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Transformative Journey of Women on Screen. Review on Lisa V. Mazey (ed.), *Cinematic Women, from Objecthood to Heroism: Essays on Female Gender Representation on Western Screens and in TV Productions*. Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2020.

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TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY OF WOMEN ON SCREEN

Over the last few years, revolutionary Western cinema has been a critical battleground in a number of debates concerning 21st century cinematic culture, female identity, and representation on screen. After several decades of misrepresentations of women in the media, the Western film industry has experienced a paradigm shift in its understanding of gender roles, largely driven by the emergence of global social movements like #MeToo and Time's Up, which have catalyzed a new realm of social discourse focused on critically evaluating the normative values and beliefs that shape societal structures. The increasing prevalence of multifaceted and inclusive female characters in mainstream films, who boldly deviate from the narrow confines of the “manic pixie dream girl” archetype, serves as a remarkable testament to the Western film industry’s unique capacity to both reflect and challenge the normative ideals of women’s identities in the contemporary sociocultural landscape.

As the result of the Northeast Modern Language Association’s 50th conference, held at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., *Cinematic Women, from Objecthood to Heroism* (2020) edited by Lisa V. Mazey has gone to great lengths to encourage its reader to reconsider the multifaceted representations of women on screen. This volume is a masterful reflection on how women’s psyche, subjective experiences, transcendence, individuality, empowerment, and spirituality are presented in Western films and television series from the 1950s to the present day. It takes the reader through the journey of the evolution of female roles on Western screens, scrutinizing the male gaze, the commodification of women, girlhood, LGBTQ+ themes, and maternity, while also speculating on the potential cinematic female roles in the future. This collection also deals with how films can contribute to fortifying the image of women and what causes women to be iconoclastic socio-culturally, both on and off screen.

The organization of the volume is carefully thought-out as it is comprised of eight chapters partitioned into three sections based on three perspectives of viewing women on screen: the traditional objectification of women, the contemporary portrayal of women as protectors or saviors, and the potential future portrayal of women as commanders. The first section of the volume delves into the complexities of gendered objectification, exploring the male gaze paradigm and the ways in which women, through their struggles to assert their agency, strive to transcend the limiting confines of being objectified and reclaim their subjectivity. In the very first chapter, “The Danger of Obsession: Questions of Power and

Freedom in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958)," Mazey focuses on the presence of female vulnerability and beauty shaping the obsession effectuated by one's use of power on another (17) while also drawing attention to masculine desire and struggle for power by assuming a protective role over an object (9). In the following chapter, Yeojin Kim explores multiple gazes and transnational assemblage in Chan-wook Park's *The Handmaiden* (2016), the adaptation of Sarah Water's *Fingersmith* (2002), questioning whether a transnational female assemblage can challenge the traditional male gaze and offer a new heterosexual gaze paradigm (20). According to Kim, Park employs the "gaze" in order to assist the female characters in their escape from the patriarchal imperial structures (20). She also describes the ways in which Park's protagonists share their fragmented gazes and reclaim their agency from patriarchal surveillance, dividing her analysis into three parts: the imperial male gaze, the non-heterosexual sapphic gaze, and the cinematic gaze (21).

The second section contextualizes the broader portrayal of the complexity of female consciousness, barriers of transcendence, and the revolutionary spirit through the female bodily experience, rather than the stereotypical representation of women as mere "objects of desire," which is emphatically present in the first section of the volume. Mary Jane Androne investigates strong, heroic, unconventional adolescent tomboys portrayed in Grannik's films, *Winter's Bone* (2010) and *Leave No Trace* (2018). She illuminates the significance of the "voice," highlighting how the young women depicted in Grannik's films vociferously assert themselves, and her essay unfolds a comprehensive analysis of the nuanced girlhood, indicating the strains and conflicts that emerge from the conventional representations of gender, sexuality, and identity. In Chapter 4, Forrest Johnson discusses feminine transcendence in contemporary post-secular cinema, more particularly in *The Fountain* (2006), *Silent Night* (2007), and *The Tree of Life* (2011). He explores how the selected films open up the world of transcendental experience through creating gendered dissymmetry and elevating the female protagonists as domestic redeemers or spiritual links (59). By drawing upon Gilles Deleuze's concept of "time image" and "belief in the world," Johnson argues that the female protagonists in the films are idolized as otherworldly, transcendental entities, with their embodiment of the miraculous, and they serve a crucial role in cultivating belief in the world.

The volume's final section provides an in-depth analysis of the portrayal of women who challenge established gender norms by embodying traits conventionally ascribed to masculinity and breaking the boundaries of gender binaries to pave the way for a more inclusive and fluid understanding of gender roles. In Chapter 5, E. Leigh McKagen investigates imperial

domesticity and salvation narratives in *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001), asserting that “women play a pivotal role in the evolution of the narrative of Euro-American imperialism to become a narrative of salvation, both internally and externally” (82). *Voyager*, narrated from the perspective of a caring and passionate female captain in a male-dominated society, marks a progression of female representation on screen at the beginning of the 21st century (92). McKagen expounds upon the caring and compassionate role, spiritual journey, and leadership of the female lead in *Voyager*, who nevertheless fails to fully surmount the traditional gender role. In the sixth chapter, Karen J. Tuthill-Jones delves into a critical examination of the television series *Sleepy Hollow* (2013-2017), with a particular emphasis on the portrayal of the main female characters and the traditional masculine dominance exhibited by the character of Ichabod Crane. By scrutinizing the show, Tuthill-Jones embarks on a quest to unravel the interplay between femininity and masculinity, striving to comprehend the intricate relationship between these two constructs. Following that, Hyunyoung Moon examines how the concept of the “warrior” adapts to the changing warfare, that of drones and robotics in the films: *Good Kill* (2015) and *Eye in the Sky* (2016). She elucidates the paradox that despite contemporary warfare not necessarily requiring traditional warrior traits, the military continues to accentuate them, while also speculating on the potential for women to embrace the position of “warrior,” a role historically occupied by men. Moon also asserts that the fact that a female character, initially intended for a male actor, emerges as the most competent and professional among the cast, underscores the intricate and evolving nature of women’s roles in the realm of war films (119). Evangeline Kroon, in the concluding chapter, investigates the representations of women in the post-apocalyptic world, meticulously scrutinizing the female characters that inhabit the bleak and despairing universe of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), and contemplating upon the divergences they manifest from their counterparts in other post-apocalyptic fictional works. Indicative of her groundbreaking findings, *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) serves as a compelling testament to the emergence of women from obscurity as they boldly take the spotlight, rejecting their objectified and subservient portrayals while wholeheartedly embracing their autonomy, assertiveness, and capacity to challenge, and dismantle patriarchal essentialism. Kroon also believes that “increased female representation in post-apocalyptic films can lead to opportunities for advancement in female casting, dialogue, and understanding” (142).

A profound examination of the portrayal of women in Western films and television shows, evaluated through various dimensions, reveals that cinema has undergone notable advancements in the representation of powerful female characters, suggesting a hopeful

prospect for the cinematic portrayal of women. In Chapter 4, the sole male contributor to the volume undertakes an exploration of the divine feminine, carefully examining the complex and diverse representations of women in the chosen films, taking a holistic approach, and ultimately revealing a nuanced understanding of the feminine experience. Through his scrutiny of feminine transcendental figures, which stand in stark contrast to those explored in the opening section, his contribution to the volume enriches and expands its intellectual horizons, imbuing it with a sense of depth and complexity. The volume's inclusion of non-Hollywood film, the visually stunning South Korean movie *The Handmaiden* (2016), is a commendable feature, yet its scholarly richness could be further augmented by a broader selection of international films that represent different cultures and regions, particularly from the Arab world or Europe, offering a more comprehensive analysis. Additionally, the volume's sections capture the evolving spectrum of female identities and reveal the gradual dismantling of traditional gender roles, yet the enduring dominance of masculinity, depicted in chapters 5 and 6, creates a sense of tension, a dissonance between conservative norms that uphold male superiority and the potential future societal view of women.

With the goal of equipping readers with the necessary theoretical framework, the scholarly essays in the volume are ambitious and offer a wide range of unique perspectives. Capturing the newfound paradigm on gender norms in the Western films and television series, *Cinematic Women, from Objecthood to Heroism* is a positive affirmation for women and makes an enormous contribution to feminist film studies by exploring how the representation of women on screen might be altered over time—from zero to hero.