

Wonder Woman:

An Idealized Tale of Female Sexual Curiosity

After reading Carina Chocano's essay "Let It Go", I was intrigued by the patterns Chocano presented regarding the Disney movie *Frozen*, and so, as a *Frozen* virgin, I decided to rent it from my local video store (yes, they still exist). The first time I viewed the film, I noticed all of the problematic elements Chocano had pointed out regarding the female narratives: emotions are dangerous and must be kept hidden, attractiveness is important, and helping others is the only way to be happy, as well as the more obvious transformation Elsa goes through as she becomes the sexy ice-queen. As the credits began, my three-year-old son proclaimed *Frozen* as his favorite movie and begged us to watch it over and over again. However, as the movie played in my living room for the umpteenth time, I was reminded, despite its apparent unrelatedness to a children's movie, of one of the top grossing films of 2017: *Wonder Woman*.

According to the website *Business Insider*, *Wonder Woman* was the 7th highest grossing movie released in 2017, making over 821.8 million dollars worldwide. It is the first female-superhero movie released by DC, and one of just a handful to be released to date by Hollywood. *Wonder Woman* has been characterized as a "power to the woman" film-- a step forward for womankind--as some would say. *Business Insider* claims, "The movie wasn't just great, it was a beacon for the female empowerment movement going on in the country." Women and girls lined up in their costumes, lasso in hand, to see it on its release date. Families and feminists alike sat in theaters together, a buzz of excitement and wonder filled the theaters, the internet, and the world. *Wonder Woman* is supposed to be about the new female archetype that so many people have been hoping for. But was it?

The scene in *Frozen* that sparked a connection for me between the two films is the scene in which we first meet prince Hans. Princess Anna is dancing around the town singing of her hopes for the future when she runs into prince Hans' horse. The music abruptly stops and Anna falls into a boat, in which she and Hans have an awkward first encounter. She falls on top of Hans and they exchange an uncomfortable moment as she continues to lie on top of him. A child may see this scene as an embarrassing and silly moment, but through the lens of an adult, it is clear that the awkwardness is a sexual one. This is when *Wonder Woman* was brought into my mind's eye: the boat, the unnecessary sexual tension, the male and female character too close for their own comfort, a pattern that sparked my attention and seemed to spark other people's attention as I pointed out the similarities between the two.

Although it may seem that there is a new female archetype in today's films, through close examination of recent "progressive" releases, we can see that stereotypes and binaries remain, such as can be seen in the female-superhero movie *Wonder Woman*. The first thirty minutes of *Wonder Woman* lived up to every expectation that I'd had. The film's establishing shot is of a beautiful island resembling a Greek paradise, which we later find out is Themyscira, an oasis made for the Amazon women by the gods. Warrior women run through the shot, presumably preparing for battle by shooting arrows, engaging in fight training, and gracefully maneuvering physical stunts on horses. A young Diana, not yet Wonder Woman, watches in awe and copies the women from afar. Practicing her own moves, she jumps off of a cliff, and luckily, down below, her mother stretches out her arm and catches her one-handed. The women are strong, brave, powerful; the leaders are female, and it is clear that they kick ass. However, this feminist utopia begins to dwindle as Steve Trevor's plane crashes near Themyscira.

Diana, now a young woman, saves Trevor and brings him to shore. German soldiers follow Trevor by boat, as they are also able to cross through the veil, and we are then blessed with an incredible war scene between the Amazons and the Germans. The beach scene allows us to see the real power of the Amazons through their plethora of moves, a deep contrast compared to the German soldiers' two-dimensional abilities. From a feminist perspective, the moment that the female Amazons defeat the male German soldiers is the highlight of the film. Yet this pinnacle of female empowerment occurs in the first few moments of the movie.

In the wake of this battle, the Amazons are afraid because no one has ever crossed the veil into Themyscira before. After Trevor gains the trust of the Amazons through their use of the Lasso of Truth, we are quickly bombarded with a shocking (and humorous) bathtub scene. Thirty minutes into the film, Diana walks in on Trevor stepping out of the tub and stares at his naked body (which he does not try to cover). She stares at his lower half, which is hidden from the camera, and asks, "would you say you are a typical example of your sex?" and Trevor proudly responds, "I am... above average". Diana continues to stare, and then breaks the silence: "What is that?" Trevor assumes she is talking about his penis, but he then realizes she is referring to the watch sitting near him.

This moment is shocking because the man is the sexualized object! The ever-present male gaze is now flipped, as she is gazing at him, and we too are gazing. Is this an attempt at a new approach, where women can be the oglers? It seems that the ogled can become the ogler, but only if it is done through the male gaze. This objectification is masked as Diana's curiosity for a body part that she has never seen before. However, this encounter strongly reinforces gender ideals: the inexperienced sexual curiosity of a female, googly-eyeing a more experienced man

and his penis. Trevor's masculinity is reaffirmed as his female savior sees his body and stops in her tracks. If there was any question that men wrote the storyboard and screenplay, it is removed by the obvious elevation of the male in the bath scene.

In fact, this woman's reaction was not written by a woman, but by a man named Allan Heinberg. The story boards were created by three men, the original Wonder Woman was created by a man, and over half of the credited cast is men. Such statistics are not unusual: of the top one hundred films released in 2016, only thirty five had a female lead or co lead. It is undeniable that these numbers are not representative of the current population in America, which is 51% female. However, the percentage of female representation in film is notably higher than female representation in American government, where women make up only 20% of our elected representatives.

As the film's plot unfolds, we are eventually reminded of the oh so ever-present male gaze when Steve and Diana decide to travel to Belgium in order to kill the Doctor and General who are leading the German army. Steve brings together a small group of men to strengthen their mission; the group commences and discusses plans inside a bar. When Diana mentions that she will be coming along on the mission, the men make comments about a woman joining them, such as "I'm not gonna get myself killed helping a wee lassie out of a ditch". In this moment a man points a gun at the men from behind, and Diana quickly grabs the gun out of the man's hand and defuses the situation by throwing him across the room. One of the men then takes a drink and pretends not to have seen Diana's incredible abilities and the other says matter-of-factly, "I am both frightened and aroused". This remark sets up a binary placed on women. Are these the binaries that Hollywood has set up for women? A female can either be frightening or arousing,

or both. There is no thank you, no apology for their degrading words; instead, his apology and thank you are all wrapped into one sexual comment, as though a comment about being sexually aroused by her would be a compliment. “Compliments” like this one are deeply familiar to women, but such a remark is only a compliment in the world of the male gaze, because regardless of a woman’s accomplishments she is thus reduced to a sexual object, useful as a source of male arousal.

In addition to the bath scene, in which the humor lies in Diana’s apparent interest in Steve Trevor’s penis, zooming in on *Wonder Woman* (2017) we find the film to be dominated by the male gaze, not only in the portrayal of Wonder Woman herself, but in the portrayal of what a woman's behavior looks like versus what it means to be a man:

- A woman's job consists of teaching men how to love and be decent human beings. The history of the Amazons is portrayed as if it were a 3D painting: the Queen explains to Diana that Zeus created the Amazons in order to bring love to men's hearts, as they are the bridge to a greater understanding of all men. The visual that goes along with this narrative shows naked women seductively coming out of the water and climbing a boulder towards men that are violently fighting.
- Diana sees Steve Trevor naked and asks questions about his penis, asking, “would you say you are a typical example of your sex?” he responds proudly “I am... above average”.
- She needs a man to teach her. Throughout the entirety of the film, Diana is naive, curious, and in need of direction.

- Female sexual curiosity. The bath scene and boat scene are both examples of idealized female sexual curiosity.
- Having an “above average” penis is a desirable thing to have, and should not be covered up if a woman walks in.
- Sexualized conversations. The sex talk scene is one long overly sexualized conversation between Steve Trevor and Diana when they are on a boat headed to Europe. She insists that he lie with her, and he nervously says, “I don’t sleep with women”. She continues to encourage him, and ask questions; Steve ultimately ends up sleeping next to her. Their conversation consists of sex, and nothing but sex. It seems despite her innocence that Diana is seducing him, while he is seemingly trying to be a gentleman.
- Steve Trevor dresses Diana up as his secretary, supposedly as camouflage but in effect demoting her to a trivial social role.
- Diana’s beauty is a continual talking point; there are countless remarks about and nods to Diana’s beauty. When they reach “civilization”, men watch her and make comments such as “you are a work of art”. The focus on her beauty does not speak for itself as it might in a male superhero movie, in which the attractiveness of the super hero is rarely a talking point.
- No one believes her. When Diana tells Steve about Ares, the god of war, he brushes it off as silly, and encourages her to not speak of it, seemingly afraid of what others will think. He can be close to her, sleep with her, and even love her, but he does not need to believe her.

- Men can say whatever they please to a woman, as long as they believe their remarks to be a compliment.
- Sex symbol transformation. Similarly, to Elsa's transformation in *Frozen*, Diana goes through a transformation when becoming Wonder Woman. The team Steve Trevor brought together are in the trenches trying to reach their destination, yet Diana goes against Trevor's wishes in order to help women and children she sees in distress. The first action of the transformation consists of Diana letting her hair down to show her long hair perfectly curled. We, the audience, then see the Wonder Woman costume for the first time: a sleeveless and form fitting bodice, which covers only part of her thighs, paired with knee-high boots.
- Her love interest dominates screen time. Diana's male co-character, Steve Trevor, has a large part in the film, and is arguably the real main character of the film; it is his mission, he makes the plans, picks the team, and gets in the last punch. Superhero movies tend to have the love interest as only a secondary character, but *Wonder Woman* inverts this balance so that the male dominates the screen.
- Sex scene. Diana's naivety is highlighted as she sees snow for the first time, and immediately following this, Steve walks her to her room where they kiss passionately. The scene alludes to them having sex, although actual sex is not shown. Taking a woman's virginity is desirable, no matter how naive she is and naiveté seems to be a quality that men in *Wonder Woman* find attractive. It is also important to note the lack of sex scenes in other superhero films.

- Only a man can make Diana into a god. Diana is fighting Ares the god of war when Steve Trevor blows up the plane he is flying for the greater good. She is so upset when Steve Trevor dies that in that moment she becomes a god *and* the god killer. She is filled with so much sadness and anger that all of her powers come into fruition in that moment. This storyline adds to the implicit narrative that a woman needs a man in order to reach her full potential.
- She falls in love with the man and is in love with him long after his death, so much so that in the film's last scene Batman sends her the original photo of them together.

Why should we care about such underlying issues in a fun, lighthearted superhero movie?

The audience is presented with a female superhero and because we have been so deprived of strong female characters we take the movie at face value, but noticing and acknowledging the problematic narratives and characteristics of *Wonder Woman* allows for deeper analysis of our own culture: the creator of it.

These unrealistic and ideological gender roles are present not just in our films; they are present in our workforce, government and society. Steve Trevor does not believe Diana's claims regarding the god of war Ares at first. Yet following Diana's transformation into Wonder Woman and the implied sex scene, the men that they are traveling with state their belief in her stories of Ares. We would expect the man who has just taken her virginity to proclaim his belief in her as well, but instead he stays silent. It is only when he sees Ares, the god of war himself, that Steve expresses his belief. It seems that this man can "love" her, but does not need to believe her. We have seen a similar narrative regarding women being believed or, more accurately, not believed on a public level with the movement "Me, Too" and with the recent

assault allegations against men in the public eye. Sexual assault is often brushed off with the frightening phrase “boys will be boys”, and an even more frightening concept: women are not trustworthy and should not be taken seriously. A recent example of this would be the controversial Brett Kavanaugh hearings.

On September 4th 2018, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford related to the United States Senate an experience which had happened thirty years ago, when she and Kavanaugh were teenagers. This experience was one that she argues has affected her life into her adulthood, as she testified, the night that Brett Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her has "haunted me episodically as an adult." Ford came out publicly with the sexual assault allegations when she learned that Donald Trump had nominated Kavanaugh for a Supreme Court seat. Ford nervously, yet gracefully, described the scene in detail to a room full of primarily old white men, and through the fictionalizing medium of television, to millions of people across the globe.

She said she was pushed into a bedroom where Kavanaugh "began running his hands over my body and grinding into me."

In the room, with Kavanaugh and Judge, she said, a drunk Kavanaugh "groped me and tried to take off my clothes."

"I believed he was going to rape me. I tried to yell for help. When I did, Brett put his hand over my mouth to stop me from yelling," she said. "This is what terrified me the most and had the most lasting impact on my life. It was hard for me to breathe, and I thought that Brett was accidentally going to kill me." (CNN Politics)

Ford's claim was characterized by the Republican house as a Democratic power-grab. A red faced Senator Lindsey Graham yelled aggressively (while pointing his finger), "Boy y'all want power. God I hope you never get it." He then turned to Kavanaugh, and said, "You're looking for a fair process, you came to the wrong town at the wrong time, my friend." (CNN Politics)

News of the hearings flooded my Facebook newsfeed, and unsurprisingly, I quickly noticed a pattern regarding who believes Kavanaugh and who believes Ford. Almost every single person on my feed who posted articles, memes, and photos pointing towards Kavanaugh as the victim had also posted continual support for Trump; and in Trump's America, there is little room for believing women. There is no proof of what happened (or didn't happen) that night thirty years ago, however, America's automatic dismissal and repression of women's voices, testimonies, and experiences bubbles insidiously under the surface of American society, and even seeps into movies with a female lead. American culture is not concerned with protecting women; instead, many believe that our men are the ones who need protecting.

It seems that the only way to rid of the male gaze in government and film is for females to be their own representatives and write their own superheroes. However, in the book *Feminist Film Theory*, Sue Thornham argues that simply having more female writers, actors, and directors in cinema is not necessarily the answer:

...Even with women fully represented in the film industry, men will continue to write, direct and produce films about women. Unless convinced otherwise, they will continue to produce the same old stereotypes. Finally, many women, products of the same society that created the neurotic male filmmakers, are anti-woman. Simply having more females working in film will not change the films' content

unless everyone working in films, male and female, starts rethinking the traditional sex role stereotypes.

Throughout history, we have seen cohesive parallels regarding movie narratives and culture. In order for women to gain fair and equal representation, women must first notice and acknowledge the presence of the male gaze. After thoroughly analyzing *Wonder Women*, we see that it seems as long as the male gaze is dominating our culture, women will not have accurate representation in film or government. Perhaps we should envision new superpowers for ourselves by becoming our own advocates.

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Wonder Woman. Directed by Patty Jenkins, Story by Zack Snyder, Allan Heinberg, and Jason

Fuchs. Performances by Gal Gadot and Chris Pine, Warner Brothers, 2017.