IN POPULAR FILMS (2000-2011)

By

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IN POPULAR FILMS (2000-2011)

Abstract
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This dissertation explores the patriarchal ideologies present in the top three
grossing films of each year from 2000 to 2011 and how these messages work to continue
the subordination and oppression of women. The movies studied have been grouped into
three genres: animated, action, and science fiction/fantasy. Within each of these genres the
presentation of the heterosexual romance-marriage-family ideal, violence against women
and the men as protectors narrative, and the depiction of men as being the only capable
leaders are explored. The analysis of each genre specifically concentrates on one of these
narratives, as each genre was found to place an emphasis on one particular ideological
message.

This dissertation further addresses how these films and the ideologies they are
presenting in regards to women can be seen as a sort of backlash or reaction by those in
power to messages of women’s empowerment and gains made by the women’s liberation
movement of the 1960s to early 1980s.
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Bailey. Your love kept me going in the most difficult of times, and you are the heart and soul of my work. I wish you were here to see what we accomplished, but you remain in my heart forever. I will always love you.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION, METHODOLOGY, AND SCOPE

Introduction

Evelyn had a goal: find a man to fall in love with, get married, and have kids. She attained this goal, marrying her college sweetheart about a year after graduation and having two children within the next few years. Now she feels stuck. It turns out that her husband and marriage isn’t all it was cracked up to be and raising her children doesn’t give her the joy she thought it would. Darla is in a constant state of crisis. Things always seem to happen to her – her car breaks down, she is short on money for rent, a family member is sick… She feels she needs rescuing, and she looks for a hero – a white knight – to come to her aid. She has never learned to take care of herself, because she believes a man will always be there to rescue her. This need to be rescued blinds her to the violence she has endured in her life at the hands of her “rescuers.” What’s a little chair throwing when he takes care of the bills? Cindy is a smart, articulate, determined, professional woman. She is highly educated and has worked hard in her career. Despite all this, Cindy is stuck in a middle management job. In meetings she takes a backseat as the men in charge direct the meeting. She watches from her office as less qualified male colleagues rise through the ranks and become her superiors. The three scenarios presented above are all true stories (though names have been changed). Each of the women unknowingly represent some of the many messages and ideologies surrounding women and their place in our society.
Second Sex/The Other

The women referenced above all epitomize, in some form or another, the idea of women as the “second sex.” Over 60 years ago philosopher and scholar Simone De Beauvoir wrote about this concept in her groundbreaking book *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir explained that women are relegated to the position of the other; their voices are not heard, their viewpoints are not taken into account, and they are only viewed in relation to man – never as a separate entity. De Beauvoir (1952) wrote, “Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man... He is the Subject; he is the absolute. She is the Other” (p. 6). The world belongs to men and “men have no doubt in this, and women barely doubt it” (p. 10). These statements hold true today, just as they did over 60 years ago when they were written. How is it that when women make up over half of the world’s population that the world still “belongs” to men? A partial answer can be seen in the continued promotion of patriarchal ideologies in social institutions such as the media. Men are the “master class” and the “master class wishes to keep them [women] in their place” (De Beauvoir, 1952, p. 153). Through the normalization of stereotypes and messages that promote women as the “other” women remain the “second sex.”

Patriarchy and Ideology

Patriarchy exists in any “family, group, or society in which men hold power and are dominant figures” (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2010, p. G5). In the United States, this system is upheld through the economy, law, religion, and media, among other structures. Sociologist Allan Johnson wrote that “patriarchy’s defining elements are its male-dominated, male-identified, and control-obsessed character...Patriarchal culture includes ideas about the nature of things, including women, men, and humanity, with manhood and masculinity most closely associated with being human and womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal position...
of other” (Johnson, 1997, p. 73). Patriarchy has come to be seen as normal in American culture (and indeed in most cultures across the globe). Patriarchal ideologies form the foundation of much of our culture. Sturken and Cartwright (2001) explained that,

I ideologies are systems of belief that exist within all cultures. Images are an important means through which ideologies are produced and onto which ideologies are projected…We all engage in this pervasive project, whether we realize it or not. Certain values are made to seem natural, inevitable aspects of everyday life. Ideology is manifested in widely shared social assumptions about not only the way things are but the way we all know things should be. Images and media representations are some of the forms through which we persuade others to share certain views or not, to hold certain values or not (p. 21).

In our society, it is made to seem natural that women are the “other” and that there is an “absolute human type that is masculine” (De Beauvoir, 1952, p. 5). Simply put, the “ideology of patriarchy is the belief that men have the right to control the life circumstances of women” (Howie, 2010, p. 180). The study of these ideological constructions is important because they appear to be natural – or a given – and they will remain that way unless people question them. This dissertation focuses on the ideological assumptions surrounding women (patriarchal ideologies), their place in society, their abilities and desires, and their value that are presented in the top-grossing films of the 21st century. Texts, such as films, are, according to Stuart Hall, where “collective social understandings are created: a terrain on which the politics of signification are played out in attempts to win people to particular ways of seeing the world” (Storey, 2009, p. 4). Accordingly, “Ideologies permeate the world of entertainment, and images are also used for regulation, categorization, identification, and evidence” (Sturken & Cartwright,
thus entertainment media must be carefully examined so that ideologies may be challenged and discussed.

The Social Institution of Media

One of the primary ways in which women are “othered” and patriarchal ideologies are perpetuated and promoted is through how the media represents both men and women. Philosopher Louis Althusser put forth the idea of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), social institutions that function predominantly by ideology, in his 1971 essay “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses.” The ISAs, of which communications (media) is one, serve to promote the ideology of the ruling class. Althusser further explained that ideology constitutes individuals and their lived experiences, while, at the same time making sense of the world in ways that misrepresent power. This is true for both the dominant and subordinate classes; “ideologies do not just convince oppressed groups that all is well in the world, they also convince ruling groups that exploitation and oppression are really something quite different, acts of universal necessity” (Storey, 2009, p. 72). Ideologies form people’s worldview, but this worldview is not necessarily a true representation of the larger world. Althusser (1971) stated that dominant ideologies, that maintain distributions of power and privilege, are maintained through the use of the media by “cramming every citizen with their daily dose of chauvinism,” etc. The media “does not browbeat its viewers into submission, but, instead, compels individuals into compliance with existing economic and social arrangements…For example, films teach viewers what it means to be a man, woman, citizen, lover, worker, etc” (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008, p. 335). In fact, people often become so engaged with electronic media “in such a visceral way that it can become impossible to clearly distinguish between memories that are lived and
individual and memories that are experienced and constructed individually and collectively” (Markowitz, 2011, p. 12).

One of the most far-reaching and influential forms of media is film. Cinema is one of the great cultural touchstones of American life. Through films, U.S. society tells the story of who Americans are as people, where Americans have been, and where the United States as a society is going. As such, film serves as a primary site from which the norms of patriarchy can be disseminated to large portions of American society.

Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall believed that media could be a powerful ideological tool. He stated that the media gives us “those images, concepts, and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand, and make sense…of our social existence” (Griffin, 2004, p. 371). Hall further stated that cinema exists “not as a second-tier mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby discover who we are” (Moshin & Jackson, 2011, p. 230).

With the tremendous influence that films wield on American society, it is important to examine the messages being given through the medium of film. Hollywood films circulate some of the most widely viewed images of women, in the workplace and at home. These images give society a collective sense of what sorts of leaders women make, how women should act and look, what the norm is for femininity, etc., and the images urge conformity to stereotypes (King, 2006; Steinke, 2005).

Films are ideological messengers; through their stories they show us the values and conceptions of our societies, organizations, and communities. Mintz and Roberts claimed that, “Of all the products of popular culture, none is more sharply etched in our collective imagination
than the movies” (1993, p. 1). Film scholar Christian Metz explained spectatorship in regards to film; “the viewer suspends disbelief in the fictional world of the film, identifies with not only specific characters in the film but more importantly with the film’s overall ideology through identification with the film’s narrative structure and visual point of view” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 73). In suspending disbelief and criticism, audience members take in messages and are exposed to a wide variety of messages that come to be seen as normal and natural. “We decode images by interpreting clues to intended, unintended, and even merely suggested meanings…We are trained to read cultural codes such as aspects of the image that signify gendered, racial, or class-specific meanings” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 26).

**Beyond the Theatre**

Films impact us beyond our experience of them in movie theatres. Movies today have wider dissemination than ever before and their messages reach a larger percentage of the population than at any other time in history. Films can be viewed not only in designated movie theatres, but at home or on the go through the use of DVDs and Blueray discs, through movie downloads and streaming videos on computers and phones, and through rebroadcasting on cable and regular broadcast television stations. Society is also exposed to films, especially large, blockbuster films, through advertising campaigns, marketing tie-ins with fast food franchises, theme parks, toy deals, books and comics designed around films, video game spin-offs, fan fiction (stories inspired by movies, but written by fans), online discussions via a variety of social media (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc.) and water cooler discussions.

The word blockbuster is classically defined as a bomb capable of taking out an entire city block. The term was applied to films in the 1920s to describe movies that attracted lines so large that they could not be contained in a city block. The term gained momentum in the 1970s with
the arrival of such films as *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, due to their immense popularity and box office (Epstein, 2006). It seems an appropriate term for the top-grossing films of each year, as these movies decimate the box office, leaving little room for smaller films that have not been marketed as heavily. These films, marketed by large conglomerations, run by males, are marketed aggressively to destroy the other films in the theatre because, as Paulo Freire (2004) noted, for the oppressors “Money is the measure of all thing, and profit the primary goal” (p. 58).

The impact of movies on culture is so pervasive that even those who have not seen the top-grossing films of any given year can often quote lines from the popular films or instantly recognize images or characters from the films. The mass marketing of films to the public aids in the pervasiveness of the ideologies presented in blockbuster films. A movie’s message reaches us not only on the silver screen, but through images presented on television, in print media, on the Internet, and in merchandising tie-ins (Mintz & Roberts, 1993, p. 1-2). For example, a number of the movies that will be examined in this dissertation have permeated our culture to the point of being made into amusement park attractions in various Disney and Universal Studios locations, both in the United States and elsewhere. Films will continue to serve as a medium for shaping cultural values and ideals – aided by their growing pervasiveness in our cultural psyche (Mintz & Roberts, 1993, p. 27).

**Worldwide Box Office: The Globalization of Film**

It is also important to realize that the messages presented in films are disseminated not only to the American public, but worldwide. Media scholar Todd Gitlin (2002) stated, “Everywhere the media flow defies national boundaries” (p. 176). Additionally, he stated that “hardly anyone is exempt from the forces of American images and sounds,” in fact, with Hollywood as the “global cultural capital” and entertainment as one of America’s top exports,
the domination of American blockbuster movies globally is clear (Gitlin, 2002, p. 177).

Although domestic box office is still key to a film’s success, more and more revenue is garnered through the distribution of films abroad. For example, the top grossing movie of 2011, the last year examined in this dissertation, was *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2*. The United States’ domestic box office for the film was over $381 million – a staggering sum. The movie’s foreign box office (all other countries) was a jaw dropping $947 million (Box Office Mojo)! This clearly illustrates that the messages relayed in blockbuster films have a global impact. The images, stereotypes, and narratives concerning women serve to normalize patriarchal ideologies on a global scale.

**Statement of Problem**

This dissertation focuses on the ideological assumptions surrounding women, their place in society, their abilities and desires, and their value. “Ideologies permeate the world of entertainment, and images are also used for regulation, categorization, identification, and evidence” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 22), thus entertainment media must be carefully examined so that ideologies may be challenged and discussed.

It is an accepted fact amongst most media and feminist scholars that films and other media have long been used as tools for the continued dissemination of patriarchal ideologies. I contend that not only is this true, but our most popular films of today can be seen as a type of reaction to and against the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s to 1980s.

As feminist scholars Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon (2009) wrote, many feminist critics believe that a period of feminist advancement is invariably accompanied by a stage of backlash – “a reverse movement that is a reaction to or counterassault on feminism” (p. 52). There is much historical evidence to support this. Scholar Marjorie Rosen (1973) wrote about
how films reflected a backlash to the women’s suffrage movement back in the early 1900s.

Slowly women’s point of view gained traction in the movies and female movie stars headlined films in the 1930s and 1940s, but in the 1950s and early 1960s another backlash occurred as a reaction to the increased number of women in the workforce due to World War II. Once the war was over, these women were quickly ushered back into the home and popular culture inundated them with images of the perfect housewife they should aspire to be. “Home was once again regarded as the proper haven for women and feminism was pushed further out of women’s lives” (Genz and Brabon, 2009, p. 52). Rosen stated, “No more were the independent career-minded heroines of the forties, no more the bright and witty women who could carry a picture…” (p. 246).

Some scholars, such as Imelda Whelehan, focus on retrosexism and how representations of “how things used to be” are “defensively reinvented against cultural changes in women’s lives” (Whelehan, 2000, p. 11). Although this is often discussed in terms of the retro setting of many films (as well as television shows, such as Mad Men), I contend these sensibilities are presented in contemporary settings as well, and this works to further normalize the ideologies being presented. What is presented in our top grossing films of the 21st century thus far is not a blatant antifeminist stance, but rather a reprioritization of patriarchal ideologies that continue the subordination of women. A reassertion of the heterosexual romance-marriage-family path as being the way to fulfillment for all women; a refocusing on hypermasculine representations of men, which prioritizes violence; and a discourse that presents only men as capable of leadership have taken center stage in our films. The top-grossing films of the past 12 years have served up a constant buffet of patriarchal ideologies in the form of narratives regarding the heterosexual romance-marriage-family ideal for women; the glamorization of violence and victimization
stories that show women to be passive, weak, routine victims of violence, and in need of
protection by hypermasculinized males; and the prioritization of male leaders, leaving women
with little influence or power, all while continuing to give lip-service to feminist ideals and goals
through small nods to female empowerment. Through their delivery of these messages, these
films, in reality, do little to foster female empowerment and actively work to continue the
oppression and subordination of women, leaving women as the “other.” The discourses “can be
used to freeze in place existing inequalities by presenting them as inevitable and - if read
correctly - as pleasurable” (Gill, 2007, p. 206).

The top-grossing movies present us with ideologies concerning the place of women in
society, what they may aspire to, their capabilities, and their character. The dominant ideologies
presented serve to support the idea that women are the “second sex” – they are weaker, less
capable, and should be confined to the domestic sphere. These ideologies present men as “the
norm” and frequently make women invisible (Gill, 2007, p. 9). The media is an institution that
“sustains positions of dominance and subordination” (Bordo, 1993, p. 460) – a position of
dominance for men and a position of subordination for women. Women are positioned as the
“other” through a variety of means. This dissertation will specifically look at three themes that
are showcased in the top-grossing films of the 21st century: heterosexism and the marriage and
family ideal, women as victims, and the lack of women in leadership positions. By stereotyping
women as wives/mothers, victims, or mere sidekicks to male leaders, and normalizing these
themes, the top-grossing movies aid in the perpetuation of the “othering” of women.

**Methodology and Scope**

This dissertation is a work of media criticism that focuses on uncovering the ideologies
regarding the role of women in society that are manifested in our most popular (top grossing)
films of the 21st century. The dissertation owes a great deal to a variety of work done by scholars in the fields of communication/media studies, cultural studies, and film studies, but is firmly planted in the critical cultural media studies approach of ideological critique through textual analysis. Douglas Kellner described the importance of textual analysis in studying media and culture: “The products of media culture require multidimensional close textual readings to analyze their various forms of discourse, ideological positions, narrative strategies, image construction, and effects” (Kellner, 1995, p. 10). Textual analysis uses a wide array of tools from content analysis, to formalism, to semiotics to explicate these ideologies, discourses, etc.

**Media Studies and the Critical/Cultural Approach**

The fundamental assumption behind media studies is that the media matter or that “what we see, read, and hear does have some effect on us” (Lind, 2004, p. 2). Media studies can essentially be split into research performed using two different approaches: 1) social science and 2) critical/cultural. Social scientists model their research on the natural sciences and strive to be objective. Critical/cultural researchers “reject not only the desirability of maintaining an objective, value-neutral position but also the possibility of accomplishing such a goal” (Lind, 2004, p.2). They tend to focus more on the long-term effects of exposure to media content and how the media helps to maintain privileges for some and oppression for others. Qualitative methodologies, such as textual analysis, are used. The critical cultural approach gained prominence with communication scholars in the 1970s, particularly among those engaged in feminist studies. “Focusing on relationships of power and dominance, the critical cultural perspective suggests that media content helps to nurture a system that keeps the dominant class in power” (Bramlet-Solomon & Carstarphoen, 2012, p. 27). In this dissertation, I follow in the tradition of critical/cultural media researchers as I focus specifically on the medium of film. I
have chosen to concentrate on the medium of film because the “Cinema remains the art form to which most people today respond most strongly and to which they look for recreation, inspiration, and insight” (Danesi, 2012, p. 141).

**Ideological Critique**

The tradition of ideological critique/analysis in media studies is also often referred to as thematic analysis. Ideological critique focuses on the “connections between cultural representations – meanings – and power relations, affirming the importance of images, values and discourses in constructing and reproducing social order…It seeks to understand how it is that social relations based on domination, antagonism and injustice come to be seen as natural, inevitable and even desirable by those who benefit least from them” (Gill, 2007, p. 54). At the heart of ideological critique is the examination of patterns and themes in representations. Themes and patterns in media texts help to produce hegemony – a concept explained by scholar Antonio Gramsci as a process through which a group “is able to claim social, political and cultural leadership throughout a society or social formation” (Gill, 2007, p. 55). Basically a ruling class exercises authority and leadership over the subordinate classes, but this is not done only through force, but through consent (Gramsci, 1971, p. 80). This concept has its roots in Marxism and the idea that the ruling class in any society provides the dominant ideas for that society, making these ideas seem natural, when they are in fact not. Ideologies of oppression are put forth in order to maintain the (economic) status quo. When Karl Marx first put forth the basis for Marxism he was referring to the bourgeois and the proletariat, but feminists who use this theoretical framework substitute men for the bourgeois and women for the proletariat. In the case of film, this means that the dominant group (men) spreads their ideology to the subordinate group (women) in the movies (as well as through other cultural avenues and laws/policies). The
consent of the subordinate group is found in their acceptance and patronage of these films. (The same can be said of other subordinated groups, such as minoritized racial and ethnic groups, etc.) “Ideology is understood in terms of ideas, meanings, and practices which, while they purport to be universal truths, are maps of meaning that sustain powerful social groups (Barker, 2008, p. 66), and hegemony is a process by which a non-dominant group comes to accept their subordination as the norm (Miller, 2005, p. 73). Hegemony must be constantly maintained; it is an ongoing process. John Storey (2009) explained,

Dominant ways of making the world meaningful, produced by those with power [money and influence] to make their meanings circulate in the world, can generate ‘hegemonic truths’, which may come to assume an authority over the ways in which we see, think, communicate, and act in the world and become the ‘common sense’ which directs our actions or become that against which our actions are directed (p. 87).

The representation of women as inferior to men becomes normalized (made to seem like common sense) and reflected in the conduct of the people of the society.

In this dissertation, I focus on the patterns and themes that emerge regarding women when analyzing the top-grossing films of each year of the 21st century thus far (2000-2011). These patterns and themes serve to “other” women, subordinating them and elevating men as the dominant group and society’s definition of masculinity as the norm. Feminist film scholar Tonia Modleski (1991) stated that “Ideology is as effective as it is because it bestows pleasure on its subjects rather than simply conveying messages” (p. 57). This is why “blockbuster” movies are so influential. People go to the movies to take part in a pleasurable activity – to be swept up in a story. Film scholars Pramaggiore and Wallis (2008) explained, “If the profit driven film industry makes more money supplying viewers with films designed to make them feel good – rather than
films designed to challenge their pre-existing beliefs – then popular formulas that work again and again may simply confirm the way people already think. Analyzing popular films in terms of their implicit ideologies can uncover the ideas and philosophies that shape a culture” (p. 334).

**Feminist Perspective**

As this dissertation focuses on ideologies surrounding women, a feminist perspective is present in my analysis. There are many definitions of the term “feminism” and many veins of feminism that have been used when dissecting media and film. However, in the spirit of Rosalind Gill, “I use the term feminism to signal a concern with enduring gender inequalities and injustices, amongst a matrix of other forms of oppression relating to ‘race,’ ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, disability and health status” (2007, p. 25). As such, I most closely align myself with what has been defined as cultural (and sometimes essentialist) feminism. The definition of cultural feminism that I am using focuses on the subordination of women (the dominance approach), and is most clearly articulated in the work of Simone de Beauvoir (discussed earlier). In this view women are not born women, they become women. The idea of “woman” is socially constructed. Through this social construction women have been “relegated to the status of Otherness” and find “themselves in a condition of subjection and dependency. This had led males in the course of time to construct a series of myths about woman so as to control her better” (Crotty, 1998, p. 167). These myths are presented in films and serve to “beget the social roles to which women are assigned and to which play a pivotal role in holding them subject” (Crotty, 1998, p. 167).

Scholar Rosalind Gill stated, “Feminist analyses of the media have been animated by the desire to understand how images and cultural constructions are connected to patterns of inequality, domination and oppression” (2007, p. 7). This dissertation continues in that tradition
and proceeds from “the claim that gender is among the most important defining features of social life” (Miller, 2005, p. 78).

**Organization of Films**

For organizational purposes, the 36 films analyzed for this dissertation have been placed into three categories: Animated Films, Action Films, and Science Fiction/Fantasy Films. These three categories encompass all but two of the blockbuster films studied, as these genres have consistently been the most popular types of films for the past 12 years. It should be noted that many of the films included could justifiably be placed in more than one genre. Ultimately, I have placed them into the genre that I feel they share the most in common with. However, the fact that many could easily fit into other genres is indicative of the fact that blockbuster films of the 21st century share much in common, including the ways in which prominent ideologies regarding women are spread and reinforced. (In fact, as will be discussed, during the course of my analysis, it became clear to me that three themes were especially dominant and these three themes were each most dominant in one of the three genres studied.) Within each of the three genres I have chosen to focus on a handful of films that best illustrate the themes I wish to draw attention to. All films that fall within the genre covered in each chapter are touched upon, but my emphasis is placed on a smaller selection of films within the genre. The films covered within this dissertation are:

- Animated films:
- **Toy Story 3** (2010)

- **Action films:**
  - *The Dark Knight* (2008)
  - *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008)

- **Science fiction/fantasy films:**
  - *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005)
  - *Avatar* (2009)
Also included are two dramas: *Cast Away* (2000) and *Passion of the Christ* (2004).

I have provided short summaries for the movies covered in this dissertation in my appendix, along with the theatrical movie posters for the films. I do this so that my readers may have an easy reference to consult should they not have seen any of the films being referenced. This also serves as an easy reference for discovering which films represent what years.

**Additional Clarifications**

Before delving into an analysis of the movies laid out above in the next three chapters, I would like to make a few additional clarifications regarding the focus of this dissertation and the scope of my analysis. First and foremost, it is important to realize when speaking about gender ideologies and stereotypes that gender does not exist in a vacuum. The distribution of power and privilege, as well as oppression and inequality, are based on a confluence of factors. In addition to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, age, ability, and other factors intersect. What is true for one person in an oppressed group is not necessarily true for another person within the same group. The intersectionality of the above factors is an important consideration when examining the messages and ideologies found in film, or texts of any kind. With that being said, the focus of this dissertation is on women as an oppressed group. I wish to clarify this from the start, as I will discuss other factors that lead to marginalization, but my treatment of these topics is cursory. I wish to acknowledge their importance, while remaining focused on women as a larger group.

Secondly, the messages and ideologies presented about women that I examine in the following three chapters is not exhaustive. I have chosen to focus on the three themes and stereotypes that I observed most frequently. Each genre of film analyzed had one specific theme
or stereotype that is most prevalent, as well as many others. The importance of messages not examined should not be diminished.

Finally, as a point of clarification, the movies selected for analysis were chosen based on domestic box office gross. In a world where “Internet and mobile devices have made it easier and more convenient to view movies, going to the movies still remains a popular activity…a movie is best experienced communally, inside a movie theatre” (Danesi, 2012, p. 149). It is this attraction to the communal form of entertainment that led me to base my selection on box office gross, and, as previously mentioned, my focus is on American ideologies, so the domestic box office was chosen.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

This chapter can be viewed as the opening credits of a movie. Chapters two through four represent three storylines and involve analysis of the top-grossing blockbuster films of the 21st century thus far and the primary ideologies promoting women as the “other” that are present in these movies. In chapter five, the end credits run, as I conclude my work by summarizing what was uncovered in my analysis, discussing general trends and observations, and offering insight into what it all means. Finally, the dissertation will end with “bonus scenes” – a short reflection on the top three grossing movies of 2012 (the study itself covers the years 2000-2011).

So, without further ado, I present my analysis of the top three grossing films from each year from 2000-2011. After all, “what is the feminist critic but an articulate advocate of opinions about texts? – opinions which she sometimes shares with other women, and sometimes helps to form” (Modelski, p. 45).
CHAPTER TWO
THE PRINCESS: HETEROSEXISM IN ANIMATED FILMS

Audience members watch films for a wide variety of reasons. As previously stated, “Cinema remains the art form to which most people today respond most strongly and to which they look for recreation, inspiration, and insight” (Danesi, 2012, p. 141). In the case of animated films, this recreation is aimed at younger audiences, but usually consists of material aimed at adults as well. One of the most dominant themes within animated features is “happily ever after.” This theme plays to anxieties over loneliness and not being successful. Audiences receive a feel-good message about everything working out in the end for the leading men and women characters in the film.

For women, the predominant form of achieving this “happily ever after” is presented as heterosexual romance that leads to marriage and family. In fact, the animated films included in this chapter are varied in their stories, representing everything from a satirical look at fairytales, to the adventures of fish, to the exploits of a speed-loving race car, to a tale of friendship between toys, and more. But, despite their varied storylines and characters, these films share many similarities in the messages and ideologies concerning women in society that they disseminate and, foremost, among these is the importance placed on heterosexual romance, marriage, and family for the attainment of “happily ever after.”

Women are, from an early age, fed the fantasy of finding romantic love with a “white knight,” marrying their “prince charming,” having children, and living happily ever after. “This fantasy, which promises women complete fulfillment through heterosexual love, ensures the
impossibility of women ever getting together (as women) to form a subculture and hence to develop a system of values that will effectively challenge and undermine an increasingly hegemonic patriarchal ideology” (Negra, 2009, p. 43). And the fantasy is dominant in some of the first films we see as children – animated films - firmly placing this belief in our heads at an early age. Even as adults, after further exposure to the world around us and to concepts of feminism, Jean Grimshaw stated that “it is perfectly possible to agree in one’s head that certain images of women might be reactionary or damaging or oppressive while remaining committed to them in emotion and desire” (Gill, 2009, p. 14). This desire and emotion are played up to full effect in animated films. The priority placed on the heterosexual romance-marriage-family imperative in these films continues to stress the division of gender roles. This imperative exists for both men and women, but is shown to be of the greatest importance to women, who must obtain this trifecta for fulfillment and success to be achieved. This effectively removes other avenues to happiness and fulfillment and keeps women removed from the public sphere. Since success in the public sphere is accorded the most respect, women are thus “othered.” Men come to represent success and women the binary opposite. This devalues women and their contributions in both the public and domestic spheres.

In what follows, I will look at some of the ways this priority, as well as two other ideologies that stereotype women, is exhibited in some of the top-grossing animated films from 2000-2011. Though all of these films present this ideology in some form or another and will be explored, my focus will be on the Shrek films and their classic fairytale narrative.

**Heterosexism, Marriage, and Family**

Romance has been a central plot device in films since their beginning and from this very beginning the emphasis has been placed on heterosexual romances. In fact individuals with
other sexualities are rarely seen in our most popular films, with the exception of the occasional “sassy” male gay friend in movies such as *My Best Friend’s Wedding* and *Something Borrowed* – films that are marketed as romantic comedies and are rarely among the top-grossing films any given year. Although this standard has been around since the beginning of film, in the films of the last 12 years a renewed emphasis on women characters as “the girlfriend” has emerged. In these roles the women serve little purpose beyond being the love interest for the male protagonist. This emphasis on the girlfriend role in turn presents romantic heterosexual romance as the only option available to women for fulfillment. The rise in this type of character can be seen as a continuing backlash to the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s to the early 1980s that began in the films of the late 1980s. The emphasis on heterosexual romance may also be seen as a backlash to the gay rights movement, particularly the push for marriage equality that began in full swing in 2000 when Vermont became the first state to legally recognize civil unions between gay and lesbian couples.

The *Shrek* movies may be one of the most obvious examples when it comes to the primacy of the heterosexual romance, marriage, and family priority. Although conceived to poke fun at classic fairytale narratives, the films fall into many of the same narrative structures and stereotypes that exist in the films they are lampooning. As the films progress, we see the evolution of Shrek and Fiona’s relationship and each film showcases the priority of one of the sides in the heterosexual romance, marriage, family triangle.

The first film opens with the reading of a storybook that quickly sets up the premise under which Fiona has been operating for her whole life. “Once upon a time there was a lovely princess, but she had an enchantment upon her of a fearful sort which could only be broken by
love’s first kiss…she waited in the tower for her true love.” This true love was, of course, literally a knight in shining armor – a white, upper-class, male.

It is with a sense of irony that we are then introduced to Shrek as Fiona’s rescuer and eventual love. After all, he does not fall into the classic hero description – he is not a white, upper-class male. As the movie opens, fairytale creatures are being rounded up by the decree of Lord Farququad and banished. They are seen as “others” and, thus, a threat. Shrek is among this group that is classified as “other.” In fact, Shrek has two strikes against him. He is not only othered due to his fairytale character status (essentially his race) but also for his economic status. He is presented as lower class in stereotypical fashion. Shrek is unrefined, a slob. He farts and belches, he has bad breath and no manners, he shuns the company of others, and is, generally, presented as uncouth. This is typical of representation of lower and working class individuals in entertainment media. According to author Diana Kendall (2012) the media has “manipulated gender traits (for instance portraying blue collar men as incompetent, immature, and irrational) to suggest the inferiority of the working to the middle class” (p. 147). These representations are often based not only on economic location but on ethnicity, as is the case with Shrek. Shrek is a prime example of the fact that not all men are created equally either. He represents a “lower class” of male and “lower classes of men are simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged. They possess power in relation to women, but they lack power in the larger social context” (Marinucci, 2010, p. 89).

However, despite the fact that Shrek overcomes the disadvantages put on him by society in regards to race and economic status, what is never questioned is the fact that Fiona needs to be rescued and that it is man that must do the rescuing (the damsel-in-distress narrative). When, 35 minutes into the film, we first see Fiona, she is passively waiting in a tower for her prince
charming. She has no doubt that he will come to rescue her and, that once he does, her life will be as it was meant to be. They will marry, have children, and live happily ever after. She does not appear to aspire to anything other than this, and she does not actively engage in trying to save herself. When Shrek bursts into her room (in armor covering his face), she does not make a run for it or even actively thank him, rather she smoothes her hair and dress and lies back in her bed so that she might have her heterosexual romantic dream of being kissed by her true love enacted. It is taken for granted that she must patiently wait for her hero – and future husband – to come.

When, after escaping the tower, she finally gets Shrek to remove his armor and she gazes upon her white knight for the first time, she proclaims, “This is all wrong...you’re not supposed to be an ogre.” Not only is heterosexual romance the imperative here, but white heterosexual romance is presented as the norm. This norm has such a strong hold that Fiona says this, despite the fact that she too is part ogre. A spell turns her into an ogre every evening at sundown, and she remains that way until the sun rises the next morning. This is her deep, dark secret that she does not want anyone to know. She “passes” as white princess.

Despite their differences, Fiona and Shrek fall in love and Shrek fights for her hand, interrupting her marriage to Lord Farquaud (for whom Shrek rescued Fiona for, in return for the fairytale creatures freedom to move about – i.e., out of his swamp). When Shrek kisses Fiona at the altar their true love is sealed with the first kiss that Fiona has always dreamed of and she is, literally, transformed as she takes on her “true form” and permanently becomes an ogre, like her love. Without this great heterosexual romance she would not have become who she was truly meant to be. The movie ends with Fiona and Shrek’s wedding and the storybook from the beginning of the film reads, “And they lived happily ever after.” The ending sets the audience
up for the continuing quest for true fulfillment that follows in the next two films: married life and the addition of children.

Figure 1: Shrek and Fiona’s transformational first kiss (IMDB.com)

In the second film we learn that this concept of what a “normal life” includes has been with Fiona (as it has with the audience) from a very early age. Shrek happens upon Fiona’s childhood diary which outlines her plans for life: be rescued, get married, and have lots of kids. As Simone De Beauvoir (1952) stated, “The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage. Even today, most women are, were, or intend to be married, or they suffer from not being so” (p. 439).

As western society moved into the 20th century marriage became more of a result of romantic love than of an exchange of “property.” This seemingly gave women more freedom of choice, but in reality their options were still very limited. Girls were (and still are) taught from an early age concepts of what author Lynn Peril called “pink think.” One of the main focuses of “pink think” is how to attract a man for marital purposes and then keep that man happy, satisfied, and keeping good care of you. Although this type of thinking was especially dominant in the 1940s to 1960s, it is still present today and is found in many popular films. Again, this can be seen as the result of a reaction to women’s liberation and a desire to maintain the status quo among the privileged. In this point of view, singleness is seen as “a form of social delinquency – a private betrayal of the needs of society as a whole” (Peril, 2002, p. 105). The priority placed
on marriage can be found not only within cultural messages, but in the law. In 1996 Congress passed the Personal Responsibility Act (providing temporary assistance to needy families); it declared that “marriage is the foundation of a successful society.” And in 1997 the U.S. General Accounting Office found 1,049 federal laws in which benefits, privileges, and rights were contingent on marital status (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2010, p. 302-303).

Figure 2: Shrek and Fiona begin their married life together (IMDB.com)

Fiona and Shrek must travel in *Shrek 2* to the land of Far Far Away to receive her parent’s blessing of their marriage (shades of older views on marriage in which the woman was considered property that needed to be given). Although Fiona’s parents do come to accept Shrek as their son-in-law eventually, and Fiona’s mom quickly brings up the question of kids when Fiona and Shrek come to visit in the second movie, it is worth noting that Fiona and Shrek do not represent the idealized coupling. In fact, the second movie revolves around the fact that Fiona’s father, the king, does not think Shrek is worthy of his daughter. As an ogre from the swamp (strong parallels to minoritized ethnic groups and slums), he does not represent the so-called norm: white, male, middle or upper class. In calling into question what is “normal” in this way, the films succeed in their attempt to subvert the classic fairytale and the presentations in most films of what a couple or a family should look like. The couple even chooses to revert back to
their ogre selves after a spell has rendered them into the idealized (by society) version of themselves: white and good looking. (When they are in this form they are fawned over and given considerably more attention and respect.) This positive message of acceptance of who you are is diluted by the persistence of the message that we are all alike inside and we can all get along if we get to know one another without addressing the systemic issues and institutional racism that perpetuate discrimination. This cursory acknowledgement of racial issues may be detrimental as “by refusing to talk openly about race-specific causes of racial disparities, those who adhere to post-racial liberalism may actually worsen the extent of those disparities” (Wise, 2010, p. 4).

Once again, despite the cursory addressing of racial issues, the primacy placed on the importance of heterosexual love, marriage, and family in providing happiness to women is not challenged. All of the interactions between women in the first two films, and most of the interactions in the third film, concern their love life. And the one character in the films that presents a different view of gender – the cross-dressing wolf - is called a “gender confused wolf” and openly scoffed at by Fairy Godmother in the second film, reinforcing the fact that only the strictest adherence to gender rules and heterosexuality are deemed acceptable. Throughout the film the main goal never waivers: the pursuit of “happily ever after” in the form of a happy marriage. People may place obstacles to happiness in their way, but Shrek and Fiona’s love and strong marriage can conquer it all!

The third film in the series picks up right where the second film left off, so, of course, that means, in accordance with the heterosexual romance, marriage, family ideology, that it is time for children to enter the picture, so that Fiona’s trifecta can be attained and she can be completely fulfilled. Throughout the years, pregnancy and motherhood has been promoted as
making women more beautiful. (And the advertising industry has worked tirelessly to assure that this is something women seek.) This has meant that for childless women the consequences could be quite dire. Lynn Peril stated,

Childless women were the ones who needed to worry as they were ‘more likely to have nervous and emotional troubles, poorer bodily function, and generally more precarious health than the mother.’ In fact, a woman without children was little more than a sexual neuter; ‘to be beautiful one must first be a woman – and being a mother is being a woman in the true sense of the word (p. 176).

This not just an attitude of yesteryear, there is still a stigma attached to women who are not married and do not have children past a certain age.

It is not only the priority placed on women to be mothers (and the fact that this comes naturally and parenthood is something for which women are meant) that we see conveyed in the film, but the parallel message that men are not as adept at parenthood, which places the responsibility for parenthood firmly back in the woman’s court. Fiona is presented as much more excited about the fact that she is pregnant than Shrek is. While Fiona readies for the new addition (we find out later that they actually have multiple children) with a baby shower and talks with her friends about her impending motherhood, Shrek has nightmares about fatherhood.

The fact that Fiona and Shrek have multiple children is significant, as the nuclear family ideal is part of the trifecta for women’s fulfillment and this ideal requires more than one child. This ideal is usually presented as consisting of a “heterosexual couple, married for life, with two or three children. The father is the provider while the wife/mother spends her days running the home” (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2010, p. 303). This ideal image of the nuclear family harkens back to popular television shows of the 1950s, such as Leave it Beaver and Father Knows Best.
These shows focused almost exclusively on white, upper-middle class families and taught audiences that the role of women was “to hold down the home front, raise the kiddies, and get the meatloaf on the table when Dad got home from work” (Zeisler, 2008, p. 35-36). The emphasis on the role of women in the home in the 1950s was a direct result of anxieties regarding women’s place in society after the end of World War II. During the war, more than six million women entered the labor force, lured by a desire to contribute to the war effort or by financial need, due to husbands and fathers being deployed in the war (Zeisler, 2008, p. 27). The media was key in shepherding women into the labor force in response to the war and it was also key in shepherding them back into the home afterward, as women were confronted with images of the “perfect” housewife. Stephanie Coontz (1997) is quoted as saying that in the 1950s when this ideal became widespread,

The timing and spacing of children became more compressed so that young mothers were likely to have two or more children in diapers at once…the educational gap between women and men increased, while job segregation for working men and women seems to have peaked…The result was that family life and gender roles became much more predictable, orderly, and settled in the 1950s than they were either twenty years earlier or twenty years later (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2010, p. 304).

In the film, we see Fiona fall into the pattern of having more than one child in diapers at one time.
As she rejected the idea of a nanny for her children (a gift presented by Snow White at her baby shower), declaring that caring for her children was the point of being a mother, Fiona effectively removed herself from the public sphere for the foreseeable future to raise her children. The prioritization of this message in 21st century films can, again, be seen as a sort of reaction to the women’s liberation movement in the second half of the 20th century and the movement of women, in greater numbers (there have always been many women in the work field, especially women from minoritized racial groups), into the workforce and public sphere, which threatens the distribution of power in society. Thus, messages promoting the importance of heterosexual love, marriage, and family as the means to fulfillment for women are presented in the media to normalize this notion and keep women in the home.

At the end of *Shrek the Third*, Fiona and Shrek’s “happily ever after” is displayed in a montage of them joyfully playing with and caring for their children. Fiona has reached the transition to full womanhood and a state of fulfillment.

Though the *Shrek* films present the clearest representation of the ideology that women’s fulfillment comes from heterosexual romance, marriage, and family and is a clear example of the backlash against women’s liberation and advancement, the other animated films that found their
way into the top-grossing movies from the years 2000 to 2011 are not immune from these same messages.

Even *Finding Nemo*, a story that lacks many female characters at all, still manages to begin with a representation of true happiness being the nuclear family unit. Marlin and his wife are living a truly happy and blessed life together with their children. When his wife and all of his children, except for Nemo, are killed, Marlin changes. He becomes fearful and withdrawn and reticent to try new things and meet new people. Though a reaction of this kind to death is not completely unrealistic, in not showing fulfillment in any other area of his life the film subtly emphasizes again the importance of the nuclear family in attaining happiness and it is “glorifying the role of the mother” (De Beauvoir, 1952, p. 569) by showing that happiness and a normal life is lost when the mother figure is lost. (It is worth noting, however, that in the film this is shown as being of primary importance for males too, not just females; though the impact of this is somewhat negated by the limited female roles in the film.)

Similarly, in the film *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, the importance of the nuclear family is not hammered home in the way it is in the *Shrek* movies, but is instead subtly present. If one looks around at the happy adult citizens of Whoville, one observes that they are almost exclusively married with children. Those citizens that are not married are presented as the ones that have a lack of love in their lives, are incomplete, and are still searching for happiness, such as the Grinch. Author Anthea Taylor (2012) stated that “being in a romantic heterosexual relationship has historically been conceptualized as the key marker of mental health and maturity in modern Western societies” (p. 20). The Grinch is then appropriately seen as crazy. Although the Grinch is presented as the bad guy, if one looks deeper, it can be surmised that he largely became that way due to the fact that he was made to feel different (another racial allegory) and,
thus, not as worthy of love. So, again, we see not only the primacy of heterosexual romance, marriage, and children, but the message that the true epitome of this ideal can only be achieved by white, middle or upper class families.

In the world of animated films this heteronormative imperative is not exclusive to humanoid or animal (who are commonly imbued with human characteristics and qualities) characters. Objects, such as cars and toys, join the fray as well. In the 2006 film *Cars* the main character of Lightening McQueen is fawned over by female groupies. In stereotypical fashion, the male character is presented as desirable to females due to his power, wealth, and status. A mere wink from Lightening causes the female fans in the race stands to swoon in delight. And Sally, the main female character, quickly shows signs of being infatuated after their first meeting – a prerequisite for the love story that follows. Lightening and Sally even have an example couple to model their relationship after, as Lightening’s idol, The King, is happily married to a car that supports him and his career. He tells her after tying for first place in a race that “It wouldn’t mean anything without you.” Apparently, even amongst cars, the need for a heterosexual pairing is prominent.

The heterosexual romance, marriage and family narrative is also present in *Toy Story 3*. A couple of side storylines in the film revolve around romantic love among the toy characters. Barbie meets and falls head over heels for Ken. When Barbie and Ken first meet she kicks her heel back in excitement and everything moves in slow motion, an easily recognizable sign of love at first sight in the movies. Ken is represented as desirable due to his privilege – nice house, nice car, tons of clothes. Barbie tells him, “You have everything.” Ken’s response? “Everything except someone to share it with.” Even Ken, as a man, feels that life is incomplete without romance. The pull to be with Ken is so strong that Barbie initially abandons her friends in their
time of need to be with Ken. At the end of the film, as the credits roll, Barbie and Ken have not only found romantic love together, but the motherhood path has become a reality for Barbie as she takes on the care of Big Baby. Additionally, we are presented with the love story of Buzz and Jessie, and once again, the audience knows love is in the air through visual cues, such as Jessie appearing to move in slow-motion to Buzz when his factory settings are re-set and he, essentially, sees her again for the first time and through dialogue like “We will conquer evil with our love.” If you are a female character in Toy Story 3, you are paired off by the end of the movie as the priority of heterosexual romance takes hold. There is also a foreclosure of any sexuality being valid other than heterosexuality in the film. With his love of clothes, Ken is often mocked for being too feminine; it is not presented as a valid option to be a man with these characteristics. And when the Bookworm thinks Ken is cross-dressing, upon spotting him wearing high heels (it is actually Barbie in disguise), he rolls his eyes.

As we will see in the following chapters, this emphasis on heterosexual love stories and the goal of marriage and family is not the exclusive domain of animated films (though the fact that these films are directed at children and the emphasis is placed at such an early age on these goals is problematic). A good example of this can be found in Cast Away. Despite the fact that the majority of the movie takes place on an island with only one character present (the main female character does not appear until 13 minutes into the movie and then disappears again 20 minutes into the movie, not reemerging until one hour and 47 minutes into the film, before being removed one final time for the last 20 minutes of the two hour and 23 minute movie), the ideologies surrounding love, marriage, and family are very present. Before Chuck boards the plane for his fateful journey he and his girlfriend, Kelly, are at a family Christmas dinner. At one point during their dinner conversation a family member asks Chuck, “When are you going to
make an honest woman out of her?” (Note that there is no concern over making Chuck an “honest man!”) The pressure to conform to society’s norms is very present, and, in fact, Chuck proposes to Kelly right before he boards the plane. Anthea Taylor (2012) stated, “becoming engaged, and ultimately married, is still largely viewed as a form of redemption for single women, a type of social victory, despite narratives of progress around the purported acceptance of women’s singleness” (p. 21).

After the crash, it is Chuck’s love for Kelly and his desire to marry her and have a family that keeps him going. He clings to his memories and to the pocket watch (an object he nearly kills himself trying to grab as the plane goes down) with her photo inside as lifelines. He also draws pictures of her on the walls of the cave in which he lives and makes sure to leave a note written on a rock professing his love for her when he attempts his island escape, in case he does not make it. When Chuck finally returns to the civilized world he is confronted with the fact that Kelly has moved on, married, and had a child. Though she proclaims her undying love for him, the pressure to have a “normal life” was too great. And Chuck comes to accept this, even telling her, “You should have more kids.” This is his way of telling her that everything is okay and he understands that she needed to move on and have that “normal” life.

The presence of heterosexual love stories and the importance placed on the goal of these couplings to be marriage and family are not inherently bad representations of women and there are many individuals who follow this path and are happy; the problem emerges when this is the only valid option we are presented with. The emphasis placed on these things being the key to happiness for the female characters (and to a lesser extent the male characters as well), precludes other avenues to happiness and marginalizes those who do not adhere to this norm. Members of the LGBTQ community, single women, and women without children are made to feel
incomplete. As scholar Diane Negra (2009) wrote, “It is taken to be self-evident that single and non-parenting women’s lives are empty, deficient, or not yet fully underway…the quest to become unsingle dominates their lives” (p. 61).

They are essentially told that they should be unhappy. According to the United States Census (2011), there were 112 million people in the United States aged 18 or over who were single in 2011, and 53% of that population was female. This is a staggering number of women (and men) who are made to feel inadequate (and is not even taking into account married but childless individuals or those in the LGBTQ community – who may even be married and have children, but are still marginalized)! The top-grossing films reflect that “being a straight single woman, particularly for a long period, is often seen as a failure to perform heterosexuality adequately or appropriately,” and so single women represent “embodied resistances to the regulation of intimate relationships and thereby act as threats to be managed” (Taylor, 20112, p. 22).

All of this pressure to conform to this type of life path also leads to dissatisfaction for women like Evelyn from the introduction of this dissertation. What happens when you follow the prescribed path and still find yourself unhappy? The message portrayed in society and in blockbuster films is that you must be deficient or, at best, misguided (Rubinfeld, 2001, p. 84-87). If such a large percentage of the population is made to feel deficient or lacking then their continued oppression at the hands of a patriarchal world continues. “Compulsory heterosexuality perpetuates and reinforces the oppression of women by men” and “patriarchy is the fundamental source of sexism” (Marinucci, 2010, p. 88-90). As A.B. Wolfe wrote, “So long as woman is mainly seen as a vehicle for sexual gratification and a cheap housekeeper combined, so long as it is thought that ‘the noblest thing any woman can do is be a good wife and mother,’
so long as women are not gladly and consciously recognized by man to be a part of the human race as well as bearers of it, that long will the ideal of the family leave much to be desired and the actual family remain a heavy sociological problem” (Wald, 2011, p. 88). This sociological problem is reinforced as the norm – not a problem at all – through the depictions of heterosexual romance, marriage, and family in blockbuster films.

In a day and time when the LGBTQ community has spearheaded a fight against the normativity of heterosexuality in American society and gay marriage is a widely debated topic at the state and national levels (at the time of this writing, 12 U.S. states have legalized gay marriage), the messages of heterosexual romance, marriage, and family presented in animated films can also potentially be seen as a sort of backlash against this movement. The power of the privileged heterosexual community, particularly straight, white, Christian males, is being threatened. As with every equal rights movement, the call to share power and privilege is never easily accepted by those in power. It goes against the American dream and messages of individualism to give up a piece of pie that you have been led to believe is rightfully yours. As Americans, we are taught to “assume that a higher material standard of living is evidence of superior talent and merit rather than the result of structural favoritism” (Heller, 2010, p. 112). It is not a matter of Democrats versus Republicans, but of the privileged versus the oppressed. Scholar Peggy McIntosh defined white privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I (a white individual) can count on cashing in each day, but about which I am ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (McGoldrick, 1998, p. 148). The same definition can be applied to male privilege and heterosexual privilege. If white privilege is like having an American Express Card that can be swiped anywhere to access these unearned assets, then male privilege is a Visa card
and heterosexual privilege is a Mastercard (and the more of these cards you have to your name, the more assets – or privilege – you have in reserve).

Popular films still present heterosexuality as the unquestioned norm – the natural way of things. Homosexuality is not present, except in off-handed references that work to classify as deviant those who display this or other sexuality (think back to the cross-dressing Wolf in the Shrek films). This is not only exclusionary and oppressive for the LGBTQ community, but for all women, as with the norm of heterosexuality comes the imperative for heterosexual romance. The end goal of these romances is presented to naturally be marriage and children, especially for women. (Men are given greater latitude to “play the field” and to want other things in their life besides a family.) Thus, this is presented as THE only avenue available for happiness and fulfillment; for women being a wife and mother is the end all and be all. This ideology effectively shuts down other avenues for happiness and participation in the public sphere is not shown as a legitimate route for women.

**Power and Leadership**

Though the most prevalent messages regarding women in animated film deal with heterosexual romance, marriage, and family, there are many other ideologies regarding women that are present. One of these deals with women and leadership – or, more specifically, the lack of female leaders. The chance of seeing women in a position of leadership in animated films is greatly diminished by the fact that all of the films in this study that fall within this category have male leads. Not one of the seven films presented has a female protagonist, and, as the protagonist is almost always the leader - or hero - in the film, women in these films have an uphill battle from the start. The fact that leaders in U.S. society are presented as being active in the public sphere (politics, business, etc.) and the women in these films are told that their
happiness comes from the domestic sphere, as covered above, also puts women at a disadvantage when it comes to being presented as leaders.

One of the most vivid examples of denying women the ability to be seen as leaders is present in *Shrek the Third*. The entire movie is predicated on Shrek’s quest to find someone to take over the land when his father-in-law dies because Shrek does not want to take on the responsibility. But the question remains, why is it his responsibility to begin with? He is related to the king only through marriage. Fiona is the king’s child. Why would leadership of the land not fall to her next? Maybe she would want to take on this responsibility and maybe she wouldn’t, but she is never given the option. The message is clear: a woman does not have the leadership abilities needed to rule. So, the action and the power are left to the men. Women are also clearly shown as naturally being in a supportive role within the films, such as in the first film when Lord Farquuad is told by the magic mirror that he is not yet technically a king, but he can marry a princess and become one. The woman’s role here is clearly to support her husband and his career. This is reminiscent of the rhetoric from the 1950s that implored women to “be good-will ambassadors for their husband in the community”; a wife’s job was to help her husband along in his career and aid in his professional advancement (Peril, 2002, p. 209).

Female characters are also largely missing from the public world of *Cars*, especially in the race world from which Lightening comes. There are no female race cars, pit crew members, owners, or agents. It is not until Lightening comes to the small town of Radiator Springs, which has been left behind by time, that he encounters any women in the public sphere. (Initially Lightening doesn’t even acknowledge Radiator Springs as being in the public sphere, as he refers to it as “Hillbilly Hell” and intimates that they are all unintelligent and incapable of leadership.) But even here, the town is led by Doc, an older, male car. Doc seems to unilaterally decide what
is best for the town and its residents; he clearly holds the power and is their leader. (*In How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, the town leader, the mayor is also male.)

The males-as-leaders narrative is also very strong in *Toy Story 3*. We see the male characters taking the lead from the very opening scene of the movie, where the toys are acting out a train robbery story, in which Woody is the primary hero and Jessie is presented as his sidekick. The toys are led by Woody and Buzz (and even the villain, the leader of the toys at the daycare center, Lotso, is male). In fact the leader of the daycare toys comments early on about Buzz’s initiative and leadership skills. They are set up as the leaders of two different factions and the stage is set for conflict. When Woody and Buzz’s gang escape the center and find a new home, and in the process displace Lotso, it is another male, Ken, that steps into the leadership role at the daycare center. Beyond simply precluding women from these positions of leadership, the film also subtly indicates that females (especially those deemed beautiful by society’s standards) are often lacking in the intelligence to be strong leaders. When Barbie states that “authority should come from the consent of the governed” the shock and awe at her having so eloquently stated the principle of democratic rule is very apparent. The other toys’ jaws open wide and their eyes bug out. This statement is quickly discarded though, as the male characters get back to developing a plan for escaping the daycare and getting the best of Lotso.

**Violence and Victimization**

One way to prevent women from becoming leaders and entering the public sphere is to portray them as helpless and passive. This is a common narrative across genres, and animated films are no different. Once again, if we hark back to the first *Shrek* movie the adventures throughout the movie follow the rescue of Princess Fiona from her tower prison. Fiona’s rescue is one that she herself does not actively participate in; rather Shrek and his faithful friend,
Donkey, must figure out how to get Fiona past the dragon and safely back to her land. The males are portrayed as heroes and the hero must, it seems, fight for and rescue the girl. Now, it should be mentioned that Fiona is presented at one point as being quite capable of taking care of herself in the first film. When she, Shrek, and Donkey are surrounded by Robinhood’s men, she is the one that fights them off (though she must be perfectly coiffed when doing so, taking time to fix her hair in the middle of the fight). But, this independence is short lived and she quickly goes back to being the damsel. This is reinforced throughout all three of the *Shrek* films, from the playing of the song “Holding Out for a Hero,” which includes the sentiment that the hero should be “fresh from the fight” to the scene in the third film where Fiona tells Prince Charming, who is holding her and a group of her princess friends captive, “Shrek will be back soon, and you’ll be sorry.” Women assume the victim role and wait for the male hero. In fact, this is so prevalent that when the women talk about possibly breaking free and are told to then “assume their positions,” the position they assume is one of waiting for the men to save them. When they are eventually convinced to make a break for it, they are quickly caught (betrayed by one of their own) and, ultimately, the saving is done by the male characters.

The damsel-in-distress narrative is also somewhat present in *Toy Story 3* in the male characters’ interactions with Jessie. Woody and Buzz’s concern over Jessie seems to be greater than their concern over the other (male) members of the group. This is first evident when it appears that the toys will be placed in storage in the attic as Andy goes off to school. Woody makes a point of asking Jessie if she will be okay up in the attic, but no other toy is shown this concern. Why should Jessie react any differently than the rest? But, the narrative is, perhaps, most clearly illustrated in the garbage truck scene in which a slow-motion rescue of Jessie plays out. (Once again that clever trick of slow-motion emphasizes the point!) Barbie is also presented
as a passive victim in the beginning of the film. When she is placed in a donation box she becomes hysterical. No other toy reacts in this way and the other toys are presented as being actively engaged in changing their situation.

The damsel-in-distress trope is present to a degree in both *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and *Finding Nemo* as well. In the *Grinch*, Cindy Lou is rescued twice by the Grinch. He saves her from being pulled into the mail machine at the beginning of the movie (setting up their relationship for the remainder of the film) and at the end of the film he rescues her from going over the side of the cliff in a sled. Significantly, it is in this last act that he solidifies his conversion from “other” to *man* (the strong protector) and this in turn is rewarded with the love of his childhood crush, Martha May. In *Finding Nemo*, the story revolves around the journey to save Nemo, but it is Dory who is repeatedly saved during the course of their adventure. Marlin rescues her from the jellyfish and Nemo shows himself to be a risk-taker (leader) by saving Dory from the fishing nets. (We also see a group of all male fish – there does not seem to be any female wildlife in the ocean other than Dory, even all of the parents and teachers at Nemo’s school are male – come to Dory’s aid when they think that Marlin is harassing her.)

In the film *Cars*, there is no damsel-in-distress, but we do see a sort of violence perpetuated against Sally in the form of sexual objectification (a concept that will be discussed in the next chapter). Upon meeting Sally for the first time, Lightening tells her, “All you have to do is stand there and let me look at you.” Later, when staring at her rear-end as she drives away, he comments on her cute pin-stripe tattoo on her backside. Rather than being upset that he is objectifying her by singling out one part of her body and leering at her, she giggles and blushes.

The ideology of women’s fulfillment being predicated on heterosexual romance, marriage and family is the most dominant ideology presented in the top-grossing animated films
presented in this chapter. However, other ideologies are presented that “other” women as well, such as the ideology that women are naturally victims of violence and must be protected (and controlled) by men, and the ideology that men are innate leaders and women are not. An explanation of these last two ideologies will be presented in greater detail in the following two chapters. Thus, as we leave the genre of animated films behind and move into chapter three, the damsel-in-distress narrative and the perpetuation of the idea that women are naturally victims of violence will be examined in greater detail within the genre of action films – a genre largely predicated on this narrative.
CHAPTER THREE
THE DAMSEL: VICTIMHOOD IN ACTION FILMS

Heroes, villains, and damsels-in-distress, these are the key components to an action film. The movies included here, within the action movie genre designation, represent stories from the pages of comic books, cartoons, former hit television shows, and more.

These movies allow audiences a chance to escape from their everyday lives and vicariously take part in grand actions and adventures, secure in the knowledge that good will conquer evil in the end. In a world where this is not a foregone conclusion, audiences are reassured by this formula. It is not a coincidence that the rise in action films (of the three genres in this dissertation this is the most popular genre in terms of overall box office and number of films listed within the study) came about post 9/11. In the wake of the terrorist attacks, Americans felt vulnerable, and, in their movie watching, looked for heroes who would make them feel safe and secure. These heroes, however, are always presented as males and the victims that these heroes rescue are almost always females. In December 2001, three months after the attacks, President Bush’s chief political advisor, Karl Rove, invited more than 40 of Hollywood’s top producers to a meeting to put forth a plea that Hollywood work to help the American public process the experience and to communicate the new war on terror. (This is similar to the approach taken during the World Wars and the use of propaganda films.) In response, Hollywood produced The Spirit of America, a rapid-fire montage salute to American cinematic heroes. The film’s director, Chuck Workman, defined these heroes as, “reluctant but defiant revenge takers” (Faludi, 2008, p. 8). The movie was bookended by clips from the John Wayne move The Searchers, which Workman chose because “John Wayne is the quintessential American hero for what I was trying to say. He’s a rescuer. When he rescues the girl, that’s what
the movie is all about. Rescue is a good word to describe what a lot of these movies are about” (Faludi, 2008, p. 10). And so the stage was set for the action movies of the new century, movies that hark back to old cinematic narratives of men rescuing women.

Feminist media scholar Carol Stabile (2009) stated that in the years after 9/11 it is not surprising that we have “seen a number of blockbuster action-adventure films. Batman, X-Men, Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, Hellboy, Iron Man and a host of other ‘men’ have flown, stomped, fallen, and swung across the screens in Hollywood blockbusters” with their “narratives of protection and secular salvation” that “richly illustrate the power of sexism in a militarized culture” (p.86). She went on to explain that,

popular comic book superheroes historically have emerged in response to similar moments of international crisis: Batman (1939), with its gothic, crime-ridden urban settings, and Superman (1932) were born of the depression and the rise of fascism; Captain America (1940) and Wonder Woman (1941) followed on the heels of these successes, as US involvement in World War II became inevitable. Spider-Man, the Hulk, Iron Man, and X-Men were all products of the early 1960s, playing to the huge market that would become known as the baby boomers and capitalizing on the twinned Cold War fears of nuclear war and Communism (p. 87).

This prioritization of active masculine heroes and the emphasis on passive female victims serves to “other” women as the weaker sex. Coolness and strength is equated with action and attributed to (heterosexual) men (Ramirez, 2009, p. 92). And women are afforded the opposite characteristics: passiveness and weakness. This not only serves to devalue women, but it normalizes violence against women, as it becomes natural for audience members to think of women as victims.
Violence and Victimization

Within this section, I will look at the different ways in which violence against women is normalized, the stereotype of the damsel-in-distress, and the priority placed on masculinity and action as means by which women are “othered.” As was the case with animated films and the ideology of the heterosexual romance-marriage-children priority for women, the role of violence and victimization can clearly be identified within all of the films included within the action genre category. I will address all of these films, at least briefly, but my emphasis here is on two of the biggest superhero franchises of the time period being studied: *Spider-Man* and *Iron Man* (note that both film series have “man” actually written into their titles, leaving little doubt of whose story is being prioritized) and the *Transformers* series, which offers us a look at a more “every day” hero in the form of a non-superpowered young adult male. Each film series serves as an example of one particular area within this narrative that I wish to highlight.

In 1984 the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) created the Duluth Power and Control Wheel as “a way to describe battering for victims, offenders, practitioners in the criminal justice system and the general public” (DAIP). The wheel includes the following spokes: using intimidation; using emotional abuse; using isolation; minimizing, denying, and blaming; using children; using male privilege; using economy abuse; and using coercion and threats. Most of these spokes – indicating ways in which men exert abusive power and control over women - are evident in the treatment of women in the action films included in this dissertation.

One way that scholars “identify ideologies is by investigating the way films employ stereotypes, which are oversimplified images that stimulate or reinforce beliefs about groups of people” (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008, p. 334). One of the most prominent stereotypes employed in films in regards to women is the damsel-in-distress stereotype. Consider this, in an article
titled “Behind Every Superhero, There’s a Woman Without Much to Do,” writers Carlson, Highfill, and Smith (2013) wrote that every lead female character in the 11 movies they examined (including six of the films in this study) was depicted as a damsel-in-distress. (They additionally noted that almost all of the women are depicted as very emotional and scream and cry a lot, they all fall in love with the hero, and they have surprisingly little actual screen time – with the least amount of screen time being given to the character of Rachel Dawes in The Dark Knight – a film included here – with 11 minutes.) These films show that “girls may expect that they will continue to be victims and needy and that their responsibilities include maintaining beauty and sexual appeal while boys may determine that their role is to protect and defend women and to possess them even through the use of violence” (Dietz, 1998, p. 426). The narratives in these films are “quintessential protection scenarios that indulge fantasies about the heroes’ unlimited ability to protect a silent and largely feminized humanity from that which threatens it” (Stabile, 2009, p. 87).

The epitome of the damsel-in-distress stereotype may be the character of Mary Jane Watson from the hugely popular Spider-Man trilogy directed by Sam Raimi from 2002 to 2007. Mary Jane always seems to be in need of rescue. Mary Jane is rescued in highly dramatic fashion by Spider-Man at least seven times during the three films. She is rescued from a crumbling building, from a gang of would-be rapists on the street at night, from plummeting to her death as she is thrown from atop a bridge, from being crushed by a car hurtling towards her, from being sucked into a machine, from having a wall collapse on her, from falling 80 stories in a dangling taxi cab, and from the clutches of numerous villains. One villain, Doc Ock, even threatens to “peel the skin off her bones.” She screams, she cries, and she is thrilled when her hero appears, but she does little to rescue herself. The fundamental principle of superhero lore is
that there is someone who must be protected and this someone is almost always a female or a child; Mary Jane falls perfectly into this role.

Beyond these flashy rescue scenes, she plays the damsel-in-distress in many other ways. She is rescued by the two young men in her life, Peter and Harry, from her abusive father. Her father exhibits control over Mary Jane through his use of emotional abuse (one spoke on the Power and Control Wheel). He often screams at her, berating her. At one point he tells his daughter, “You’re trash and you’re always going to be trash, just like her.” He also engages in intimidation by throwing things at her. Peter and Harry work to bolster her self-esteem and offer her a means of escaping life with her father after graduation. Despite escaping her father, Mary Jane cannot seem to escape abuse. She is berated by her boss at the diner and her rescuers often turn abusive as well. In the first movie she dates Harry, who is portrayed as controlling. He belittles her choice of dress on the day she is to meet his father and refuses to defend her when his father tells him, “Do what you need to with her and then broom her fast.” Mary Jane overhears this conversation and expresses her hurt that Harry did not stand up for her; in turn, Harry berates her for being upset. The next two movies in the series do not differ in this formula. Mary Jane is often used as leverage by the respective villains; she is a way to lure Spider-Man into traps. Even Peter (Spider-Man) turns emotionally abusive in the third film when he is infected by an alien substance.

Mary Jane also experiences many types of sexual violence. In addition to her almost-rape, she endures being leered at by Harry’s father Norman (who later, as his alter ego, the Green Goblin, threatens to kill her nice and slow and declares “we’ll have a hell of a time”) and lewd comments directed at her by the villain Venom in the final film, who says, “My spidey senses are tingling, if you know what I mean…” These acts of sexual aggression are not portrayed as
anything abnormal. In fact, this type of behavior is downplayed to such an extent that after
Spider-Man saves her from the group of would-be-rapists, she comments, “You have a knack for
saving my life. I think I have a superhero stalker.” (A comment that is then followed by a
passionate, rain-soaked kiss.) This callous attitude towards stalking behavior is especially
disturbing when one considers that 81% of women who are stalked by current or former
romantic partner are also assaulted by this person (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998).

![Figure 4: Mary Jane – the damsel-in-distress](image)

Mary Jane is not the only woman in peril in the films. In the first film, the Goblin attacks
Aunt May – as a way to get at Spider-Man. Aunt May is put in peril again in the second film
when she is kidnapped by Dr. Octavius (Doc Ock) during a bank heist. And in the third film we
are introduced to the character of Gwen Stacey, whose sole purpose in the film seems to be to
serve as an additional female that Spider-Man can rescue.

By continually placing the woman in the position of damsel-in-distress, the films set the
stage not only for men being seen as the great protector of women, but as the rightful controllers
of women. After all, if the women had just listened to the men in their life in the first place, then
many of these situations would have been avoided. In the first *Spider-Man* film, Peter tells Mary
Jane, “I will always be there for you. I will always take care of you.” The implication is that
Mary Jane cannot take care of herself. The second film carries on in the same vein. Mary Jane
tells Peter that, “I can’t survive without you.” Despite this declaration, Peter makes the decision for her that they cannot be together, as the only way he can protect her is if they are apart. He tells her, “I can’t let you take that risk…You and I can never be.” Within this exchange we see both Mary Jane and Peter discount Mary Jane’s ability to take care of herself. Her agency is removed and what is right and wrong for her is decided by the man in her life. Spider-Man thus perpetrates a sort of violence against Mary Jane in his control over her.

The emphasis placed on violence in action movies also serves to normalize the victimization of women. Women are not only continually the victims of violence by the movies’ villains, but the heroes often exhibit violence toward the women as well, not only by controlling the women as illustrated above, but sometimes with actual force. Take for example Spider-Man 3, when Peter gets so fed up with Mary Jane questioning him about his relationship with Gwen that he hits her in a rage. There are no real repercussions for this action. Mary Jane is upset and leaves, but in the end the hero gets the “girl” back and they live happily ever after. The lack of repercussions for this act of domestic violence serves to normalize violence against women even further.

Action films also present a version of hypermasculinity as the ideal for all men. This current hegemonic masculinity has among its most prominent features “courageousness, risk-taking and the ability to withstand pain. ‘Real men’ in other words, should not cry, should avoid ‘sissy-stuff’ and give them hell when needed.” Men are encouraged to look for danger and adventure, and “through masochism, traditional masculine attributes such as physical strength, stamina, invulnerability, and heroism can be displayed” (Lindgren & Lelievre, 2009. P. 395-396). These attributes can all be found in Spider-Man. When he is bitten by the spider that gives him his powers, he quickly becomes ripped, with well defined muscles and immense strength –
something he revels in. He is quick to deem himself invulnerable as he begins climbing
buildings with his bare hands, jumping from rooftop to rooftop, and swinging from a web high
above the streets of New York, all without knowing how extensive his powers are. His
hypermasculinity is soon rewarded with adoration from female fans, further promoting this as the
ideal version of what it means to be a man.

This emphasis on the male hero and the presentation of a hegemonic masculinity that is
violent in nature is epitomized in the two *Iron Man* films. Gitlin (2002) remarked that there is a
“remarkable casualness of the action movie’s gory images” (p. 193), yet violence prevails.

If Spider-Man’s popularity rose in reaction to 9/11 and the preceding “war on terror” (and
if it was not clear that this association should be made for the viewer within the stories
themselves, the viewer only has to notice the not-at-all-subtle shots of Spider-Man swinging past
unfurled American flags), the *Iron Man* movies take this association to another level. And, in
the process of doing so, the movies present to male audiences a hypermasculinized example of
who they should aspire to be.

It is clear from the start that Tony Stark (Iron Man) is a leader. “The superhero is first and
foremost a man, because only men are understood to be protectors in US culture and only men
have the balls to lead” (Stabile, 2009, p. 87). Tony vows in the beginning of *Iron Man* to protect
America and *her* interests. He initially does this by developing and selling weapons. In a
demonstration of the power his weapons have, he declares that the “bad guys won’t come out of
their caves.” This is an obvious reference to Al-Qaeda and the search for Osama Bin Laden.
Thus the stage is set for revenge being visited upon America’s enemies.

When captured in the Middle East and held in the very caves he referred to in his
presentation, Tony must fight for his life as he plans a daring escape by constructing an iron suit
all while dealing with the life-threatening shrapnel lodged near his heart. But, as men are presented with bodies that are “strong and impenetrable,” not even shrapnel can keep him down; in fact the device made to keep the shrapnel out of his heart is what gives him power for his suit. He understands himself to be “powerful and not physically vulnerable,” just as our culture conditions men to believe that they are (Stabile, 2009, p. 89).

What follows in the first two films of the series (as well as the third film, which as this is being edited was just released), is an adrenaline soaked thrill ride, drenched in pulsating hard rock music, that presents masculine ideologies and stereotypes that prioritize the male perspective through their focus on male characters and presents an idealized hypermasculinity that few, if any, real men can live up to. Should Tony deviate from the route of violence and war, he is quickly shamed. Tony declares that he would like to focus on sustainable energy development and step away from the manufacturing of weapons. When he does so, the world thinks he has gone crazy. His behavior is not coded as normal. His friend Rhodey tells him, “You need time to get your mind right.”

What better way for Tony to get “his mind right” than to recognize the priority of rescuing the damsel-in-distress. The main female character in the Iron Man films is Pepper Potts – Tony Stark’s assistant and eventual love interest. Pepper appears to have a bit more control of her own fate than Mary Jane, but she still relies largely on men to save the day. Whereas Tony may save the day directly, when Pepper attempts to help save Tony, she must call in others (men) to do so. Again, we see the lead female character portrayed largely as a damsel-in-distress, as Tony must rescue Pepper when Obadiah threatens her and is about to shoot her. In the second film, Pepper has to be pulled out of the way by Tony’s driver, Happy, when Tony and his friend Rhodey have a disagreement and violence erupts. Later, Tony rescues Pepper from an
exploding drone. As chaos erupts around her, Pepper stands frozen, unable to move, looking dazed and confused. (These scenarios would lead one to conclude that Pepper’s legs do not work in times of crisis!!)

As with Spider-Man, we also see a normalization of domestic violence in the fact that when Tony and Pepper fight this leads to kissing. In equating fighting with passion the film helps to promote the message that violence and sexual passion are linked.

Hegemonic masculinity has been defined as “the type of masculinity that, at the present time and place, is regarded as the norm. It is defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” (Lindgren & Lelievre, 2009, p. 395). The hegemonic masculinity being presented in action films is one of extreme violence and aggression. Part of this definition of masculinity is the ability to control women; the power to rescue women is only one small part of this. Tony exhibits control over Pepper (who begins the series as his assistant) in many ways, but most obviously controlling her time to such an extent that she does not have much of a life outside of work. In fact, when she has plans for her birthday and informs him she will be leaving on time because of this, he tells her, “I don’t like it when you have plans.” Pepper is treated as if she lacks autonomy. Another means of controlling women is by sexually objectifying them. Throughout the first Iron Man and into the second, Tony is presented as a playboy. He has a “talent” for bedding women. This is exhibited early on when he meets a journalist, Christine, who he beds within hours of meeting and then later refers to as a “piece” when explaining why he is late to catch a plane. The objectification of women does not stop there. Tony treats all women as if they are interchangeable tools for his own pleasure. Tony also routinely equates women with objects, such as cars, and is even told he is inviting a sexual harassment lawsuit
when he meets an employee named Natalie in the second film and declares, “I want one,” as if she is something that can be ordered through a catalog. Men are taught early on that this type of aggressive sexual behavior is not only acceptable, but expected. Lynn Peril (2002) described the advice given in the 1963 book *Sex and the Single Man*: “Apparently real men never ask a woman to take her clothes off: Do it for her! And do it firmly, vigorously, in spite of some resistance on her part – the old ‘no’ means ‘yes’ strategy in action” (p. 154).

Scholars Julie Stankiewicz and Francine Rosselli (2008) stated “the simultaneous presentation of women as sex objects and victims in various forms of media increases acceptance of violence against women” (p. 589). The sexual objectification of women is seen in films across the action genre, but there may be no film series more blatant in the presentation of women as sexual objects than the *Transformer* movies. Martha Nussbaum laid out seven notions that are involved in the idea of treating a human being as an object. These seven notions are as follows:

1. **Instrumentality**: The objectifier treats the object as a tool for his or her purposes.
2. **Denial of Autonomy**: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
3. **Inertness**: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also activity.
4. **Fungibility**: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable.
5. **Violability**: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary integrity, as something that is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
6. **Ownership**: The objectifier treats the object as something that owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
7. Denial of subjectivity: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experienced feelings (if any) need not be taken into account (Kelland, 2011, p. 175-176).

All seven of these notions can be found in the Transformers films (as well as many of the other films included within the action genre).

Drenched in violence, pounding heavy metal music, and lingering shots of beautiful women, the Transformers movies, like most action films, are indicative of how “classic narrative cinema appeals to male identification” (Fleetwood, 2011, p. 192). Part of this male identification is the standard plotline revolving around a male hero and his relationship with the damsel-in-distress. In the third Transformers we are introduced to the new main female character, Carly, with a shot of her butt clad in skimpy panties (no head or body, simply her legs and butt) as she climbs a staircase to wake her boyfriend with the line, “My hero needs to wake up!” Thus, from our very first introduction to the character of Carly she is set up as the one in need of rescue (the classic damsel-in-distress concept) and a sexual object. This is indicative of how women and men are presented throughout the Transformer franchise.

The Spring 2008 Media Report to Women reported that females are five times more likely than men to be shown in sexually revealing clothing in the top 400 movies from 1990-2006. This trend enforces the notion of women as sex objects. Women become “passing fantasies for men” (Haskell, 1974, p. 331). Having a woman serve as the object of sexual fantasy is prominent in the Transformer movies. In the first movie we are introduced to Mikaela. Sam lusts after her, despite knowing very little about her; his obsession with her is purely physical. Her sexuality is played up to great effect. When we first see Mikaela she is wearing a micro mini-skirt and a tight, midriff bearing tank top. The camera focuses on her midriff as she walks beside Sam’s ear
while he convinces her to let him give her a ride home. This focus on one body part is indicative of how someone who is objectified has “her sexual parts or sexual functions separated from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (Kelland, 2011, p. 177). When the car later breaks down and Mikaela leans into look at the engine, Sam stares directly at her breasts and exposed midriff while talking to her. Her personality and intelligence is not what is on display here; instead, her breasts and flat stomach come to “represent” her.

Figure 5: Introduction to Mikaela (IMDB.com)

Mikaela serves as eye candy for the male audience. There is a sexual imbalance of power in that Mikaela (and Carly in the last film) are often seen as exposed – much of their body prominently on display, but the male protagonist, Sam is never viewed in this way. Mikaela is further made into an object through comments such as the following spoken by her boyfriend at the beginning of the film: “Why doesn’t my little bunny hop in the back?” Mikaela is not presented as fully human through this objectification. This continues in Revenge of the Fallen, where again Mikaela’s physical beauty is emphasized over any kind of acknowledgment that she might have something else to contribute (such as her mechanical ability, something she feels she has to hide, as it is not considered feminine). One of the Decepticons that defects to the Autobots side says to her, “You’re hot, but you aren’t too bright.” Later, he affirms how hot she is by humping her
leg, an action to which she responds by simply smiling and commenting that he at least notices her. This is the attitude that prevails throughout both films.

Mikaela is not present in the third film. Beginning with the introduction to the new main female character, Carly, with a shot of her butt clad in skimpy panties as she climbs a staircase to wake Sam, Carly is seen as a sex object throughout the film. Her treatment as an inanimate object that is simply there for male pleasure may best be represented in a scene where two male characters are discussing cars. They talk about how the classic cars they are looking at are built like women with all their curves.

![Figure 6: The woman and car comparison (IMDB.com)](image)

Meanwhile, the camera focuses the audience’s attention not on the cars, but on a shot of Carly in her tight dress that hugs every curve of her body. It is worth noting that despite having a professional job at a museum, Carly is always seen in skin tight clothing. Though, interestingly, her clothing is almost always white in color – seeming to signify innocence and purity, despite the sexual objectification of her body. The only time she wears an outfit of another color is when she dons a tight black dress and then betrays her boyfriend, Sam, by walking away from him in favor of her boss. The dark color comes to represent her as the evil betrayer and she is quickly brought “back in line.” Her betrayal leads to her being captured by Dylan, the Decepticons human ally, and becoming the damsel in distress that Sam needs to rescue.
Carly is sexualized in the dialogue of *Dark of the Moon* as well. Sam’s mother stresses the importance of having “a hottie” as a girlfriend and Carly receives compliments only in the form of observations about her body – never her intellect, compassion, skills, etc. By having one of the few other women in the film respond to Carly in a way that promotes the sexual objectification of women, the movie reinforces this objectification as everyday and normal.

Naomi Wolf (1991) stated that such imagery played out anxieties from the sex war, reproducing the power inequality that recent social changes have questioned: male dominance and female submission (p. 137). It produces anti-woman attitudes and inculcates the idea that submission is a desirable trait in women (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008, p. 581).

The damsel-in-distress narrative is also found in all three of the *Transformers* movies. This narrative relies heavily on prioritizing masculine violence. “We are literally flooded daily with tales of male violence… The violence is affirmed and rewarded. The more violent the male hero is the more love and affirmation he receives from women” (hooks, 2000, p. 123). Violence permeates the *Transformers* movies, and women characters are often caught in the middle of the violent action, seemingly incapable of defending themselves.

When Mikaela first encounters the Decepticons in the first movie, she is paralyzed by fear, unable to move. Sam, on the other hand, takes the presence of robot beings and the violence that follows them in stride. While Mikaela stands immobile, Sam rescues her from being crushed. These moments of rescue are given prominence through the use of slow-motion shots whenever a damsel-in-distress is in need of assistance in all three films. *Transformers* helps bait “the trap of feminized powerlessness and masculinized protection” (Stabile, 2009, p. 91).

In *Dark of the Moon*, Carly is violently kidnapped by the human villain. It is up to Sam to save her from the clutches of her evil boss. The “active roles of both protector and threat are
masculinized” (Stabile, 2009, p. 86) and the female is left passive – unable to protect herself. Carly repeatedly screams for Sam’s help, instead of attempting to escape on her own. The stereotype of women as passive victims in need of rescue promotes the necessity of a patriarchal culture. Padavic and Reskin (2002) wrote, “Stereotypes are ‘over learned,’ which means that they are habitual and automatic. As a result, they influence our perceptions and behaviors without our awareness” (p. 43). We come to accept masculine discourses and patriarchy as natural and women are “encouraged to believe that violence is a sign of masculinity and a gesture of male care…passive acceptance of violence is essential if they are to receive the rewards of love and care” (hooks, 2000, p. 125).

Though the three movie series above serve as prime examples of the different messages regarding violence, victimization, and women in action films, they are only three examples of this prominent narrative. All of the action movies that were among the top-grossing films for the year they were released between 2000 and 2011 exhibit aspects of this narrative to some extent.

In the vein of the Spider-Man and Iron Man films, superhero mayhem continues in The Dark Knight. The Joker banks on Batman’s need to protect the damsel-in-distress, his childhood love Rachel (thereby showing his love and care), to enact his evil plan. The Joker kidnaps both Rachel and the district attorney, Harvey Dent. The location of both individuals is revealed, but Batman is presented with a choice, as he cannot get to both of them in time. A bomb is set to go off in both locations. Batman chooses the location he believes Rachel to be in, but the Joker has given him the wrong information and he finds Harvey there instead. (He rescues Harvey, but Harvey is badly burned in the process and this serves as a catalyst for Harvey turning into a villain as well.) Rachel dies. (And that is largely the end of any real female presence in the film.) Ironically, if Batman hadn’t been so focused on saving Rachel on an earlier occasion, then things
might have played out differently. Batman saved Rachel at a dinner party earlier, as the Joker tossed her out a window, and, in doing so, allowed the Joker to get away. Batman is later told that the Joker “killed your woman,” insinuating that Rachel was an object that he possessed, rather than a person with her own personality and agency. Not only is Rachel presented as the damsel-in-distress in *The Dark Knight*, but Batman is presented as the “watchful protector.” This protector is hypermasculine in his prioritization of violence (physically pounding on the Joker to get information) and the emphasis placed on physical strength as seen in his suit, cut to accentuate every well-developed muscle. The Joker on the other hand is feminized through the wearing of makeup and the color purple. He is seen as non-threatening initially because he presents himself in this way. Masculinity is presented as good and right and femininity as the opposite.

In addition to Rachel, we are also briefly introduced to the police commissioner’s wife in the film. Her husband fakes his own death and does not tell her in order to protect her. Grieving the loss of her husband is apparently more acceptable than having her take on the risk of knowing a powerful secret. Despite his attempts to protect her, she and their children are later kidnapped by Harvey Dent and must be rescued by Batman. (Notice that the woman is on equal footing with the small children in this scenario.)

The damsel-in-distress stereotype and violence and victimization narrative are not limited to superhero action movies. Other types of action movies employ these devices as well. In much the same vein as the scenario in *The Dark Knight* in which the damsel-in-distress is knowingly employed to set a trap, in *Mission Impossible 2* (the only action film in this dissertation released prior to 9/11) Ethan Hunt relies on the fact that the villain, Sean Ambrose, will attempt to swoop in and rescue his former girlfriend and great love, Nyah Nordhoff-Hall,
when she is “caught” by the authorities. (The character of Nyah is the only lead woman of color in any of the top grossing films covered in this dissertation.) In reality, Nyah is now working with Ethan and is being sent in to spy on Sean and gather intelligence on him and his operation. The plan backfires, however, and Nyah truly becomes the damsel-in-distress when Sean finds her out and kidnaps her. While captive and awaiting Ethan’s rescue, Nyah ends up injecting herself with a deadly virus as a way of preventing Sean from having access to the virus. This action shows Nyah taking control of her own fate and making a valiant sacrifice, but the impact of this decision is somewhat negated by the fact that she remains the damsel-in-distress, as Ethan races to obtain the cure from Sean. Ethan not only saves Nyah from the virus, but saves her from her life of crime in the end, as he wipes clean her criminal record, giving her a new start to her life (one that in the classic heterosexual romance narrative includes him as they passionately kiss and then walk off together).

We also see, once again, the equation of violence with sexual passion in Mission Impossible 2. Ethan and Nyah meet after Nyah (a professional thief) breaks into a safe. Ethan pursues her and in the ensuing car chase Nyah ends up dangling from her car off of a cliff. Ethan saves her. They are turned on by the violence (Ethan by rescuing her and Nyah by being rescued) and within hours of meeting they are in bed together. Sexual objectification is also on display, as evident in a shot during Ethan and Nyah’s first meeting that focuses on Nyah’s breasts and Ethan’s face; or in Sean forcing her to undress in front of him, leering at her, and then, in no uncertain terms, indicating that it is time for her to have sex with him; or the fact that even when the rest of her dress is practical, Nyah is always baring her midriff. The objectification takes nonsexual forms as well, such as when women are compared to monkeys: “You know women. Like monkeys. Won’t let go of one branch till they get a grip on the next.”
A prioritization of hypermasculinity is demonstrated in *Mission: Impossible 2* in the way in which violence and mayhem is par for the course for Ethan. Though he is not a superhero, he is shown performing physical feats that are nearly impossible – from rock climbing without ropes, to fights in which he rockets off walls and flips over his opponent – his acts of physical strength are presented as normal for men.

The *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies offer further proof that the emphasis on violence and the victimization of women runs rampant across all types of action films, even those set in a long ago era. We are introduced to Elizabeth Swann’s role as the damsel-in-distress in the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* film early on. She is strapped into a tight corset that does not allow her to breathe. As a result, she faints and falls into the ocean off of a wall high above and nearly dies. The pirate Jack Sparrow saves her. Throughout the rest of the movie she is repeatedly rescued by either Jack or Will (though, in fairness, she does rescue Will once as well, but, ultimately, it is up to Jack and Will to save the day). And it is firmly established that the way to a woman’s heart is through rescuing her, as Jack comments to Will that you “win a fair ladies heart” through saving the day. This narrative continues in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* as Elizabeth sits in jail, where she is violated with leers and grabbing hands by the male prisoners. Her dad, the governor, must rescue her from this situation and her significant other, Will, is tasked with finding Jack and a compass he possesses in order to assure her continued safety.

In addition to the jail scene above, Elizabeth endures many other acts of violence and objectification. In the first film, Jack holds her captive in order to escape from the military, by threatening to strangle her with a heavy chain around her neck. Later she is thrown to a bunch of pirates for their pleasure, and they grope her and insinuate the sexual acts they will perform on
her, before the captain of the ship determines that she may be useful to them in other ways and stops the men. This same captain later forces Elizabeth to strip down to her undergarments before forcing her to walk the plank. In their desire to protect Elizabeth, Jack and Will discuss going so far as to lock her up in the second film (a sort of violence in itself)!

In *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, the emphasis is not put as squarely on the rescuing of the damsel, but the narrative that women need protection and the normalization of violence is still very evident. (And as Imelda Whelehan alluded to, the sexist nature of the story is not taken seriously due to its retro setting of the 1950s.) From dramatic car chases with men leaping from car to car fighting one another to battling members of an ancient civilization – violence permeates the film. The actions of the male characters in the film reflect that men are “encouraged to believe violence is a sign of masculinity and a gesture of male care” (hooks, 2000, p. 125). Indy is presented as very masculine, proving that even older men must live up to the hypermasculine image they are presented with in the media. (Actor Harrison Ford was 65 years old when he filmed the movie.) The character of Marian often needs protection and relies on the men around her to call the shots, and the men are, without a doubt, the focus of the film, as they make up most of the cast of characters. As Genz and Brabon (2010) stated, “The principle thrust of the feminist argument is that the subject has been conceived as inherently masculine, and thus, it has been a significant factor in maintaining the inferior status of women” (p. 108). The subject is most definitely masculine.

The final film classified within the action genre is slightly different from the rest of the films presented here in that it is directed at more of a family audience. However, despite its family friendly exterior, *Night at the Museum* does not escape the prevalent display of violence and damsel-in-distress syndrome that permeates action films. An emphasis on masculine
violence is illustrated in the characters of Jedediah and Octavius. They are constantly fighting over territory. At one point, Larry tries to calm them down and restore peace. Jedediah comments, “We’re men; we fight. That’s what we do.” Octavius adds, “It’s kind of how we pass the time.” Later, when they are once again fighting, Jedediah remarks that, “It’s time to let Smith and Wesson do the talking,” drawing the conclusion that their dispute can only be resolved through the use of a gun in a violent act. These bits of dialogue help illustrate that “patriarchal gender norms render the capacity for violence as properly masculine rather than feminine, creating for women what Connell has called a ‘cultural disarmament,’ or a social context in which men’s capacity for violence is normalized, while women are typically marked as vulnerable to violence” (Radner, p. 269).

As all of the other display mannequins and such that come to life at the museum run about, there is one character that remains trapped behind glass. The character is Sacagawea – the lone female present in the museum at night. Behind the glass she literally has no voice, as nobody can hear her when she speaks. She remains trapped in the display case until she is finally rescued by Larry. Although she is barely in the film, she needs to be rescued again a short time later when she is about to be run over by a bunch of horses and is pushed out of the way by Teddy. The one other female character that has a discernible presence in the film is a museum docent that Larry meets when he starts working at the museum. This character is admirable in that she is highly educated and is working towards writing her dissertation and completing her Ph.D. – an academic achievement far beyond that of the male characters in the film. However, she is not only minimally present, but loses her drive along the way. She decides to quit her dissertation work and must be rescued from making this decision by Larry, who convinces her to keep working toward her goal.
In all of these films “hegemonic masculinities (those dominant ideals of what men should be and how they should act) legitimate patriarchal structures and subordinate femininities and other ‘marginalized masculinities’ along the multiple lines of ethnicity, race, class, property, age, sexuality, the nations, and so on” (Tengan, 2008, p. 15). The films work to establish man as the subject and woman as the other. Through this structure, women are “at once excluded from discourse and imprisoned within it” (De Laueretis, 1984, p. 106). Male views and values are given prominence and naturalized in blockbuster films. “Classic narrative cinema appeals to male identification” (Fleetwood, 2011, p. 192), and this is done in two ways. 1) Male storylines, characters, actions, and traits are privileged. American Studies scholar Catherine Ramirez (2009) wrote, “Coolness has been coded as masculine and heterosexual” (p. 92). Popular movies reinforce this notion of masculinity being cool and those coded as feminine lacking in coolness. 2) Women characters are stereotyped by giving them characteristics such as “passivity, obedience, docility, accommodation, and submissiveness” (Ramirez, 2009, p. 92) – all the marks of the classic damsel-in-distress.

This dual emphasis on the male traits of aggression and violence and the female traits of passivity and submissiveness as normal leads to the view that the victimization of women is normal and natural. Action films serve to help culturally define men as “strong, independent, unemotional, and aggressive. Women are defined in direct contrast to men as weak, dependent, emotional, and passive. Thus, men in patriarchal societies are granted inherent superiority over women and the power to both protect and discipline” (Lutze & Symons, 2003, p. 320) and, further, acts of violence (aggression) become a means by which to reinforce women’s subordination. Feminist writer Lucinda Marshall (2006) explained the theory of Power Over (an “other”) as saying that “it is allowable for a person, ethnic group, government, etc. to get what
they want by power over an other…The other is then asserted to be ‘less than.’ Once that
definition is made, then the other must be protected or destroyed” (p. 307). This is exactly what
happens when women are depicted as damsels-in-distress in the movies. Furthermore, the
“simultaneous presentation of women as sex objects and victims…increases acceptance of
violence against women” (Stankiewicz, 2008, p. 580). Imagery of this sort continues to play out
anxieties over women’s place in society and reproduces the power inequality between men and
women, portraying male dominance and female submission (Wolf, 1991, p. 137).

It is also significant that women are seldom presented as the protagonist in action films,
and, thus, rarely seen as heroes. Stuller (2010) stated that any text that has a woman as the
central character in the story “understands at some level that women are primary beings, and that
they are not ultimately defined according to patriarchal assumptions in relation to fathers,
husbands, or male gods. Whether explicitly feminist or not, therefore, works with female heroes
challenge patriarchal assumptions” (Stuller, p. 133). However, in looking at the top grossing
films examined in this dissertation, we find that only two of the films have a woman or girl as the
central character and these two films both fall within the science fiction/fantasy genre. Strong
feminist characters are absent in our most popular films. This lack of heroic female role models
in popular culture can be “distressing for a little girl, as well as for a grown woman. We’re
shown too many images of us as beauty queens, femme fatales, vixens, girlfriends, mothers, and
damsels in need of rescuing. We can be all these things, but we can also be more” (Stuller, 2010,
p. 2-3).

In a society where one in four women will experience a rape during their lifetime; 30% of
females are estimated to be victims of child abuse; 8% of women are stalked at some point in
their lives; women make up 75% of the estimated 20.9 million people trafficked each year for
sexual exploitation and manual labor; and domestic violence is the most perpetuated physical crime against women (Lutze, 2012, Lecture), evidence of widespread violence against women is clear. By perpetuating the image of violence against women, reinforcing notions of the white knight – or superhero – male savior, and excluding women characters from roles in which they are empowered to protect themselves (and others), action films lead women, such as Darla in the introduction to this dissertation, to not only accept violence perpetuated against them as normal, but disempowers them from rescuing themselves from harmful situations. Men come to use violence as a way to establish and maintain the sex-role hierarchy, a hierarchy that was threatened by the women’s liberation movement in the late 20th century (hook, 2000). The violence and victimization of women is normalized and the cycle continues, leaving men in control.

**Heterosexual Romance, Marriage, and Family**

As has already been seen in many of the examples above, oftentimes the hero-rescues-damsel storyline of action films originates from a strong heterosexual love and romance between the hero and the main female character. The damsel always falls in love with the hero. This serves to reinforce the ideologies surrounding women, heterosexual romance, marriage and family as previously discussed in Chapter Three.

From the opening line of *Spider-Man*, the audience is made aware of the priority of heterosexual romance in the story. A voiceover by Peter begins the film with, “This like any story worth telling is about a girl…” This love story plays out throughout the *Spider-Man* trilogy. Love makes Mary Jane feel as if she is “more than I ever thought I could be.” Having a meaningful heterosexual romance completes her. As the second movie opens, we find Peter still pining over Mary Jane. In fact, he is so in thrall that when he has the opportunity to sit down and
chat with a great scientist who shows interest in Peter’s science abilities that, instead of
discussing science, their discussion turns to how to woo a woman. The fact is, according to both
Mary Jane and Peter by the end of the movie, that being without one another is like being only a
half a person. By the third movie in the series the institution of marriage becomes a focus of
Peter and Mary Jane’s romance. Peter is preparing to ask Mary Jane for her hand in marriage.
Mary Jane’s first appearance in the movie has her singing a song about how great love is. After
this performance, her very first line is her asking for Peter’s approval, followed by the very
needy plea of “tell me you love me.” She must be validated by Peter in order to feel worth.
There are bumps in their romance along the way, but ultimately love wins out and the movie
closes with them in a passionate embrace.

Spiderman and Mary Jane are not the only superhero and love interest combination to be
influenced by the belief that heterosexual relationships are primary and should lead to marriage
and a family. In Iron Man, Tony Stark is told that, “You are a man who has everything and
nothing.” In this instance the “everything” is power, money, and possessions. What he lacks is a
stable love life and family. Without these things even he, a male character, is seen as
incomplete. And in The Dark Knight, Rachel ultimately chooses Harvey Dent over Bruce
Wayne (Batman) – accepting Harvey’s marriage proposal - because she longs for a “normal
life,” one in which she can safely have and raise a family. The pull of what has been deemed
“normal” is too strong to resist.

Ideologies surrounding the primary importance of heterosexual relationships, marriage,
and family are not limited to superhero movies within the larger action genre. At the heart of
every action movie is a heterosexual romance between a hero and their damsel. The relationship
between Ethan and Nyah drives much of Mission Impossible 2, and they end up together at the
end of the movie. In the *Transformers* films the main character, Sam, is motivated not as much by his concern for saving the world as he is for his need to save his girlfriend (whichever one it may be at the time), so that they might have their happily ever after. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies revolve around Will and Elizabeth’s love for one another. In fact, *Dead Man’s Chest* opens with their attempted wedding and for the remainder of the movie they are on a quest to get back to that moment and exchange their vows. Elizabeth comments at one point, “I just thought I’d be married by now. I’m so ready to be married!” This failure to be married bothers her immensely. Even Indiana Jones, a long-time bachelor, marries his “great love” at the end of the *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*! Finally, their love is fully legitimized.

Even when marriage is not involved directly in the plot, heterosexual relationships that carry the implicit belief that the ultimate goal of the relationship remains marriage and children, are emphasized as the norm and the reward for those who follow the rules. Not wanting these things is coded as abnormal. Sociologist M. Jaqui Alexander explained that, “Not just (any) body can be a citizen…for some bodies have been marked by the state as non-procreative, in pursuit only of pleasure, a sex that is non-productive of babies and of no economic gain. Having refused the heterosexual imperative of citizenship, these bodies, according to the state, pose a profound threat to the survival of the nation” (Ramirez, 2009, 132-133). Blockbuster films reinforce these notions of who is and is not considered a true citizen by normalizing heterosexual romances that are building towards marriage and family.

**Power and Leadership**

Not surprisingly in a genre that revolves around a male hero that rescues a damsel-in-distress, women in action films are not shown as holding positions of leadership or power. The power firmly resides in the hands of the male heroes. In all of the movies presented here, a male
is the protagonist and the movies center around the protagonist as a leader. As scholar Anthony Neal (2002) stated, we live in a “society that ‘presumes’ that men provide leadership in both the public and private sphere” (p. 60). Throughout the films men are seen as the leaders and women are seen as background pieces, damsels-in-distress, and rewards for heroic actions on the part of male characters. Freeman, et al (2001) stated that, “Long-standing beliefs about gender roles – what is deemed appropriate behavior for both males and females – militate against women wielding the type of power associated with male leadership. A female desire for power runs contrary to the established cultural truth that normal women are not interested in power” (p. 9). This cultural “truth” is given weight in popular films.

In the words of the evil Venom is Spider-Man 3, “power feels good!” If this is so, then the female characters in the series are not experiencing the positive feelings associated with this power. Beyond the damsel-in-distress situations that they are continuously placed in (which make them powerless and passive), they are also shown to have classically female, non-power-associated occupations. Mary Jane is an actress. Gwen is a model. Aunt May stayed home to care for Peter. In the newsdissertation office at which Peter works we do not encounter female reporters; the only female we meet is the editor’s secretary. (Ironically, there is a special DVD feature at the end of Spider-Man 2, titled Interwoven: The Women of Spiderman that is meant to highlight the female characters in the first two films. The featurette is very short and includes the secretary, someone who until that point has not even been named!) In Spider-Man 3 we briefly meet Dr. Octavius’ wife, who is an English professor; however, she is not introduced in a professional environment like her husband, but rather at home, preparing a meal for her husband and Peter. She quickly leaves once the meal is over so that the men can discuss science; she is, after all, only a professor of English, not a scientist! She is kept on the sidelines.
The sidelining of female characters is prevalent throughout the action genre. In the *Iron Man* movies, Pepper Potts is not seen as Tony’s equal. In the first film, Tony must talk her through helping him disarm a weapon of mass destruction. She is helpful to him…but only to an extent. In the second film, Pepper is promoted to CEO of Tony’s company—a giant step! When offered the position, however, she does not acknowledge her own worth, such as a male character might, but, instead, smiles giddily and is struck dumb. Later she declares that she “can’t handle the stress” and quits. The audience should not be disappointed though, because Tony won’t ALLOW her to quit! In the end he still holds all of the power; she does not even have the power to accept or reject the job. The second *Iron Man* also introduces us to Natalie Romanoff (Black Widow) who is hired as Tony’s new assistant, despite being completely over-qualified for the job—something nobody seems to acknowledge, let alone question. (Natalie is revealed later on to in fact be a highly trained spy, and at the end of the film Natalie is allowed to kick butt as her alter ego, Black Widow, though this must be done in a skin-tight suit.)

In *The Dark Knight* the lack of women characters is rather astounding. Yvonne Tasker (1998) wrote that “big-budget action movies continue to focus primarily on male protagonists and to position women in supportive, often romantic roles” (p. 67), but this film seems to take the absence of a female presence even further. Consider this, the mob families have no women, the bank robbing crew has no women, and there is only one female detective on the police force in Gotham City (and, ultimately, she is revealed to be a traitor!). Add to this that the only female character with any development and substantial screen time is Rachel, and Rachel dies with 45 minutes left to go in the film! What may be most disconcerting of all, however, is something that is not part of the storyline at all. The character of Rachel was played in the first movie, *Batman Begins*, by actress Katie Holms. In *The Dark Knight* the exact same character is played by
actress Maggie Gyllenhaal. Would the main male character have been so easily replaced in a trilogy designed to be continuous in narrative? The message here seems to be that women are interchangeable.

Again, this unequal distribution of power and leadership in action movies is not exclusive to films with male superheroes (a sub genre with storylines that are largely predetermined by the comic books on which they are based). Ethan’s selected team members in Mission: Impossible 2 are all male (he is told he must use Nyah by his superior). Nyah is shown as having her own set of skills and a mind of her own – a rarity for female characters in action films – but she is not brought into the team for her skills, but rather because of a prior relationship she had with Sean Ambrose. While others are valued for the skills they bring to the table, Nyah is not. And in the Pirates of the Caribbean movies we clearly see that crew members are pretty much only one gender: male. (There is one token female in the first movie, but she disappears by the second film.) In fact, it is considered bad luck to even bring a woman aboard a ship, and, in the second film, Elizabeth must disguise herself as a man in order to board. Conversely, the male pirates disguise themselves as women in the first film because women are harmless – not a threat – and this allows them to enter places where they might otherwise be regarded with suspicion. And, though Elizabeth proves time and again to be resourceful, intelligent, and good with a sword, she still receives the designation of “female creature” from Jack, which serves to not only devalue her as a potential leader, but, in fact, dehumanize her. Jack, on the other hand, is exalted for the same characteristics and designated the leader by his status as captain. His crew is so devoted to him that they declare that they will sail to the end of the world for him (setting up the third movie, not included here).
Women are also not shown as capable of leadership in the *Transformers* movies. In addition to Mikaela, the first film gives us only two other female characters; these women would be considered secondary characters. One of these is Sam’s mom, who has little to do, and the other is a female scientist, Rachael. Rachael discovers that the Decepticons are transmitting messages to one another through various machines. This is a major discovery, but instead of acknowledging its importance, the male characters respond to her by telling her to put a filter on the “brain-mouth thing.” She is essentially banished from the conversation, relegated to the corner, and told to be quiet while the men solve the problem. Significantly, Rachael disappears during the course of the film. Her character is not given any resolution; she simply fades into the background. (This is also true of the only person of color in the film, her friend Glen.) It is also significant to note that she is never called by name in the film. In order to discover her character’s name, someone watching the film would have to wait for the credits or do outside research.

Another way that men are promoted as leaders and women are shown to be incapable of leadership within the *Transformer* films can be seen in *Dark of the Moon*. In this movie we see the depiction of women who show any initiative of their own as “ball-breakers.” Director Mearing, head of National Intelligence, is a prime example of this. She is depicted as an ice queen - undesirable and unlikable. The movie reflects the fact that society, in general, has an “inability to imagine femininity as anything but a condition of vulnerability - in popular culture and educational, political, and social life” (Stabile, 2009, p. 89). This inability requires that those women who do not fit the image of vulnerability be categorized as deviant. Additionally, though Mearing is in a position of power, you would not know it based on how the other characters treat her. She is left out of the loop as things develop, for as long as possible. By
painting her as an unlikable character, the message is that if a woman does show initiative then she faces being disliked and lonely – one cannot be both a true woman and a leader. As the movie clearly shows, “Power is usually depicted as masculine and legitimated through a masculine discourse” (Castellanos, 2011, p. 282). (This same message is present in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* with the character of Irina Spalko. She is the villain in the movie and the equation of an intelligent woman with evil is clear.)

The exclusion – to a great extent - of women from the *Transformers* films is particularly ironic given that in these films the Autobots declare that they are fighting for all sentient beings, and, yet, the inequalities among these beings due to gender, race, sexual orientation, ability, etc. are never acknowledged or addressed in any way. It seems as if the Autobots and their allies are primarily fighting for white, heterosexual, middle class, able-bodied males.

The more comedic action movies do not escape the women-as-sidekicks mantra. Irina in the *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* holds a position of leadership, but she is quickly discounted as crazy. There is an equation of women with power with evilness. Marian, the other main female character, is shown driving the car while the men fight. She is removed from the primary action and placed into a support position (the sidekick). Then, when she makes an “executive decision” and drives the car off a cliff and into a river as way of escaping, her judgment is quickly called into question, and she is told, “Don’t ever do that again.” What should she never do again – think for herself? Come up with a clever plan that saves all of them?

Finally, *Night at the Museum* may represent the lack of power and leadership roles given to women in film most acutely through its lack of female characters. There are only three female speaking roles in the entire film (speaking roles of *any* kind, not just main or secondary characters).
Action films clearly support existing ideologies that “other” women, continuing to make them the weaker sex and the second sex in all aspects of life. The final genre to be discussed in this work – science fiction and fantasy – is presented in the next chapter and continues this pattern by emphasizing what was just discussed above: a lack of positions of leadership and power given to women.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE SIDEKICK: LEADERSHIP AS A MALE PEROGATIVE IN SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY FILMS

Science fiction films transport audiences to different worlds. Indeed, the films included here in the science fiction/fantasy genre take place in a galaxy far, far away; in a land inhabited by not only humans, but hobbits, elves, and dwarves; in the fantastical lands of Narnia and Underland; on the mythical planet of Pandora; and in variations of our world, where magic exists and vampires and werewolves are real. These films allow us to escape the world we live in and imagine whole new worlds. They also allow us to work out issues of multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusion, as the aliens and mythical creatures of science fiction and fantasy films have often been compared to different races and ethnicities. Though relationships between different cultures and races in these films are not perfect, they are, in many ways and in many of the films, presented as much more inclusive and with greater equality than similar relationships in the real world. (Note, as I will detail later, this is not the case in all science fiction fantasy films, but even in those that do not showcase greater equality among races/species the emphasis is largely placed on trying to build this type of environment.) However, women are still largely excluded in these films, especially from positions of power and leadership. At first blush, many of these films offer the audience a look at powerful, intelligent females, but upon closer inspection we see that the women are not all that empowered and men are conferred with inherent superiority. The message of equality has not yet truly spread to gender equality in those lands far, far away.

Power and Leadership

The women’s liberation movement allowed more women than ever before to voluntarily enter the public sphere and the world of paid labor, but this road has not been a smooth one.
Women still only occupy a small number of leadership positions in the workforce. Scholars Nancy McGlen and Karen O’Connor (1995) maintained that there are two primary stumbling blocks for women in the public sphere as they work to attain leadership positions: 1) general attitudes about the employment of women and 2) “attitudes about women’s qualifications to learn or perform certain kinds of work” (p. 153-154). Films highlight these concerns by continuing to promote the leadership of men as natural and showing women as lacking in the skills and abilities needed to lead, thus, perpetuating these stumbling blocks.

As with the perpetuation of the heterosexual romance-marriage-family ideal for women and the emphasis on women as victims, the portrayal of women in films as not being leaders can be seen as a sort of backlash to the advancements made by women into the public sphere as part of the women’s liberation movement. They show women as being incapable of leadership, thus promoting the ideal of male leadership and legitimizing the supposed inherent rightness of men holding positions of power and leadership over women.

Susan Bourque defined four factors that limit women’s political leadership that can be seen as obstacles in all areas of leadership for women. Bourque highlighted the following: 1) the sexual division of domestic labor, 2) the structure of work and the persistence of gender role expectations, 3) ambivalence about women exercising power, and 4) perceptual issues. The first two obstacles have to do with the continued application of the ideology that women are first and foremost wives and mothers and are, thus, responsible for duties within the home. Bourque wrote, “Public assumptions about home and family as the bedrock of democracy and women’s roles in that family place important parameters around women in leadership in politics” (p. 87). The second obstacle refers to the “dissonance that powerful women create for our conceptions of which sex is powerful” (p. 87). Finally, she illustrates the fourth obstacle by using as an example
the role of the first lady in America and the fact that “media attention to high-profile first lady positions put an emphasis on women in a subordinate, non-political status” (p. 89). She discussed the fact that strong first ladies who express an interest in political life often elicit criticism when they go beyond their ceremonial duties. This same attitude can be seen in science fiction/fantasy films and the emphasis placed on female characters as sidekicks, not leaders.

Messages presenting the ideology that power and leadership are equated with men run rampant throughout all the science fiction/fantasy genre movies examined here. However, in the same vein as in previous chapters, I will concentrate most fully on emphasizing this particular ideology within a handful of films. Two film series within the movies included in this genre clearly depict this ideology and will be highlighted: the *Harry Potter* films and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

In the *Harry Potter* movie franchise the audience is introduced to an intelligent, brave, and caring young lady in the form of Hermione. She makes her own decisions a great deal of the time and is, more often than not, self-sufficient. However, despite all of these positive qualities, Hermione is, at the end of the day, a secondary character in the *Harry Potter* franchise. Her role is indicative of what is seen across the board in the science fiction/fantasy films included here – women, though often represented as strong, are relegated to secondary positions. They are the sidekick to the male hero. The women, ultimately, do not hold as much power as the men and are not put into leadership roles.

Within the *Harry Potter* franchise, Harry quite clearly carries the mantle of leadership, despite the fact that Hermione is frequently shown to have a superior knowledge of spells and how to deploy these spells. Despite her knowledge, she is not the “chosen one” and is not viewed by those around her as a leader. Hermione serves as a prime example of the fact that
“artificial barriers and not qualifications, performance, or experience are inhibiting female advancement” into leadership positions (Freeman, 2001, p. 41). Her attention to detail and desire to plan ahead is often mocked. Instead, Harry’s impulsive nature reigns supreme and great importance is attached to notions of sacrifice and duty - or “manning up” on Harry’s part. Hermione’s intelligence and own leadership abilities are downplayed or ignored and her extreme intelligence is often viewed as abnormal. When we are first introduced to her in the first movie, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, she is presented as a bossy know-it-all – not exactly someone whom you want to befriend or follow. Later in the movie, Ron comments that she is “brilliant, but scary.” This theme, that a woman who is intelligent is both unusual and scary is present throughout the films, largely in Ron’s reactions to Hermione. (This equation of women with power or intelligence as abnormal is also seen in how Harry’s aunt viewed his mother as a “freak” with her magical powers.)

The marginalizing of powerful women is also present in the *Harry Potter* films in the form of the evil Bellatrix. Bellatrix is no more evil than her counterparts in Lord Voldemort’s army, yet she is referred to in the *Deathly Hallows, Part 2* as a bitch. No such name calling is present when describing the male villains in the movie. The mere fact that she is a woman seems to make her power less palatable to those around her. This is indicative of “long standing beliefs about gender roles – what is deemed appropriate behavior for males and females – [which] militate against women wielding the type of power associated with male leadership” (Freeman, Bourque & Shelton, 2001, p. 8).
The most prevalent way in which women are painted as not being leaders and not possessing power in *Harry Potter*, however, is seen in the overall exclusion of women from positions and duties that would accord them higher status and the exalting of men who show traits associated with leadership and power. Freeman (2001) stated that, “In the absence of information or experience to the contrary, people act in accordance with their stereotyped perceptions, and women are less likely to be chosen for leadership positions” (p. 33). These stereotyped perceptions are continued through the exalting of male leaders in the *Harry Potter* films. For example, in the game of quidditch, the most important and valued position is that of a seeker. There are no female seekers. We also do not see any female team captains and barely any female players at all, despite the high importance put on this sport as a community building activity. The message is that women cannot be leaders within their communities. (Of the three friends at the heart of the Harry Potter films, Hermione is the only one who does not play quiddich. She is left to be the “cheerleader” on the sidelines.) Similarly, in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the Triwizard Tournament is shown to be an event of great importance and prestige. A female player is selected for this tournament, putting her on equal footing with her male counterparts. However, she is the one and only player to withdraw herself from the
competition during the water challenge. And as a “token” female her “heightened visibility fosters a skewed attribution system whereby luck is credited with her successes and women as a class are faulted for her missteps” (Freeman, 2001, p. 29). She is presented as powerful…to a point. Harry on the other hand becomes very successful as the tournament progresses and as his power and prestige increase, so does the attention given to him by girls. His power is seen as desirable.

Harry, as the protagonist and hero, is also portrayed in the movies as always being the first to jump into battle. (The meaning of his name, Harry, even promotes Harry as a leader. His name means to persistently carry out or attack on. Whereas, the name Hermione means “messenger.” Harry’s name is imbued with action and Hermione’s is much more passive.) He exhibits one of the primary qualities society has assigned to leaders: he is a risk-taker (Freeman, 2001, p. 32). In the first movie, Harry enters the dungeon first and gives orders to Ron and Hermione. He is clearly depicted, from early on, as the leader of this group, despite the fact that Hermione is shown to be the better student of magic (and is, in fact, the one that got them into the dungeon and past the first obstacle waiting for them). Hermione herself downplays her own contributions to the group, instead emphasizing that Harry is a GREAT wizard. (This takes place despite the fact that Hermione repeatedly saves both Ron and Harry with her advanced knowledge of spells and potions throughout the films.) When it comes down to the final battle, it is Harry who must face the challenge alone. And this theme carries on throughout the movies, with the ultimate power struggle always coming down to Harry and the (male) villain. Power is represented as everything that is desired and that power is firmly in Harry’s hands. In fact, in the first film Harry’s contributions towards saving the school are quite literally awarded higher
points than his two friends in the yearly battle between the different houses for the House Cup – pushing his team to victory.

As much as Hermione is pushed to the sidelines and relegated to the position of sidekick in the *Harry Potter* movies, at least she – along with other women and girls – is on the screen a great deal of the time. The same cannot be said for women in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Consider this, there is an unidentified female narration that opens the film, but we then do not hear another woman speak a line until 35 minutes into the film. The character that speaks at this point in the movie is a barmaid (and not a significant character) and she simply tells the men at a bar that it is closing time. We then don’t hear from a woman for another 43 minutes (the first significant female character)! The second film does not have a speaking woman role until 22 minutes into the film as well. In a film series full of a wide array of characters and many different plotlines, there are in fact only three females that have a significant role of any type in the films: Galadriel, a powerful elf princess; Eowyn, the niece of King Theoden of Rohan; and Arwen, an elf princess. (In the world of *Lord of the Rings*, the only women with any clout at all are women born to royal privilege.) Galadriel is the only woman who received a ring of all the rings originally forged (the token female). Despite this, her role in the films is minimal. Arwen too is minimally present in the films and serves mainly as a love interest for Aragorn – giving him something to want to survive to come back to. Arwen’s role in the film is indicative of the many images in film that “direct women and girls to be more concerned with romance and dating, while men are depicted as more concerned with their occupations” (Hammer, 2010, p. 261).

Eowyn is given the most screen time, though she does not appear until the second film. When we are first introduced to Eowyn she is very passive and her purpose seems to be to serve
as the official mourner of her (male) cousin who has died in battle and as the conduit for messages between the men and the children, as no man ever speaks directly to a child. As the film progresses, we see that she is actually quite handy with a sword. In fact, she makes a comment that women learned long ago that even if they have no sword they can still die by a sword. She has chosen to give herself a fighting chance by learning how to wield one. Despite her skill, when the time comes to fight and she declares her desire to do so, she is told that she may not fight and that she must, instead, lead the women and children away to safety. She expresses her displeasure in this role, but she is repeatedly told to mind the women and kids and stay out of the men’s work of fighting. She is effectively told to stay firmly in the domestic sphere. Because it has been an unquestioned prerogative for men to lead, women, such as Eowyn, are often in the “untenable position of being criticized for adopting a male model of authority [she wants to be part of the battle] and devalued by the female stereotyped model” (Freeman, Bourque& Shleton, 2001, p. 8-9). Eowyn is able to reclaim some of her own power and right to choose her own course in the final film when she manages to disguise herself and enter the fighting. In fact, she is able to kill a great, evil warrior who tells her, “No man can kill me.” She responds, before killing him, “I am no man.” However, the fact remains that she had to dress in disguise in order to enter the public sphere and claim any type of leadership role or power. As leadership scholars Jackson and Parry (2008) stated, “the influence of leaders depends on a large extent on the manner in which their followers perceive them” (p. 48). In order for Eowyn to be afforded any right to leadership and power, she must be perceived as something she is not – as a man. It is only after this violent (something that is coded as male) act that her uncle (the king) tells her, as he lies dying on the battlefield, that she can rule in his stead.
As with the *Harry Potter* movies, the greatest display of the lack of power and leadership accorded to women in the *Lord of the Rings* films may be in the priority placed on men and their heroic actions. The fellowship of the ring is made up of men and it is men who decide the course of action in the film. Once again, positions of leadership and the right to exercise power are left exclusively to men. And these positions are presented as desirable in the respect and adoration accorded the men (Aragorn, for example, is presented as a great leader and has two women fall in love with him).

Though the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* films provide us with prime examples of the ways in which women are discounted as leaders and relegated to secondary positions with little power, the ideology that men are leaders and women are not is present throughout all of the films within the science fiction/fantasy genre in this dissertation. I will now look briefly at these other films.

The *Star Wars* movies were described by popular film director Shawn Levy (director of such films as *Night at the Museum*) as “nothing short of a generational touchstone…I literally can’t think of a comparable cultural phenomenon that has so pervasively shaped and galvanized viewers to the extent that *Star Wars* has. It is embedded in my – and our- cultural DNA in a unique way, and these are enduring strands” (Boucher, 2012, p. 37). This quote speaks to the
cultural impact of the *Star Wars* films. With this kind of cultural impact, it is of great importance to look at the messages regarding women in these films. The original *Star Wars* (1977) gave us a female character, Leia, molded in much of the same vein as Hermione in the *Harry Potter* movies – strong, intelligent, capable of making decisions, and present on screen for much of the movie. The most recent additions to the *Star Wars* films, *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith*, take place before the events of the first three *Star Wars* and the primary female character is Padame, future mother to Leia. Like her daughter before her, Padame must carry the mantel of being “the female” in the *Star Wars* universe. (In the *Revenge of the Sith* she is literally the only woman who speaks during the entire film!) Few other women are present in that galaxy far, far away and the few we see are minor background players or shown only in crowd scenes. Padame is shown to have a position of power, as she is a senator, but again, she seems to be a token female in power. Additionally, as the movies unfurl, the audience comes to realize that the senate members do not wield much true power, which makes the senate seem a fitting position for Padame then, as “a female desire for power runs contrary to the established cultural ‘truth’ that ‘normal’ women are not interested in power” (Freeman, Bourque, & Shelton, 2001, p. 9). The power rests in the hands of the Jedis and the Jedi Council and their evil counterparts, the Sith. There are only a few female Jedis (seen only briefly and never allowed to speak). And when an assassin is sent to kill Padame it is assumed the assassin is male (though it is in fact a woman) – as no woman would possibly engage in a “profession” that is that aggressive. After the assassin’s attempt on her life, Padame is sent away for her protection, despite her adamant objections. Yoda states, “She must respect our decision.” Padame is expected to follow the orders of the male leaders around her, and despite her pleas for a diplomatic solution to the war at hand, she is overridden and banished to another planet, where
she will be out the way and the men can fight. In the *Revenge of the Sith* she returns from exile, but she is barely present in the film. She is pregnant and this serves as justification for removing her from the action. Instead, she becomes nothing more than an occasional sounding board for Anakin. At the end of the trilogy, Padame is removed from the action altogether in death. She dies shortly after giving birth to twins.

*The Chronicles of Narnia* differs a bit from the three movie series referenced thus far in this chapter. Unlike the other films, female characters are much more present throughout the movie and play pivotal roles in the plot and the events that take place in the film. In fact, the entire story would not take place if it were not for Lucy, as she finds the wardrobe and its secret entrance to the land of Narnia. However, it is worth noting that Lucy is not given much authority or power in the film. None of her siblings believe her when she tells them about what she has found and experienced until her brother Edmond also stumbles into Narnia and legitimizes her story. As the story progresses from there, Lucy and her sister Susan are present for much of the action, but Susan is mocked for being smart (shades of Hermione in the *Harry Potter* movies) and is seen as a detriment to the quest they undertake, as she is not a risk taker and wants to go home. The oldest brother, Peter, clearly emerges as the leader. He is in charge, and what he says goes. This precedent is set early on when his mother tells him to look after the others like a “good man.” The girls, on the other hand, are simply told to “be a good girl.” The girls, like Eowyn in the *Lord of the Rings* movies, are also removed from the fighting when it comes time for the great battle between good and evil. Their exclusion from fighting is set up earlier in the film when Peter, Susan, and Lucy are all given gifts to help in their journey by Santa (Edmond is being held captive by the White Witch at that time). Susan receives a horn, so that she can always call for help and Lucy receives a potion that will heal any wound. The girls are presented
with reactionary and passive gifts. Peter, on the other hand, is given a mighty sword (a repeated sign of power in science fiction films), as he is expected to be active and assertive.

A powerful female character is presented in the form of the White Witch, but we see the equation of a woman with power with evil in the same way as in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. This woman with power must be destroyed; the true ruler of Narnia is a man, not a woman.

The top grossing movie of all time is *Avatar*. This science fiction/fantasy follows the familiar patterns established by the other movies studied in this chapter. Again, we see not only a male protagonist, but men occupy all of the positions within the narrative that command power, such as the manager of the mining operation and the colonel in charge of the forces on Pandora. (We do see a rarity, however, in that the protagonist is physically challenged. He is in a wheelchair – though his Avatar allows him to walk.) The audience is introduced to two strong female characters in Grace – the lead scientist (particularly noteworthy as females are often left out of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics – or STEM - careers within the movies) and Neytiri - daughter of the Na’vi clan leaders. However, these women are, once again, pushed to the sidelines to serve as support players and their contributions are downplayed. Grace, for example, has her research mocked and the program she manages is seen as silly. Communication scholar Jocelyn Steinke (2005) studied the portrayal of women in science and engineering occupations in film. Her study focused on films with female characters in the science and engineering professions between the years 1991 and 2001. Steinke noted that even in films where women were shown as project directors, their knowledge and abilities were consistently questioned. The females had to continually explain themselves and defend their experience and backgrounds. They were often forced to defend themselves in the face of sexist
comments and language (Steinke, 2005). These findings apply to the character of Grace in *Avatar*. Steinke also noted that women are routinely shown as unable to handle both a career and a family through the portrayal of most women as single and showing those with families as failing at balancing the two areas of their lives (p. 52). Here, too, we see a parallel with the character of Grace. She is single and does not have a family. However, in the end, Grace ends up filling the role of a mother figure for Jake (typical female role), instead of having her scientific accomplishments take center stage. In this way she is “normalized.” She is taken out of the male public sphere and placed back in the domestic sphere where motherhood is the priority given to women. King (2006) and Press (2003) both found that women who are depicted as working in areas classified as men’s occupational turf are often either highly sexualized or depicted in mothering roles, such as Grace is in *Avatar*.

Neytiri make her entrance into the movie in grand fashion, saving our protagonist, Jake, from a pack of viperwolves and then becoming Jake’s mentor as he learns the ways of the Na’vi people. However, she never seems to move out of a support position and despite her ancestry and skills, she is not viewed as a leader in her tribe. Even after her father dies, the tribe turns to Jake for guidance, instead of to her. (This is reminiscent of the *Shrek* movies, where Fiona, as a woman, is not seen as fit to rule. Men are leaders and the women support them in this role.) After her initial rescue of Jake, she rescues him a handful of other times as well, but these rescues only occur when Jake is incapacitated – when he leaves his avatar form and that body goes lifeless.

In the last two movies included in this section we finally see our first two female protagonists – yes, that is two female protagonists out of 36 movies. The first of our two female protagonists is Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*. What is interesting about this movie is, though
Alice is the lead character, one would not have been able to determine this from the marketing for the film. The film was sold highlighting the character of the Mad Hatter, played by Johnny Depp. And Johnny Depp has top billing in the film. On the movie poster for the film (see below), Alice, the supposed protagonist of the movie, is not even present.

![Figure 9: No Alice (IMDB.com)](image_url)

Instead, front and center, the focal point, is the Mad Hatter (despite the fact that not only is he not the protagonist, but he does not even appear in the film till over a half an hour into the movie). There is a subtle message here that women cannot carry a film on their own. Upon closer inspection, it is also apparent that Alice is told what to do throughout most of the movie by the male characters around her – from the moment she falls down the rabbit hole, she is guided in her journey in a way that most male protagonists would not be. Alice even comments on this fact when she finally makes a decision on her own, when she says, “I’ve been told who I am and what I must be.” However, she must also be talked into “doing the right thing” and staying to fight the final battle against the Red Queen by the blue caterpillar Absalom. After
slaying the jabberwocky, and defeating the Red Queen, Alice returns home. Though she manages to assert herself, avoiding a marriage she is not keen on, and talk her way into working for her family’s company, she is only allowed an apprenticeship. One can’t help but wonder if an apprenticeship is all that would have been offered to a male character, since, as Diane Negra (2009) pointed out, there is a “persistent distrust of the working woman, particularly if she is an executive” (p. 6) which is reproduced in popular films.

In our final film, *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn, Part One*, our protagonist is ostensibly Bella; however, Bella does not exercise much agency in the film and the movie truly centers around the action that takes place around her, not on her own actions. Unlike the other movies in this dissertation, the protagonist is not depicted as a leader. The character of Bella succumbs to what many film scholars have noted - that there are often “displays of relative weakness or lack of skill by female heroes” (King, 2006, p. 7).

Bella is immersed in a hierarchical family that is run by the father figure. The vampire clan that she marries into is overseen by Carlisle Cullen, who makes decisions for the family as to where they will live and how they will act. Bella not only submits to his authority, but to the authority of her new husband, Edward. Her one independent stance is to refuse to abort her unborn child when the family believes this is the best course of action. This stand is repeatedly called into question throughout the duration of the film, however, as we watch Bella become sickly and, ultimately, die in childbirth. The subtle message that she could not be trusted to make the decision for herself is quietly conveyed.

Meanwhile the men in the movie repeatedly establish themselves as both leaders and protectors. This is perhaps best illustrated in the character of Jake, who establishes himself as a leader in his refusal to join his wolf pack members in their quest to destroy Bella’s child. Jake
instead vows to protect both Bella and her child, stating, “I wasn’t born to follow you or anyone else.” A leader typically inspires followers and Jake’s stance does this. Some of the other wolf pack members defect, joining him in his mission.

As we have seen in previous chapters, this downplaying of women’s abilities to lead and wield power can be seen in other genres besides the science fiction/fantasy film. The reader may recall a film from this study that has not yet been mentioned: The Passion of the Christ. In terms of how this film presents women, it is most closely aligned with this science fiction/fantasy genre. Women are simply excluded from having much of a presence in the film and the few women present wield no power. Instead we see women primarily in the street scenes. They seem to be more affected than their male counterparts by Christ’s death sentence, but as they wield no power, they are unable to do anything to help him. There are no female rulers and no female disciples. And, ultimately, it is the story of the Son of God. Religious scholar Elaine Pagels (1976) noted that in Christianity “the actual language they use in daily worship and prayer…gives the distinct impression that God is thought of exclusively in masculine terms” (p. 248). Even Mary as the mother of Jesus Christ “cannot be identified as divine in her own right: she is: mother of God,” she is not “God the Mother” on an equal footing with God the Father” (p. 248). This clearly displays the concept of woman as the second sex and the lack of power and leadership given to women. Not only is it a man that is chosen to represent God on Earth, but his mother is not afforded equal credit in the creation of this individual.

So, what does all this mean for those of us not living in far away or magical worlds? In the United States women make up 51% of the nation’s 300 million people, but they are still less than half of the workforce and nearly a quarter of the women in the workforce are employed in administrative and clerical support fields – more than any other field. Many of the other women
in the workforce are employed in menial jobs with low wages and poor or no benefits. Men, on the other hand, overwhelmingly dominate corporate boardrooms and jobs with six figures (Bramlett-Solomon & Carstarphen, 2012, p. 193). Tosone (2009) stated that,

In Fortune 500 companies, women comprise 50.6% of the mid-level managerial positions, but only 15.7% are corporate officers, and 6.2% are top earners. Perhaps, most surprisingly, only seven (2.6%) of CEO positions are filled by women (p. 3).

Additionally, women make up only 17% of congress and at the current rate will not reach parity with men in congress for 500 years. And there have been only 34 women governors over the years, compared to 2,319 men (Newsom, 2011). As these figures reveal, though women are seen more and more in the public sphere, they are still generally not seen as leaders. Tosone contended that this is largely due to the fact that valued leadership traits are still male-gendered. Films that continue to downplay the role of women in any society, whether our 21st century American society or the society of a mythical world, serve to perpetuate the notion that women are not leaders and cannot wield power. This is evident in a study conducted by scholar Martha Lauzen (2011) that found that male characters are much more likely than female characters to be portrayed as leaders. In fact males accounted for 86% of the leaders in the top 100 films of 2011. They were 93% of the political/government leaders, 92% of religious leaders, 83% of business leaders, and 70% of science and intellectual leaders. Women are also most often portrayed with out-of-the-workforce positions when their occupational status is known in these same films (22%). In comparison, men are not seen in these positions (out-of-the-workforce) at all and are seen to hold white collar positions more than any other type of job (22%) (p.1). This emphasis on male leaders and the devaluing of females as potential leaders leads to a feeling of disempowerment for women, and they become less likely to vote, run for office, or apply for
high level positions in the workforce. Leadership effectively becomes categorized as a masculine pursuit (Newsom, 2011). There is a “definition of male pursuits as more valuable than female within the culture, so that cultural values become the embodiment of male subjectivity,” which leads to the “restriction of female self-fulfillment” (Rich, 1980, p. 291).

Dozier and Lauzen’s study on double standards in film indicated that “male characters are more likely than female characters to be employed and hold high-status positions” (2005). Men are also far more likely than women to be the main character in a film and to be at the center of the action taking place, while women play more passive roles (Dozier & Lauzen, 2005). Women are also still portrayed as aspiring to the idealized role of wife and mother first and foremost, with careers outside the home taking a backseat (Levinson, 1995, p. 139; Stokes & Maltby, 2001). These images in entertainment promote the belief that this is just the way things are - the way they are meant to be. And they make it more difficult for women like Cindy in the introduction to this dissertation to break the mold, place more emphasis on their career pursuits than family, and advance to leadership levels in the workforce. Women are not given authority – and, thus, are denied the legitimate power to mobilize people (Padavic & Reskin, 2002, p. 100). In this way, women who step into the public sphere are still “othered” and defined as the “second sex” in comparison to the male leaders. “What one sex is, the other is not” (Padavic & Reskin, 2002, p. 40). Since men are clearly defined as leaders in our society and this is reflected in our most popular films, then women are defined as not being leaders. And “social mechanisms (such as the media) bombard the oppressed with negative messages and stereotypes about themselves, [and] they begin to believe these to be true and to internalize them” (Bordas, p. 107, 2007), such is the case with women.
After all, as King (2006) contended, films circulate some of the most widely viewed images of gender in the workplace and give society a collective sense of what kind of professionals women make, and, at a time when occupational segregation is upheld more through informal decision-making and beliefs than through formal laws and codes, films and the messages they portray are especially important (p. 3-4). “Popular culture remains a site of negotiation. In our collective storytelling, especially the repetitive formulas that film genres represent, we register changes in popular expectations about women’s work and of their abilities in general” (King, 2006, p. 4). The message in the films presented here seems to be that women’s work and their abilities are still relegated to secondary status. They are, at most, capable sidekicks.

**Violence and Victimization**

Though often not as blatant, the damsel-in-distress narrative that is so prevalent in action films is present in the science fiction/fantasy genre as well. This consistent trope is another way in which women are shown to be powerless (and, therefore, not leaders).

Women fare better in the *Harry Potter* movies than in most films when it comes to escaping the damsel-in-distress stereotype, but this element still exists. For example, in the first film, a troll attacks Hermione and she must be rescued by Harry and Ron. In fact, this is the event that solidifies their bond. In the *Goblet of Fire* key individuals in the lives of the competitors in the Triwizard Tournament are held captive underwater. The competitors must rescue their assigned “victim.” Those held captive are almost all women, except for Ron, who as Harry’s best friend represents his individual to rescue, since Harry does not yet have a significant other. If he did, then it is clear that all the victims in need of rescuing would have been female. As mentioned earlier, the female competitor in the tournament has to withdraw from this section
of the competition, which leaves her person – her sister – un-rescued. Harry, as the hero, steps in and saves the day in classic fashion. Harry saves the day again during the final challenge in the competition when the female contestant is quickly felled in the sinister maze. Harry must save her and send up an SOS signal with his wand so that she can be removed from the competition. *The Harry Potter* series plays into the male-as-hero ideal, in its depiction of Harry as the “chosen one” who must save everyone else. And although others assist Harry in his war against Lord Voldemort, it is made clear that, ultimately, Harry is the true savior.

In the *Lord of the Rings* films there is a priority put on violence, but no one female character represents a true damsel-in-distress. A general air of men needing to protect the women and children does prevail throughout the trilogy though. As the men of Rohan prepare for battle they are exhorted to “Protect your women and children.” Women and children are equated with one another in this statement and the need for masculinized protection of the weaker “others” is made abundantly clear. The same can be said of *Avatar*, which does not focus on making the women in the film damsels-in-distress (though there is a race to heal Grace when she is injured that does not succeed). But, although, there is no definitive woman in peril, the prioritization of violence is present throughout the film and climaxes in the final battle between the Na’vi people and the humans. Violence, once again, wins out over diplomacy.

The *Star Wars* movies work in a more classic damsel-in-distress structure. From the beginning, Padame is in constant need of protection. The film opens with Obi-Wan and Anakin saving Padame from assassination and the need to protect her largely propels the story. She is ferreted away for her protection and rescued in dramatic fashion time and again. At the same time, her relationship with Anakin continues to grow, but this can be seen as problematic when Anakin’s behavior toward Padame is scrutinized. He is controlled primarily by lust and he
blames Padame for making him feel lustful. There are disturbing shades of stalking and
domestic violence presented that are normalized by the “love story” and marriage at the end of
the film. This basic pattern continues into the Revenge of the Sith, which really is in its entirety a
damsel-in-distress film. Anakin simply wants to save Padame and his desire to save her at all
costs and protect what he deems to be his is what drives him to the dark side. The violent
overtones of their relationship come to a head near the film’s climax when he chokes her in a
rage and is only stopped from killing her by Obi Wan’s interference.

Even Alice in Wonderland, with its female protagonist, cannot escape damsel-in-distress
situations completely. The Mad Hatter must save Alice at the tea party when the evil queen’s
men come looking for her, by hiding the shrunken Alice in his hat. (Alice does, unlike most lead
female characters, return the favor later on, rescuing the Mad Hatter from the Red Queen’s
castle.) In what may be the most disturbing scene in the movie, Alice is leered at by one of the
Red Queen’s men and thrown up against a wall in what looks to be the beginning of a rape scene.
The action is interrupted, but when the Queen hears of what happened the man involved declares
that Alice forced herself on him in an act of “unlawful seduction.” The Queen quickly believes
the man and blames Alice for her own victimization, declaring, “off with her head!” The very
clear correlation between how women who are raped are often treated in our society as being to
blame for their own victimization is apparent, and the fact that this is treated as par for the course
is disturbing (maybe even more so because it is presented in a film marketed to children).

Breaking Dawn, Part One presents us with a passive female lead in the person of Bella.
Bella falls into “the trap of feminized powerlessness and masculinized protection” (Stabile, 2009,
p. 91) on a regular basis. It is consistently left up to the men in her life to protect and save Bella.
When the wolf pack decides that Bella and her unborn baby must die and they then prepare to
attack her, Edward and Jacob team up to protect her. This protection narrative is the main focus of the film.

**Heterosexual Romance, Marriage, and Family**

Ultimately, the emphasis placed on heterosexual romance, marriage, and family can also serve as a way to remove women from positions of leadership and from holding and wielding power in the public sphere. This emphasis exists in the science fiction/fantasy world as well (and like classic animated films, the primary female characters from these films are often princesses).

One might not expect to find too much of a priority placed on heterosexual romance, marriage, and family in the *Harry Potter* films as they focus primarily on kids. However, as the movies progress and the characters get older this emphasis becomes more and more apparent. This narrative first becomes apparent in the *Goblet of Fire*. As Harry and Ron prepare for their first boy-girl dance, Ron comments, “It’s bad enough for a boy to turn up alone, but for a girl…” The message is conveyed that though not the ultimate goal, it is okay for men to be single, but not women. By the time the *Half-Blood Prince* takes place, there are budding romances between Harry and Ginny and Ron and Hermione. The girls are seen looking at love potions in the magic shop before school starts (no boys are looking at these items). Ginny even shows her love for Harry by effectively demonstrating what a great caregiver she can be as a wife and mother in the future by performing tasks such as feeding Harry his food and trying his shoelaces for him. Similarly, Hermione shows her love for Ron by helping nurse him back to health when he falls ill from a potion.

The story of Harry Potter ends with a flash-forward into the future. In this future we see that both Ron and Hermione and Harry and Ginny have gotten married and had children. Thus,
the story is brought to a close with an affirmation of the end goal being marriage and family. (Although, in a twist, this priority is applied equally to both the male and female characters.)

The character of Arwen in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy serves one primary function – to present as the ideal for women the pattern of romantic heterosexual love, marriage, and children. Arwen is so in love with Aragorn that she declares in the first film, “I’d rather share one lifetime with you than all the ages alone.” She chooses a mortal life in order to be with the one she loves, because in her eyes that is the only way she will be complete and find happiness (and this is further solidified in a vision she has of her and Aragorn happily married with a child). Even when her dad tells her that she will be nothing once Aragorn dies (confirming that happiness is, indeed, tied to a man) she holds fast in her decision. She wants to marry Aragorn and have kids, and, ultimately the audience is left with the impression that this is exactly what she will get. The audience sees the two reunited after Aragorn returns from battle and witnesses a passionate kiss. This heterosexual marriage priority is even espoused by the character of Sam in the final film. When Sam believes he and Frodo are about to die he speaks of the barmaid, Rosie, from their hometown and how his biggest regret is not having married her. Sam too survives and his reward is the ability to fulfill this desire and live a “normal” life.

The two *Star Wars* films presented here also place great importance on heterosexual romance and the goal of this romance being marriage and children. The films are in many ways a love story between Anakin and Padame, and, before the films end, they are married and have children. When Padame announces her pregnancy they both declare that it is the best day of their lives. Even as Anakin is lured to the dark side, Padame tries to reach him by telling him that, “All I want is your love.” When all is said and done the need for a man’s love is Padame’s
driving force. This is true to such an extent that she literally dies of a broken heart and gives up her will to live without Anakin.

Like the *Star Wars* films, *Avatar* too has at its core a love story. Jake comes to love the Na’vi people and fight for them because of his love for Neytiri. When he is fully accepted into the tribe this is signified by the fact that he is told, “You must choose a woman.” The woman is not given the choice here, she is expected to go along with what the man decides as they journey towards “happily ever after.” The tribe also mates for life, so once a partner is selected (Neytiri) the expectation is that the union will last and will produce offspring. Jake and Neytiri’s love is presented as so powerful in fact that it allows him to become another species. Love can truly conquer all!

*Alice in Wonderland* offers the audience an example of a woman going against the grain and opting out (at least for now) of the marriage and children path that is laid out as the ideal for women. She runs away at her engagement party, not wanting to become betrothed to the young man who proposes, and when she comes home from Underland she establishes that she wishes to learn about business rather than marry and become a housewife. The movie does point out for the viewer the attitudes of those around Alice when it comes to marriage however as being much more in line with the typical messages presented in popular films. She is told that if she doesn’t marry that she will be seen as either a crazy old lady or as a burden to her mother. She is then unfavorably compared to a crazy, spinster aunt. These kinds of messages discourage young women, like Alice, from choosing an option other than the wife-mother norm. If the audience had the opportunity to see Alice not only make the decision to forgo this norm, but experience happiness without succumbing to the norm, a greater statement might have been made.
Finally, we have *Breaking Dawn, Part One*, which one could categorize as a supernatural romance. Judith Butler (2004) wrote that “marriage, given its historical weight, becomes an “option” only by extending itself as a norm” (p. 109). Bella’s life in *Breaking Dawn* is anything but normal with her relationships with vampires and werewolves, yet she is coded as very “normal” in the opening scenes of the movie where she weds Edward. (The prelude to the wedding and the ceremony and reception take up the first 29 minutes of the film – a full ¼ of the movie; if the honeymoon is added to this, ½ of the movie – 58 minutes – is devoted to this particular event!) Her relationship thus allows her to avoid being coded as “other” and becoming a threat to the nation. According to Wald (2011), any threat to the socially sanctioned sexuality expressed by the institution of marriage was a threat to the nation” (p. 86).

Bella is further normalized by impending motherhood. In 2001, Rubinfeld found that in the 1980s and 1990s Hollywood romantic comedies used plot conventions to reinforce traditional gender roles and relationships. Out of 109 romantic comedies that sold over 3.398 million tickets, only one of the films presented the view that women could “survive, and even thrive, without men, marriage, and motherhood” (p. 16). The romance *Breaking Dawn, Part One*, though not a comedy, follows in this tradition. Bella claims she cannot survive without Edward and she wants to be a mother so badly that she is willing to put her own life in danger to carry their baby to term. She seems to fall into the trap of accepting the way of thinking promoted in society that bell hooks (2000) described: “women who do not mother, whose lives may be focused more exclusively on a career, creative work, political work, are missing out, are doomed to live emotionally unfulfilled lives” (p. 136).

Throughout the preceding three chapters I have presented three primary ideologies that serve to other women: the belief that true fulfillment for women can only be found through the
heterosexual romance-marriage-family route; that women are passive victims in need of rescue and, conversely, that men are responsible for keeping women safe and/or in their place through the use of violence; and that men are naturally leaders, whereas women do not have the traits necessary to hold power and lead. These three ideologies present themselves across all three genres – animated, action, and science fiction/fantasy – that encompass the top grossing movies from 2000 to 2011, with each genre seemingly placing emphasis on a particular ideology. The presentation of these ideologies can be seen as an attempt to counter gains made by women in the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s to 1980s, to continue to “other” women. In doing so, they perpetuate the subordination and oppression of women. In the final chapter that follows, I will highlight some additional observations regarding the representation of women in film and conclude this dissertation with some additional reflections on the “othering” of women.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In my analysis of the 36 films presented here as examples of 21st century blockbuster films, the “othering” of women in both subtle and not so subtle ways is apparent. Additionally, two other trends were spotted that I would like to highlight briefly in this closing section: 1) a lack of representation of women in popular films and 2) the trend in movie source material that effectively serves to remove active and developed women characters from the screen.

A Lack of Representation

Every year media scholar Martha Lauzen conducts studies on women in film, looking at their representation both on-screen and behind the scenes. In her study of the top 100 grossing films of 2011, she found that though women make up over half of the population, they represented only 33% of on screen characters. This is a dismal enough statistic, but the lack of women characters is even more evident in that female characters only accounted for 11% of the protagonists in these films. Feminist scholar Yvonne Tasker (1993) went so far as to comment that while researching her book on action films, she “became convinced initially that the figure of ‘woman’ was in the process of being eclipsed from the cinema altogether” (p. 3). What is absent in a text often tells the audience just as much as what is in the text, so the lack of women in film speaks volumes about their place in society. This discrepancy in the ratio of male and female characters is often explained away with the statement that males make up a much larger percentage of movie-going audiences than females, thus, it makes sense that males are targeted by Hollywood and that what we see on screen is male protagonists and masculine storylines. This statement is a fallacy. According to the Motion Picture Society of America, the movie-going public is fairly evenly split (Media Report to Women, 1998, p. 3). However, despite the
fact that women make up around 50% of the movie-going public, women remain poorly represented both behind the scenes and on the screen.

Scholars are not the only individuals that have noted the lack of women in film. *Entertainment Weekly* columnist Mark Harris addressed the “surprise” that prevails whenever a woman-centered film does well in Hollywood in a June 2008 article in the magazine. Harris questioned why the success of women-centered films should be surprising when women make up at least half and sometimes more of the typical movie audience. He addressed the fact that in Hollywood the prevailing response to the “surprise” success of any woman-centered movie is met with “What was that? Fifty-seven million in three days? Just a little speed bump, nothing to see here, one-of-a-kind-situation, how nice for them [women], let’s just keep moving and not look back” (Harris, 2008). When this is the attitude of those in power in the Hollywood community, the dearth of strong female roles in blockbuster movies will, no doubt, continue.

Press (2003) noted that film roles for women and storylines revolving around women are still limited in Hollywood. In the 1970s there was a bit of a surge in women’s roles and storylines in film, corresponding with the feminist movement’s push for the Equal Rights Amendment, but this surge did not last (p. 2). (This is further evidence of a backlash against the gains made by women in this time period.) Once again, attention is drawn to the fact that films in which women play majors roles are “few and far between in the top grossing films” (Press, 2003, p. 4). The screen time of women in the top-grossing films is also a substantially smaller sum than one might expect at this point in time. It is important to note that women are often excluded from central roles in the highest grossing genres and patriarchal myths continue to be propagated in these popular genres (Kaplan, 1983, p. 25).
This lack of representation on the screen for females is bad enough when considering the entire sex as a whole, but when other factors are considered the picture becomes even dimmer. The women that are presented in the movies are overwhelmingly white, middle to upper class, able-bodied, young (40 or younger), heterosexual, and thin. These characters represent a very small portion of the female population and this lack of diversity in representation further serves to “other” women that do not fit into this prescribed mold.

In 2011, 73% of all female characters in the top 100 grossing movies were White, 8% were African American, 5% were Latina, 5% were Asian, 5% were other worldly, 3% were animals and 1% were classified as other. This means that moviegoers are as likely “to see an extraterrestrial as they are to see a Latina or Asian female character (Lauzen, 2012, p. 2)! It also means that moviegoers are not seeing Native American women on screen at all! Additionally the depiction of African American women declined 7% from 2002 to 2011 – a dramatic decrease. I suspect that if this study was narrowed to focus on lead or even lead and secondary female characters in these films that the percentages for minoritized racial groups would be even less.

In looking at the 36 films covered in this dissertation, only one film has a lead female character of color: Mission: Impossible 2 (Nyah). Additionally, we see a small handful of secondary characters from minoritized groups in Tia Dalma, an African American voodoo practitioner in The Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest; Anna Maria, an African American pirate in The Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl (the only female pirate); Trudy the Latina pilot in Avatar (who is ultimately removed from the action by death); and the Native American Sacajawea in Night At the Museum. Additionally, the character of Neytiri in Avatar is a blue alien, but she is played by African American actress Zoe Saldana. (Her mother in the film is also played by an African American actress, C.C.H. Pounder.) And strong correlations are
evident between the tribe in the movie and representations of Native American tribes. In this vein, Neytiri is presented in stereotypical fashion as the beautiful Indian maiden who serves as a liaison between the white man and her tribe. She even marries Jake, a narrative that has, according to M. Marubbio (2009), become prominent in stories of this nature in film. The lack of racial diversity is shockingly apparent when we look at these numbers. Hollywood films continue to promote the idea of a racial hierarchy. This racial hierarchy has been presented from the very beginning of film in movies such as D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915). In this film black men are portrayed as brutes. They are very animalistic and the message being put forth is that they need to be controlled. If they are not controlled they will run amok, raping and brutalizing white women and laying waste to everything around them (perhaps these women are in need of a masculine superhero to save the day!). This mentality of black men as animalistic is not as prevalent in movies today, but the attitude of white women being in need of protection from minorities still lingers in the media and is very present in our action films where white women are often taken and brutalized by “others.”

Today the media purport a desire for the illusion of multiracialism, but it rarely happens on any meaningful level (Childs, 2009 & Beltran & Fojas, 2008). Film scholars Pramaggiore and Wallis (2008) stated that, “most classical Hollywood films revolve exclusively around the concerns of white characters because their struggles are presumed to be both appealing and universally accessible to audiences” (p. 340). This is certainly the case with the top-grossing films studied in this dissertation. These films leave out the experiences of minoritized racial groups – both men and women from these groups are largely absent, but women are especially absent from any significant roles. Hunt maintained that the media is “absolutely fundamental to the functioning of the American racial order” (Hunt, 2005, p. 5-7).
The other defining characteristics laid out above do not fare any better. Working- and lower-class women are almost completely absent from the top grossing films. The working class are defined by sociologists based on their occupation (manual labor, unskilled or semiskilled workers), how much people are compensated for their work, and the level of education required. Those who do not work are classified as the poor and homeless (Kendall, 2008). In the movies examined in this dissertation, only one female character might be described as working class – Mary Jane Watson from the Spider-Man trilogy (and no characters would fall into the lower class or homeless category). And even Mary Jane has moments of affluence, such as when she is dating Harry, who comes from a very wealthy family. Author Diana Kendall (2012) wrote that the working class have little appeal to entertainment writers, whereas the lavish lifestyles of the rich and upper middle-class have always been highlighted in television and film. She went on to say that many of the problems facing the working poor can be attributed to “megacorporations that continue to make a profit (despite our uncertain economy) but will not employ new workers” (p. 162). It is not surprising then that big budget movies, funded by large corporations, do not wish to highlight the poor within their priority (i.e. big money making) films.

There are no ability-challenged women in any of the films presented in this dissertation (and only one ability-challenged male is presented: Jake from Avatar). “People with physical conditions are often the subject of derision, fear, disgust, prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination and the media often perpetuates these stereotypes…” (Nelson, 2006, p. 270). In the case of the films in this dissertation this is done by simply not acknowledging that ability-challenged people even exist.

As alluded to throughout my discussions of the primacy placed on heterosexual romance, marriage, and family, there are no lesbian, transgender, transsexual, or questioning women in the
films presented. Heterosexism – the stigmatizing of any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality – is very present throughout all 36 films.

There are no heavier women presented in these films. (Women are allowed to be a bit heavier if they are older, but these women are never the lead female character and serve in a secondary capacity at most, such as the instructor Minerva at Hogwarts School of Magic in the Harry Potter films.) Despite the fact that historically speaking being overweight was a desired trait (this ideal was prevalent a mere century ago), as it was regarded to be a symbol of wealth and privilege, being overweight is now seen as an individual defect. People who are overweight are seen as being lazy and having little self-control. Hollywood contributes greatly to this ideology by presenting only very thin women in television and film and the movies in this dissertation are no exception. A concern with this lack of representation for those not deemed “thin enough” has even led to the development of a new field of study within media and cultural studies: fat studies. The Popular Culture Association – American Culture Association defined fat studies on their Web site as,

an interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary field of study that confronts and critiques cultural constraints against notions of “fatness” and “the fat body”; explores fat bodies as they live in, are shaped by, and remake the world; and creates paradigms for the development of fat acceptance or celebration within mass culture…More importantly, perhaps, Fat Studies insists on the recognition that fat identity can be as fundamental and world-shaping as other identity constructs analyzed within the academy and represented in media.

With this new focus on issues of weight and representation, the total lack of characters that are heavier women (and to a lesser extent men) in the top-grossing films is noteworthy.
Women over 40 are largely absent from these films as well and those that are present are secondary characters presented as either bullying women, such as Director Mearing in the third *Transformers* film or Bellatrix in the *Harry Potter* films, or as mothers or mothering types, such as the mom in the *Transformers* films or Aunt Mae in the *Spider-Man* films. Both Press (2003) and King (2006) maintained that main characters that are women over the age of 35 are rarely seen in blockbuster movies. This is in contrast to male characters, who are often older. This double standard does little to reinforce the equality of women. When older women are seen, they are often manipulative and viewed as evil. “The middle-age woman becomes one of the main demons of our culture” (Press, 2003, p. 20) and oftentimes she becomes a caricature. Older-woman characters are often portrayed as “grotesque villains” (Haskell, 1974, p. 328) or as ice queens who never found their true love and, as a result, became cold and distant. There does not seem to be much of a life waiting for women once they pass the age of 40. (Ironically, this preoccupation with youth was an issue even among the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. It was generally considered a young movement with the average age of members being around 25. In response to this, OWL – Older Women’s Liberation – was formed (Older Women’s League, 1970, p. 201).)

It is important to remember that none of the above characteristics stand in isolation. A woman (as well as a man) can be many things and identify with many different groups. Our popular films, however, largely foreclose any of these groups or combination of groups from being seen as valid. In this way, women who do not fit into the very rigidly defined movie definition of what it means to be a woman are continually “othered” not only for their gender. In order for women to be truly recognized and represented on film, a variety of women need to be portrayed on our movie screens.
The films in this study also exhibit a lack of female voices when it comes to discussing anything other than men. The majority of the films presented here fail the Bechdel Test. This test, created by comic writer Alison Bechdel in her strip “Dykes to Watch Out For,” puts forth the challenge that to pass the test a movie must have at least two [named] women in it, who talk to each other about something other than a man. The Spring 2008 *Media Report to Women* found that films have “almost three speaking males for every one female” (p. 1), the number of women with speaking roles is limited and in each film the screen time is sparse for women who are not deemed “the girlfriend” – and sometimes screen time is sparse even for them, as was seen in *The Dark Knight* where Rachel Dawes has a mere 11 minutes of screen time or with Pepper Potts, who has an average of 14 minutes of screen time in the two *Iron Man* movies (Carlson, Highfill, & Smith, 2013, p. 48). This lack of engagement between women characters does little to foster collaboration among women or to promote female concerns as valid. This exclusion of women and women’s viewpoints leaves them with little social power.

The problem of representation is not confined to on-screen characters. Not one of the movies in this study was directed by a woman (a couple of animated films have women as the second or third credited director). Martha Lauzen (2012) found that women accounted for only 5% of directors for the top 250 grossing films of 2011 (note that this is the top 250 films, not the top 100 as was the case with her study about females on screen). Women participated in making films to a much greater extent in the early years of cinema. More than 100 women directed films in the 1910s and 1920s (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008, p. 344). In 2011, women accounted for only 14% of the writers, 18% of executive producers, 20% of editors, and 4% of cinematographers. Additionally, women were found to be the least likely to work in the genres of action, animated films, and horror (p. 1-2). That’s right, two out of three of the genres
identified in this study as the genres that comprise the top grossing films of the 21st century thus far represent the genres in which women are the least likely to be employed behind the scenes in vital creative roles. On top of all of this, women are sorely under-represented in the board rooms of the big six media companies. Only four of out of 13 board members at Disney are women, four out of 17 at GE/NBC, two out of 11 at Viacom, two out of 13 at Time Warner, two out of 14 at CBS, and one out of 16 at Fox (Newsom, 2011). None of the chief executive officers are women at these companies. This lack of female voices behind the scenes translates into what we see on screen – the prioritization of the male perspective and a near annihilation of a female perspective.

**Source Material**

As I just mentioned above, women accounted for only 14% of the writers on the top 250 films of 2011 (Lauzen, 2012, p. 1), but this is not the only trend that works to remove female stories and fully developed female characters from the silver screen. Many of our most popular movies today are derived from sources developed long ago. Superhero movies make up a large portion of our blockbuster movies in the most recent years. Comic book heroes are not only represented in six of the films in this study (the *Spider-Man* trilogy, the two *Iron Man* movies, and *The Dark Knight*), but they account for a substantial number of upcoming movies (as well as two out of three of the top movies of 2012 that are not included within the main portion of this dissertation). As this is being written, the latest *Iron Man* movie, *Iron Man 3*, is decimating the box office, both domestically and globally. It has been out domestically for one week and has grossed over $300 million domestically and $990 million internationally, making it the second biggest opening box office for a superhero movie of all time, placing it in excellent position to be one of the top-grossing movies of 2013, and firmly placing it, already, within the top 50 grossing
movies of all time (Box Office Mojo). Marvel Studios, which exclusively produces movies inspired by Marvel comic books, has six superhero movies officially on the slate within the next two years alone, including follow-ups to previously successful outings for Captain America, Thor, and the Avengers (Breznican, 2013, p. 39-41). This is not counting other studios’ films and comic book characters, such as the upcoming *Man of Steel* (Superman) and the *Amazing Spider-Man 2*. (It also does not take into account the many films of recent years that did not crack the top three grossing movies for the year they were released, but still did major business as the box office, such as *Captain America* (2011) which grossed over $175 million domestically or, from the same year, *Thor* (2011) which grossed over $180 million domestically (Box Office Mojo).)

What we are seeing with these movies is not the creation of new superheroes, but a retelling of the stories of superheroes created in comic books long ago – in a time when women were even less a part of the public sphere than they are now. Is it any wonder then that the women in these films have a minimal presence, are relegated to girlfriend/wife/mother roles, are presented as damsels-in-distress, and are shown not to be leaders? Other source material represented, just in the movies studied here, include books written in the 1860s (*Alice in Wonderland*), 1940s (*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*), and 1950s (*The Lord of the Rings* and *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*); movies based on old television shows (*Mission Impossible* from the 1960s-1970s and the *Transformers* cartoon from the 1980s); and sequels/prequels to film series begun long ago (*Star Wars* in the 1970s and *Indiana Jones* in the early 1980s).

I do not wish to give the impression here that all source material for our top-grossing films come from material written long ago or only by men. There are a few original screenplays present in the films included in this dissertation, such as *Avatar* and *Finding Nemo*, as well as
both dramas that cracked into the top-grossing films in the years covered. And there are occasions when movies come from newer source material and these newer sources are sometimes written by women. The two primary examples of that within the movies covered here are, of course, the *Harry Potter* films, adapted from books written by J.K. Rowling and *Twilight: Breaking Dawn, Part One*, adapted from the young adult book series written by Stephenie Meyer. It is worth noting, however, that the *Harry Potter* movies, though written by a woman have a male protagonist. It would seem that cultural hegemony has led even Rowling to value the male character as leader, and in the *Twilight* film our protagonist, Bella, displays minimal agency, instead letting the men around her make her decision for her. She exhibits the very definition of “learned helplessness.” Conversely, it is also worth mentioning that both of these exceptions are in the genre of science fiction and fantasy, which, as discussed earlier, have long been sites in which diversity and multiculturalism issues have been addressed…maybe this genre will be more accepting to female voices. There has been an upswing in young adult science fiction and fantasy novels being turned into movies and most of the newer crop of projects, such as *Beautiful Creatures, The Host, The Hunger Games: Catching Fire, The Mortal Instruments: City of Bones*, and *Divergent*, are novels written by women. However, at the time this was written, two of the above movies have already come and gone from the box office without making much noise (*Beautiful Creatures* and *The Host*). Time will tell how the other three, all of which are set to be released within the next year, fare at the box office. Additionally, it is worth noting that none of these film adaptations are being directed by women.

Another point worth mentioning is that almost all of the 36 movies included here are either sequels themselves or spawned sequels that have since been released or are in development. The exceptions are the two dramas (a rare genre to break into the top grossing
movies yearly to begin with) and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Marcel Dansei (2012) went so far as to comment that “the term blockbuster today usually means a series of movies” (p. 166). As Jennifer Stuller (2009) wrote, “Archetypal themes and big ideas may retain their significance for any given culture, but the way stories are told and characters presented must evolve as a particular society does” (p. 4). But, with Hollywood’s current crop of movies we do not seem to have much of an evolution in our popular stories, particularly in movies dealing with heroes. Our stories need to evolve to include a more diverse representation of our society, including more stories revolving around and involving women in primary roles.

**Summary**

Film scholar Molly Haskell (1974) wrote about how film continues to perpetuate the “big lie” of women’s inferiority, “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 still servants and romantic slaves is brought home with particular force by the Hollywood film” (p. 2-3). Although Haskell wrote this nearly three decades ago, as an examination of the top three grossing films of each year from 2000 to 2011 illustrates, this lie of women’s inferiority is still very prevalent in films today. Women are continually depicted as caring more about appearance and romance than academics or careers and are portrayed as dependents, passive and emotional on a regular basis (Steinke, 2005; De Lauretis, 1982).

Blockbuster films lack strong female role models, and without strong female role models who give a reference for young women regarding what it means to be strong and powerful women, feminism and the fight to overcome sexist oppression cannot thrive. And, as bell hooks (1984) wrote, “Sexist oppression is of primary importance …because it is the practice of domination that most people experience, whether their role be that of the discriminator or the
discriminated against” (p. 36). Studying young women’s role models, especially in relation to those models pulled from the media, takes on added relevance when one takes into consideration that, “Girls are more likely to be recognizers – interacting with certain media characters as if they were personal acquaintances” (Lull, p. 147). But the depiction of women in film influences not only how women see themselves and their roles in society, but how men view women and their place in the world as well. Media and popular culture are social intuitions through which we learn about what it means to be male and female. “We learn their modes of operation and the values which they seek to maintain as true, natural, or good. As children we learn what girls and boys should be, and, later, what women and men should be” (Weedon, 1997, p. 3). Films have the authority to represent what is normal or natural (Weedon, 1997, p. 95). These ideologies “serve as the psychological and emotional justification for the differential treatment of some within a society, promoting the social dominance of one group over another. They have been used to rationalize oppression, violence, and genocide” (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008, p. 332). In doing so, ideologies help define which identities are deemed normal and which ones are considered deviant, and women have continually been considered deviant.

Larry Gross, a scholar and director of the University of Southern California Annenberg Communication School, commented that media representation is social power, and relative invisibility contributes to social inequality (Media Report to Women, 2008, p. 2). Women’s viewpoints are often missing from film and media and female characters are often almost completely physically absent from films. When women are present, “the media treatment of women is notoriously negative” (Freeman, Bourque & Shelton, 2001, p. xi). Weedon (1997) maintained that, “No representations in the written and visual media are gender-neutral. They
either confirm or challenge the status quo through the ways they construct or fail to construct images of femininity and masculinity” (p. 97).

Moshin and Jackson (2011) stated that “a critical rhetorician’s job is to understand how truth is produced through discourse and the processes that shape ideology” (p. 218-219). I have found that what is presented as truth through the blockbuster films of today is a patriarchal society that is maintained through the continued “othering” of women, presenting them as the “second sex” through the priority placed on heterosexual romance, marriage, and children as a means of fulfillment for women, the depiction of women as victims of violence who need to be rescued and cared for by men, and the importance placed on male leaders, while leaving women out of positions of power and influence. These ideologies reflect a sort of backlash against gains made in the public sphere by women as a result of the women’s liberation movement. In continually presenting these “othering” ideologies, the media promotes the exclusion of women from the public sphere and from positions of power. The subordination and oppression of women continues. Women are presented in films in “a way that is detrimental to women’s interests” (Howie, 2012, p. 199). A systematic oppression of women is present. As Storey (2009) explained, “Whenever revolutionary tendencies show a timid head, they are mitigated and cut short by a false fulfillment of wish-dreams, like wealth, adventure, passion, love, power, and sensationalism in general” (p. 63). In response to the “timid head” of change trumpeted by the women’s liberation movement in the 1960s to early 1980s, the promotion of patriarchal ideologies re-emerged in the top-grossing films of the late 1980s and has remained more than a decade into the new century. I believe, based on previous historical patterns in regards to the depiction of women in film, that we were due for a cultural shift around the time of 9/11, but the “War on Terror” that ensued repressed that shift, instead leading us back to protection narratives
that historically have promoted women as passive victims and men as hypermasculinized leaders and saviors. (This corresponds with the rise of the action films, especially superhero films.) The images we see on screen are “designed to impress certain beliefs and ideas on society, and this includes an attempt to move women away from the ideas represented in the feminist movement toward a viewpoint of submission and subordination and back toward a patriarchal society” (Hammer, 2010, p. 260). Wahneema Lubiano stated that, “Reality, after all, is merely something that resounds in minds already trained to recognize it as such” (Fleetwood, 2001, p. 5). Films train us to recognize the oppression of women and the dominance of patriarchy as simply reality – something that cannot be changed. John Storey (2009) stated that, “Hegemony involves a specific kind of consensus: a social group seeks to present its own particular interests as the general interests of society as a whole…subordinate groups come to appear to actively support and subscribe to values, ideals, objectives, and meanings that bind them into prevailing structures of power” (p. 80). Women have come to subscribe to values, ideals, objectives, and meanings that de-prioritize them and their place in society, instead accepting as “truth” the inevitably of certain roles, such as wife and mother, victim, and follower.

**The Future**

So the “othering” of women has been presented in blockbuster films as something that cannot be changed, but is this really true? Or, can our patriarchal ideologies be overcome? I do not claim to have the answer to these questions, but as I conclude this dissertation, I am not without hope, and I hope the reader will join me in my hopefulness. If as film scholars Pramaggiore and Wallis (2008) stated, “Ideologies that pervade a particular culture are inevitably embedded in the films made by writers, directors, and producers who are part of the culture” (p. 333), then the key to ridding films of these ideologies and, thus, effecting some measure of
change in society as well, may be to reach those in creative power and to promote women and other minorities as they seek creative positions within the entertainment industry. Hegemony must be constantly maintained, which means it is possible to change. As more women and minorities are allowed to come to the table, more viewpoints will be represented and then reinforced on screen. As bell hooks (1996) stated, “It may not be the intent of a filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned” (p. 2). Having a more diverse array of filmmakers will offer up different points of view then, even if they filmmakers are not consciously presenting counter-hegemonic views. Instead of having lip-service towards equality, we can actually have an equal and multicultural representation in the media, and, as has been shown, Hollywood has a lot do with cultural shifts in the larger society (Newsom, 2011).

Media literacy is vital to this endeavor. Bramlett-Solomon and Carstarphen defined media literacy as “the ability to critically understand media content, structure, and power. Those who understand how the various media industries operate and impact our lives, as a society and as individuals, have the best chance of controlling the media’s influence” (p.4). Through the continued dissection of media texts and practices scholars, such as myself, hope to further educate the general public on the messages they are being exposed to through the media. And as King (2000) mentioned, “that which is discounted or almost invisible on the grounds of routine familiarity is precisely the material that needs to be interrogated” (p.3). The more informed our society becomes, the louder the voices of resistance. This is not all that needs to be done, there is much work yet to do to stop the subordination and oppression of women, but as Paulo Freire (1970) said, “It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for liberation that they come to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot
be purely intellectual, but must involve action” (p. 65). Finding the oppressor out then, through the critical analysis of films and “refusing to accept the definition of oneself put forward by the powerful” (hooks, 2000, p. 92), is one small step towards action.
AFTERWORD

As I complete my dissertation, the final box office numbers for the year 2012 have just come in. I would be remiss if I did not take a moment at the end of this work to reflect upon the top movies of this most recent calendar year. What follows is a very brief look at some of the primary messages being relayed concerning women in the top three movies from 2012. This is by no means a comprehensive analysis of these films and their themes and ideologies, but rather this afterword’s purpose is merely to highlight some of the primary messages of the films in relation to women and how these compare with the previous works discussed. The top three movies do not deviate from the three categories laid out in this work; in fact they follow the recent trend of action films grabbing the top spots at the box office.

The top grossing movie of 2012 was *The Avengers*, a superhero movie that quickly became one of the top-grossing films of all time. It is currently ranked number three both domestically and worldwide in terms of overall box office. In this film, a group of superheroes, including the previously discussed Iron Man, are brought together to protect the world from the evil Loki and his invading army of aliens. Along with Iron Man (actor Robert Downey, Jr.), the team includes Captain America (actor Chris Evans), Thor (actor Chris Hemsworth), and the Hulk (actor Mark Ruffalo). They are assisted by the agents of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division (S.H.I.E.L.D.), particularly Black Widow (actress Scarlet Johansson) and Hawkeye (actor Jeremy Renner).
As with the previous action movies discussed in this dissertation, *The Avengers* relies heavily on violence to propel the story forward. Director Joss Whedon commented that the way the superheroes in the film resolve their issues is “in the grand American tradition – through violence” (Breznican, 2012, p. 48). And as is typical with stories focusing on violent acts, the stereotype of the damsel-in-distress is present in the film. The main female character, Black Widow, must be rescued from a rampaging Hulk by Thor. She then cowers in a corner while the fighting proceeds around her, despite the fact that she has been trained to fight. It is only when it is someone she cares about, Hawkeye, needs help that she is able to mobilize herself. The audience is led to believe that their relationship may be more than just colleagues/friends. In this one scene then we see not only the damsel-in-distress – a perfectly capable woman unable to fend for herself - but the priority for women to honor their heterosexual romantic relationships above all else.

The other particularly noteworthy aspect of this film is the lack of women in the story (which serves to prioritize the male perspective). There are only two women in the film that I would classify as significant characters: Black Widow and Agent Maria Hill (who is, in reality,
such a minor character that her name is only spoken once). The primary female characters from the individual superhero films leading up to this movie are virtually absent. The lead female character from Captain America is dead, the lead female character from Thor is only referred to when Nick Fury (the leader of S.H.I.E.L.D.) tells Thor that she has been moved to safety (she’s a damsel-in-distress without even knowing it!). Pepper Potts from Iron Man is the only lead female character to make an appearance and it is a minimal one at that. The slack is not really taken up by Black Widow, who is definitely a sidekick at best and, unlike her male counterparts, holds no great power. This may best be illustrated by the news clip montage at the end of the film, where we see all the male characters and their acts of bravery celebrated, but the Black Widow is nowhere to be found.

The second highest grossing film of 2012 is the last in the trilogy of Batman films by director Chris Nolan: The Dark Knight Rises. In the film Batman (actor Christian Bale) comes out of a sort of forced retirement to protect Gotham City from a villain by the name of Bane (actor Tom Hardy) who shuts Gotham off from the outside world and makes plans to set off a bomb that will destroy the city. (Interestingly, much was made of the relevancy of this film in the aftermath of the “occupy movement” of late 2011 to early 2012 in which many people protested the wealth distribution in the United States. However, what seems to have been overlooked in these discussions is the 99% in the movie are actually terrorized by one of their own and rescued by a member of the economic 1% - whether they know it or not. Those in power are still presented as the saviors and those who are not are still “othered.”)
As with *The Avengers*, there are huge amounts of time in this film in which no female character is present on screen. The lead character of Selena Kyle/Catwoman (actress Anne Hathaway) was marketed to movie-going audiences as being very capable of taking care of herself and as a true match for Batman. However, what the audience actually sees is a woman who often needs rescuing and even more often plays the damsel-in-distress stereotype to her own benefit, as when she plays the victim to get out of a shoot-out at a bar where she is meeting with a client. The audience also sees Selena presented as a “match” for Bruce (Batman) in the romantic way. Alfred (Bruce’s butler and confidant) tells Bruce early on that he has always dreamed of a normal life for him with a wife and children. The closing scene of the movie presents Selena as the avenue to this normalcy. As she acquiesces to this heterosexual romance-marriage-family narrative she is normalized as well. She goes from the bad girl to the saved girl.

The third top-grossing film of 2012 offers a slight variation on the action movies previously discussed, as a female character is the protagonist in the film. *The Hunger Games* is
based on a 2008 novel by Suzanne Collins (the first in a series). The movie takes place in a post-apocalyptic nation that is comprised of twelve Districts ruled by the Capitol. The Capitol established the Hunger Games as punishment for a past rebellion and as a means to retain control of the Districts. In these games two children (under 18) from each District – a boy and a girl – are randomly drawn each year to compete in a game of survival. The last person alive is the winner. Katniss Everdeen (actress Jennifer Lawrence) is our protagonist, the female contestant from District 12.

Figure 12: The Hunger Games movie poster

As can be seen from the brief synopsis above, the entire film is built upon a violent “game.” Thus, it is no surprise that though Katniss is shown to be strong in many ways, and even rescues fellow contestant Peeta at one point, she is still the victim of much violence. In fact, because she is shown to be a strong contender to win the games after receiving a record high 11 out of 12 points in the pre-game assessment of the players, she is the target of additional violence. Those controlling the games target her for harassment, sending fireballs at her to
prevent her from getting too close to the border of the territory that the games are being held in. She is badly burned and then becomes the target of a group of kids who manage to corner her in a tree. (Her high rating pre-games has set her up as a significant threat to the others in the game.) Her mentor, Haymitch, must aid her in this situation by schmoozing for donations so that she can be sent, via balloon, ointment for her burn. The ointment allows her to move, but she is still stuck in the tree. She is only able to escape this situation (with the help of a young girl named Rue) by committing violence upon not only her tormentors but upon herself as well. She drops a hive of killer tracker jackers (bees) from high up in the tree down on the kids below as they sleep. The tracker jackers chase off most of the kids, kill one girl, and leave Katniss very sick. In an example of women working together, Rue later finds her and tends to her till her reaction has passed. The two then team up, but this team is quickly dissolved when Rue is caught in a trap and then killed.

The audience is also witness to a love story within the film. Katniss comes to love Peeta as the movie progresses. She even risks her life to get him medicine when he is ill. Upon seeing their relationship grow, the game’s organizers exalt this union by declaring that there can be two winners to the game if they are from the same district. As Katniss and Peeta are the only two contestants left from the same district, this serves to reinforce the importance of their heterosexual union. In the end, this heterosexual romance is used to offset the rebelliousness and hope for resistance that Katniss may have inspired in the more oppressed districts through her performance in the games. Her defiant attitude – she and Peeta threaten to eat poisonous berries, killing themselves when the organizers try to change the rules at the end of the game back to only one winner – is made okay by the fact that she did it for love, and love is the utmost thing a girl can aspire to.
Again, what I have presented here is just a glimpse into these top three grossing films of 2012 and some of their central themes surrounding women. There are many more aspects of these films that could be discussed, but from the short analysis it can be seen that the films of 2012, though often marketed as being more empowering for women, are still recycling the same patriarchal ideologies found in the top three grossing movies from each year for 2000 to 2011. On the other hand, it is well established that change does not happen overnight, and maybe there is some reason for hope in that the women presented in these films are stronger and more capable of fending for themselves than what audiences are used to, even if they still have a long way to go. It is also somewhat encouraging to see another film with a female protagonist make it into the top three grossing films of the year. That makes three years in a row in which this has occurred (Alice in Wonderland in 2010, The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn, Part One in 2011, and The Hunger Games in 2012) – something that has not happened in many decades. What will we see another 10-15 years down the line?
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USA: New Line Cinema.


APPENDIX A: FILM SUMMARIES

Animated Films

The following films are examined in Chapter Two and have been classified as Animated Films:

1) *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (2000): Although technically a live-action film, I have included this film in the animated category due to its target audience (children) and visual effects that produce a world that is normally seen only in animated features. Based on the 1957 children’s book of the same name by Dr. Seuss, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is the tale of an outcast who hates Christmas and decides to ruin Christmas for the nearby villagers in the town of Whoville. However, things do not go as planned.

2) *Shrek* (2001), *Shrek 2* (2004), and *Shrek the Third* (2007): In the first *Shrek* movie we meet many of the characters that will populate this trilogy. Shrek (voiced by Mike Meyers) is a swamp-dwelling ogre. When his swamp is threatened, he agrees to rescue Princess Fiona (voiced by Cameron Diaz) and bring her to Lord Farquaud (voiced by
John Lithgow) so that the Lord might make her his queen. In return, Shrek and his swamp will be left alone. Along for the journey is Donkey (voiced by Eddie Murphy), who has inserted himself into Shrek’s life, much to Shrek’s chagrin.

![Shrek movie poster](https://imdb.com)

In *Shrek 2*, we rejoin Shrek, Donkey, and Fiona. Shrek and Fiona are now married and the time has come to meet her parents. Things do not go well, however, as Fiona’s parents have difficulty accepting the mate and lifestyle Fiona has chosen, and her father the King (voiced by John Cleese) is confronted with a deal he made with Fairy Godmother (voiced by Jennifer Saunders) to have Fiona marry her son, Prince Charming (voiced by Rupert Everett). We are also introduced in the sequel to *Puss in Boots* (voiced by Antonio Banderas), an assassin hired to kill Shrek who, instead, becomes an ally.
In the final Shrek film (at least in this dissertation), *Shrek the Third*, the adventures of Shrek, Fiona, and their friends continue. This time around, Shrek is in search of a new king for Far Far Away Land, so that he does not need to take on the responsibility after his father-in-law dies. He, Donkey, and Puss strike out to find and bring back a distant relative, Arthur (voiced by Justin Timberlake) to become king.
3) *Finding Nemo* (2003): In this Disney film, a young clownfish named Nemo (voiced by Alexander Gould) is captured in the Great Barrier Reef and taken to a fish tank in a dental office. His father, Marlin (voiced by Albert Brooks), sets out to rescue him. Along the way he meets Dory (voiced by Ellen Degeneres), a forgetful, but kind, fish who becomes his travel companion. Meanwhile, with the help of his new tank friends, Nemo plots his own escape as well.

![Finding Nemo movie poster](IMDB.com)

4) *Cars* (2006): In this Disney animated film, a hot-shot race-car named Lightning McQueen (voiced by Owen Wilson) gets stuck in Radiator Springs on his way to his championship race. As he waits in the town, doing community service work for some damage he inflicted upon the streets when arriving, he makes new friends and finds love.
5) *Toy Story 3* (2010): The third film in the hugely successful *Toy Story* franchise (the other two films were made in 1995 and 1999, prior to the dates covered in this work) reunites the audience with Woody (voiced by Tom Hanks), Buzz (voiced by Tim Allen), and their gang of toys as they prepare for their owner Andy’s move to college. All of the gang, except for Woody, is accidentally donated to a daycare center ruled by a tyrannical teddy bear named Lotso (voiced by Ned Beatty). Woody sets out to find and help rescue the gang.
The following films have been classified as action films and are examined in Chapter Three.

1) *Mission: Impossible 2* (2000): The third top-grossing film of the first year of the 21st century is a sequel to a popular 1996 spy film based on a television series that ran from 1966 to 1973. The sequel’s story has agent Ethan Hunt (actor Tom Cruise) and his team tasked with finding a deadly new virus called Chimera that was stolen in transport. Their mission is to destroy it. The team members are aided in their search by master thief and former girlfriend of Sean Ambrose (actor Dougray Scott) - the man who stole the virus, Nya Nordoff-Hall (actress Thandie Newton).
2) *Spider-Man* (2002), *Spider-Man 2* (2004), and *Spider-Man 3* (2007): *Spider-Man* introduces us to Peter Parker (actor Tobey Maguire), a high school student bitten by a genetically modified spider and given super powers. The film follows Peter as he adapts to his new powers; suffers the loss of a loved one; pines over the girl next door, Mary Jane (actress Kristen Dunst); and, eventually, comes to use his powers to fight evil.
tentacles that have a mind of their own, sets out on a path of destruction. Spider-Man also continues to struggle in his personal life, as he is still in love with Mary Jane, but she is with someone else.

In the number one grossing movie of 2007, *Spider-Man 3*, Peter Parker continues to seek a balance between his day-to-day life and his life as a superhero—fighting off a variety of villains.
3) *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003) and *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* (2006): *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* is a film inspired by a popular Disney theme park attraction. The film follows the exploits of the pirate Captain Jack Sparrow (actor Johnny Depp). Captain Sparrow teams up with a local blacksmith, Will Turner (actor Orlando Bloom), in order to rescue Elizabeth Swann (actress Keira Knightly), daughter of the local governor, who has been kidnapped by the pirate Barbossa (actor Geoffrey Rush). Will embarks on the journey because he is in love with Elizabeth, while Jack embarks on the journey to retrieve a piece of Aztec gold that Elizabeth possesses that is believed to be the key to an ancient treasure.

*Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* movie poster (IMDB.com)

In the second *Pirates of the Caribbean* film (there have been four films to date, but the last two films, though popular were not within the top three grossing films in the years they were released), *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest*, Captain Jack Sparrow owes a blood debt to Davey Jones (actor Bill Nighy), Captain of the Flying Dutchman, a ship crewed by ghosts. Jack must find a way out of his debt or he will be doomed to eternal damnation and servitude on
the Flying Dutchman. Elsewhere, Will Turner and Elizabeth Swann are arrested and sentenced to death unless Will can get Jack's compass for the corrupt Lord Beckett. Will and Elizabeth end up joining with Jack in another adventure.

4) Night at the Museum (2006): Night at the Museum is an action-comedy set in the Museum of Natural History in New York City. (Although many of the action films examined in this dissertation have elements of comedy, this is the only film that is firmly planted in the action-comedy sub genre.) Larry Daley is a new night security guard at the museum. He is in for quite the surprise when he discovers that the exhibits within the museum come alive at night.
5) *Transformers* (2007), *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), and *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011): The first *Transformers* movie was released in the summer of 2007, and was titled, simply, *Transformers*. The film introduces us to many of the characters present in all three of the movies. (A fourth *Transformers* film, introducing some new characters, is slated for 2014.) The main character of all three films is Sam Witwicky (actor Shia LaBeouf). When we meet Sam he is a teenager who becomes involved in a war between the Autobots and Decepticons, two factions of an alien race of robots. The Decepticons are on Earth looking for the Allspark, an object that created their alien race, so that they might use it to bring to life to all of the machines on our planet and take control. The Autobots want to protect the human race. Sam becomes involved because his great-grandfather, who was a trepid explorer, discovered the Allspark when it crashed to Earth many years ago, and Sam inherited a pair of glasses with directions to the Allspark’s location etched into them. Sam works with the Autobots and the military to defeat the Decepticons, with his high school crush, Mikaela (actress Megan Fox) by his side.
The story continues in the second *Transformers* movie, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*. In the film, Sam, who is now a freshman in college, starts seeing Cybertronian symbols after finding a piece of the Allspark that was not destroyed. He is then hunted by the Decepticons, who want the knowledge he possesses to activate a machine that would provide them with an energy source that would destroy the Earth’s sun. Sam again works with the military to save the world, with his girlfriend, Mikaela, in tow.
The third film is set three years after the events of the second film. The Autobots are working with the United States military to fight off remaining cells of Decepticons. It is discovered that an alien technology was found by the Apollo 11 mission to the moon and hidden away for many years. The Decepticons find this technology and steal it with the intent of using it to enslave humanity and restore their home plant of Cybertron. The Autobots, the military, and our protagonist, Sam Witwicki, must race to save the human race from enslavement. (Sam is now living with a new girlfriend, Carly (actress Rose Huntington-Whiteley), in New York City.)

Transformers: Dark of the Moon movie poster (IMDB.com)

6) The Dark Knight (2008): A sequel to Batman Begins (the number eight top grossing film of 2005), The Dark Knight once again focuses on the character of Batman, made famous in comic books, television shows, and previous film adaptations. In the film, Batman (actor Christian Bale), with the help of Lieutenant Jim Gordon (actor Gary Oldman) and District Attorney Harvey Dent (actor Aaron Eckhart), seeks to destroy the criminal organizations that plague the city of Gotham. They soon encounter, however, a rising criminal mastermind known as The Joker (actor Heath Ledger) and much chaos ensues. (Note: The third, and final, film in the trilogy, The Dark Knight Rises, was released in
2012 and was the second highest grossing film of the year. This film is briefly discussed in the afterward.)

![The Dark Knight movie poster](IMDB.com)

7) *Iron Man* (2008) and *Iron Man 2* (2010): Based on the Marvel comic book hero, *Iron Man* introduces us to Tony Stark (actor Robert Downey, Jr.) a financially successful businessman. While in Afghanistan demonstrating a new missile his company has developed, he is captured and wounded. Instead of assembling a missile for his captors, as they demand, he creates an armored suit and uses it to escape. Once back in the United States, he announces that his company will cease making weapons, and he begins work on an updated armored suit. He discovers that Obadiah Stane (actor Jeff Bridges), his second in command at Stark industries and longtime friend of his father, has actually been selling Stark weapons to the insurgents. Tony then uses his new suit to prevent Obadiah from completing his agenda.
In *Iron Man 2*, Tony Stark has revealed to the world that he is Iron Man, and now everyone wants to get their hands on the technology he has developed. One of those people is Ivan Vanko (actor Mickey Rourke) - the son of Stark’s father’s former partner. Vanko joins forces with Stark’s rival weapons contractor, Justin Hammer (actor Sam Rockwell) to bring down Stark and claim the technology.
8) *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008): A fourth film in the blockbuster *Indiana Jones* movie series from the 1980s, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* reunites the audience with intrepid archeologist, professor, and explorer Indiana Jones (actor Harrison Ford). Jones meets a young man named Mutt (actor Shia LaBeouf) with a coded message from a former colleague, Henry Oxley (actor John Hurt). Jones and Mutt set out to decode the message and become entangled in a race to retrieve an ancient crystal skull and return it to its rightful place. They are pursued by Irina Spalko (actress Cate Blanchett) and her men who want the skull for much more devious purposes.

![Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull movie poster (IMDB.com)](image)

**Science Fiction/Fantasy Films:**

The following films have been classified as science fiction/fantasy films and are examined in Chapter Four.

Deathly Hallows Part 2 (2011): The Harry Potter movie franchise consists of eight movies based on books written by British author J.K. Rowling and is the most financially successful movie franchise in the history of film. All eight films have been huge financial successes; the least successful of all the films – Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (2004) – grossed nearly $250 million at the domestic box office and nearly $797 million world-wide. However, only half of the films were among the three top-grossing movies of the year in which they were released, and, thus, included in this dissertation.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone is the first film in the series. It introduces us to our protagonist, Harry Potter (actor Daniel Ratcliffe), as he begins to discover, at the age of 11, that he is magical and goes off to Hogwarts, a school for witchcraft and wizardry. He makes many friends at school, including Ron (actor Rupert Grint) and Hermione (actress Emma Watson), who become his best friends and companions for the many adventures that will follow in the series.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone movie poster (IMDB.com)
In *Harry Potter and the Goble of Fire*, we join Harry in his fourth year at Hogwarts. The action in the film mainly focuses on the Triwizard Tournament - a magical tournament between three schools of magic: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. Each school has one contestant selected by the magical goblet of fire. However, on the night of selection, the Goblet spews out four names instead of the usual three, with Harry selected as the fourth contestant, despite being younger than the minimum age of 17. What comes out of the goblet must be honored, so Harry is forced to go compete in the three exceedingly difficult tasks of the tournament.

*Harry Potter and the Goble of Fire* movie poster (IMDB.com)

Harry begins his sixth year at Hogwarts in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Harry finds a book at school that is labeled with "this book is the property of the Half Blood Prince." The book helps him with his potions class and exposes him to some dangerous potions along the way. Harry also spends his time meeting with his headmaster, Dumbledore (actor Michael Gambon) in order to learn more about the evil Voldemort's (actor Ralph Fiennes) past so that he can discover a weakness.
The highest grossing film in the franchise is the final film of the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2*. In the final film, Harry, aided by friends Ron and Hermione and other classmates, friends, and instructors at Hogwarts, faces down the evil Lord Voldemort in one final, grand battle.

classic work of author J.R.R. Tolkien, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy takes the audience into a fantastical world of hobbits, elves, trolls, wizards, and more. In the first film, the audience is introduced to the hobbit Frodo (actor Elijah Woods) who has come into possession of an ancient and powerful ring that had been thought to have been lost long ago. Gandalf (actor Ian McKellen) the wizard instructs Frodo that he must journey to the Cracks of Doom in order to destroy the ring and end the reign of the Dark Lord. Frodo is joined in his long arduous journey by Gandalf, an elf named Legolas (actor Orlando Bloom), a dwarf named Gimli (actor John Rhys-Davies), the humans Aragorn (actor Viggo Mortensen) and Boromir (actor Sean Bean), and his three hobbit friends Merry (actor Dominic Monaghan), Pippin (actor Billy Boyd) and Sam (actor Sean Astin). The group faces much danger and evil on their quest.

*The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring* movie poster (IMDB.com)

The adventures of Frodo and his friends continue in the second film, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. The group has been divided into smaller groups. Frodo and Sam continue on towards Mordor with a sneaky new companion, Gollum (voiced by
Andy Serkis). Meanwhile, Gandalf and Aragorn lead the “World of Men” against Sauron's army, attempting to draw his all-seeing gaze from Frodo and Sam and their mission.

*The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* movie poster (IMDB.com)

In the final film in the trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, the great battle rages on, as the former Fellowship aids the kingdoms of Rohan and Gondor in a great battle and Frodo and Sam reach the end of their arduous journey.

*The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* movie poster (IMDB.com)
3) Star Wars Episode 2: Attack of the Clones (2002) and Star Wars Episode 3: Revenge of the Sith (2005): Two films in a trilogy of prequels to one of the biggest science fiction franchises in the history of film, Attack of the Clones and Revenge of the Sith take us to a galaxy far, far away. (The first of the prequels, Star Wars: Episode 1 - The Phantom Menace, though the highest grossing movie the year it was released, is not included in this study, as it was released in 1999.) In Attack of the Clones, we join the action after an assassination attempt on the life of Senator Padme Amidala (actress Natalie Portman). Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi (actor Ewan McGregor) and his apprentice Anakin Skywalker (actor Hayden Christensen) are sent to investigate. Anakin is sent to Naboo with Padme and Obi-Wan is sent to the planet of Kamino, where he investigates the assassination attempts and discovers a connection between the assassination attempt and a separatist movement led by a former Jedi against the Republic.

Star Wars Episode 3: Attack of the Clones movie poster (IMDB.com)

In Revenge of the Sith, the Republic is in the midst of great turmoil. As the dark forces become stronger, Anakin Sywalker is lured to the dark side of the force and become the evil Sith
Lord Darth Vader. The stage is set for the events that moviegoers experienced many years ago in the original *Star Wars* trilogy from the 1970s and 1980s.

*Star Wars Episode 3: Revenge of the Sith* movie poster (IMDB.com)

4) *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (2005): Based on the classic book by C.S. Lewis, the *Chronicle of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* follows the adventures of four London children – Lucy (actress Georgie Henley), Edmond (actor Skander Keynes), Peter (actor William Moseley), and Susan (actress Anna Popplewell) who are sent to a professor's country home for their own protection during World War II. In the stately house they find a magical wardrobe that leads to the mystical land of Narnia. Narnia is being ruled by an evil witch (actress Tilda Swinton). To defeat the witch, the children must join forces with the lion Aslan (voiced by Liam Neeson), a mighty leader.
5) *Avatar* (2009): The highest grossing movie of all time, *Avatar*, is set on the mythical planet of Pandora. Former Marine Jake Sully (actor Sam Worthington) embarks on a mission to the distant world of Pandora. Jake is a paraplegic, and the company that Jake works for offers him a spinal surgery that will fix his legs in exchange for his services gathering intelligence for a military unit led by Colonel Quaritch (actor Stephen Lang). To gather this intelligence, Jake attempts to infiltrate the Na'vi people with the use of an "avatar" identity. Jake bonds with the native tribe and quickly falls in love with the beautiful alien Neytiri (actress Zoe Saldana). Eventually Jake must choose a side as the company moves to destroy the Na’vi people in order to gain access to precious minerals located under their home.
6) *Alice in Wonderland* (2010): This film is based upon the characters created by author Lewis Carroll in his 1865 book *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (an adaptation of which was made into an animated film by Disney in 1951). In the 2010 film, Alice (actress Mia Wasikowska) is a 19-year-old woman. She receives a marriage proposal at a party, but runs away and falls down a hole in the garden after following an unusual rabbit. She finds herself in a magical place called Underland – a place that seems both familiar to her and not at all familiar. Alice meets many creatures in the land, including the Mad Hatter (actor Johnny Depp), and realizes that she is there for a reason. She must fight the fierce Jabberwocky, defeat the Red Queen (actress Helena Bonham Carter), and restore the rightful queen, the White Queen (actress Anne Hathaway), to her throne.
7) *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 1* (2011): The third highest grossing film of 2011 transports the audience to a world much like our own, except that vampires and werewolves exist. *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn, Part 1* is the fourth film in the popular *Twilight* films based on a series of young adult novels written by Stephenie Meyer. In this film, mortal Bella weds vampire Edward and gets pregnant. Jacob, a werewolf who is also in love with Bella, is greatly dismayed by these events. Bella’s baby is growing at an accelerated rate and nobody knows if she will survive the pregnancy. As Bella struggles to survive, a war wages outside the home she is holed up in between the werewolves and the vampires over the fate of Bella and her baby.
Although the films examined in this dissertation are classified into three categories - Animated, Action, and Science Fiction/Fantasy - many other genres of films exist. Of the movies that meet the requirements for inclusion in this study (one of the top three grossing movies for the year it was released), two films do not easily fall into one of the three genres that serve to classify the films in this dissertation. These films are mentioned in passing in the preceding chapters, as despite being from another genre (drama), the films still exhibit many of the same ideologies regarding women that are presented in the examined genres.

1) *Cast Away* (2000): In *Cast Away*, FedEx employee Chuck Noland (actor Tom Hanks) is marooned on an island after his plane crashes into the ocean. Stranded far from civilization, he struggles to survive all alone on the island with minimal goods from the crash that wash ashore and his own wits.