their construction as visual objects. She argues that Bigelow moves away from the script to build female characters as subjects, independent from the white male objectifying gaze. While the white female body appears exposed and passive, its artificiality highlights the fragility and instability of the male gaze, from which the active Black female body escapes almost entirely.

Intersectionality is at the heart of David Roche's analysis of Pam Grier's star image in *Jackie Brown*, which he relates to her Blaxploitation heritage but also more generally to the image of African-American women in American cinema and culture. While Tarantino's film obviously references Grier's past successes such as *Coffy* (Hill, 1973) and *Foxy Brown* (Hill, 1974), as well as other Blaxploitation hits like *Super Fly* (Parks, 1972), it also reinvents the star by revising the genre's conventions, especially when it concerns Black women and their relationships with men. By dramatizing the working-class Black heroine's reinvention of herself within a certain

number of social constraints, the film reflexively draws attention to the lack of opportunity Grier has had, trapped both by the gendered and racialized terms of her star image, and thus to the difficulty for a talented Black actor to achieve and/or maintain star status.

Celestino Deleyto's chapter on Ken Loach's strong independent standpoint in *It's a Free World...* also adopts an intersectional approach that focuses this time on gender, class and migration from a cosmopolitan perspective. Deleyto underlines how the film represents a move away from national cinema towards a cosmopolitan standpoint that takes into account borders and those who cross them; it is also a rare occurrence of female agency and point of view in Loach's filmography that enables Deleyto to fill the gender gap often left open by cosmopolitan theory. Indeed, the film's heroine, Angie (Kierston Wareing), offers a point of view from the border not only because she performs 'borderwork', hiring and exploiting foreign immigrants, but also because she herself is frustrated with her marginalized status as a working-class woman with limited opportunities of social mobility in a globalized and male-dominated labour market.

Women's access to power in a neoliberal economy marked by inequality and the search for fame is examined by Sara Pesce, who analyses Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* as a metaphor for the Hollywood dream of stellar acclaim in the new millennium. She draws a parallel between the fame accrued by the last queen of France, notably through her trendsetting fashion statements, as well as her vilification, and the cult of celebrity that has spread across the media from fashion blogs to reality TV shows. The film explores the contradictions of this cult, emphasizing not only the privileges and power afforded to women by celebrity through access to leisure, luxury and high fashion but also the constraints of being constantly in the public eye. Yet the film's linking of celebrity with high caste and its elitist imagery reflect contemporary mixed feelings about the dissemination of celebrity cults to the detriment of the Hollywood elite to which Coppola squarely belongs.

The third part of the book focuses on women protagonists in mainstream productions, be it television series like *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998–2004), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Syndicated, 1995–2001), *Bones* (Fox, 2005–17) and *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016–), or blockbusters like *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and, finally, our starting point for this volume, *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017).

Anais Lefevre-Berthelot examines the recent rise of female voice-overs in television series. Indeed, female voices were deemed unsuitable for broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s and television shows resorted to male voice-overs until the 1980s to provide an omniscient narrator, 'a voice of God' who sees and knows all. Even in

more recent television series, Lefevre-Berthelot draws a contrast between male voice-overs that are invested with experience and authority, and female voice-overs that are more personal and intimate, in the tradition of the autobiographical literary tradition, from the pioneering *My So-Called Life* (ABC, 1994–5) all the way to *Sex and the City*. However, Lefevre-Berthelot highlights the influence of feminine representations on men, since the turn of the twenty-first century has seen the rise of first-person male voice-overs that convey the thoughts and feelings of their heroes, making them more ambiguous for the audience.

Anne Sweet also focuses on gender conventions in television series of the 1990s–2000s, addressing the issue of motherhood in female-led action dramas. Sweet first shows how, until the 1990s, pregnancy on television was considered a delicate and sometimes controversial matter, notably by producers, yet she stresses that women's reproductive and maternal functions continue to be represented in a negative light. Pregnancy is still rare, and when it occurs in a series, it is shown as disempowering for action-drama heroines, sometimes for comedic effect, as unruly heroines lose control of their bodies. More often it has horrific consequences, with childbirth being described as traumatic, depicted using tropes of the horror film that change the heroines into figures of the 'monstrous-feminine' described by Barbara Creed (1993). Women cannot 'have it all' and, in an exaggerated version of the difficult work/life balance many women face, being a woman of action seems incompatible with being a mother.

A similar strategy of containment of female action heroines through tropes of the 'monstrous-feminine' can be found in the films examined by Charles-Antoine Courcoux, who considers the recurrence of the motif of the 'vagina dentata' from a psychoanalytical perspective in contemporary films and television series like *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Evil Dead* (Alvarez, 2013) and *Stranger Things*. The toothed vagina functions as the externalized expression of sexuality to be repressed and can be seen as a repeated discursive concession that counterbalances the supplement of agency given to female heroes. Indeed, this agency is articulated with signs of the abject female body in order to signal the lethal potential of an autonomous femininity in terms of sexuality.

Finally, women's entry into the mainstream seemed complete with the release of *Wonder Woman* in 2017 after decades of waiting for the most famous female comic book character to be given her own film. Yvonne Tasker stresses how groundbreaking the film was since it showed that a 'superheroine film' where women are not mere supporting characters could be a box office success. Comparing *Wonder Woman* with Marvel's *Thor*, she also underlines that the two mythical figures draw on classical imagery in different ways: whereas the *Thor* films follow the rather

conventional script of what it means to become a man, Wonder Woman addresses the issues of power and engagement with more earnestness and melodramatic intensity. Drawing on multiple intertexts, the film nevertheless builds a new model of femininity that does not depend on sexualized glamour or self-reflexivity, in a move away from the characteristics associated with post-feminism (Genz and Brabon, 2009).

Tasker's chapter thus concludes this diachronic study of women's movement from the margins to the mainstream by spotlighting the female takeover of a highly masculine, mainstream film genre. Considering this movement as part of a global tendency, one cannot fail but notice that today, the mainstream is more than ever before used to foreground what had remained marginalized, with box office success. Countless films and TV series, largely distributed in theatres, but even more pervasively by on-demand platforms, participate in the mainstreaming of long-marginalized characters and subjects (e.g. Black and Latino superheroes in Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (Persichetti, Ramsey and Rothman, 2018), Black Panther (Coogler, 2018) and Watchmen (HBO, 2019–), teenage gay sex and more in Sex Education (Netflix, 2019–) or the African-American transgender underground scene in Pose (FX, 2018–21)). Throughout this book, the authors not only question the place of women in the film/TV industry on and off screen but also the industry as a norm-maker, inviting further reflection on the intrinsic relationship between film and society.

Notes

[1] Sheri Linden (2017) talks about the 'female empowerment mix' in her review of Wonder Woman in the Hollywood Reporter; Diana is an 'agent of power' according to Variety (Barker, 2017) and 'she totally kicks ass' according to Justin Chang (2017) for the LA Times.

[2] There are notable exceptions of course, with, for instance, the launching in 2004 of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media to push for more equal representation of women in the media.

[3] See Encyclopedia Britannica "The fourth wave of feminism" and Chamberlain (2017).

[4] See e.g. Mullen (2020) and Kac-Vergne (2021).

[5] See McRobbie (2009: 11).

[6] See e.g. Cavanaugh (2017).

[7] According to the Forbes lists of highest-paid actors and actresses in 2019 and 2020.