

James Cameron and Heroines

Wonder Woman came out in 2017 to large scale praise and approval by audiences and critics alike. Robbie Collins who reviewed the film titles his review “a thrillingly staged knockout blow for feminism” (Collin, 2017) while Wendy Ide states that “it’s impossible not to feel a warm swell of relief that she is such a glorious badass, one who wears her femininity with the same pride and poise that she wears her armour-plated bra.” (Ide, 2017). Wonder Woman exceeded expectations to even the director’s (Patty Jenkins) surprise (Darby Maloney, 2017). However, James Cameron commented on the film in question arguing that the film was “a step backwards” and citing his own character in the film Terminator 2, Sarah Connor, “earned the respect of the audience through pure grit.” (Freeman, 2017).

While many disagree with James Cameron along with the Director of Wonder Woman stating “He doesn’t understand Wonder Woman” and “the massive female audience who made the film [the] hit it is, can surely...judge their own icons of progress,” (Mumford, 2017). James Cameron chooses to write female characters into his film that he deems to be different suggesting that “Hollywood movies get it wrong when they show women in action roles” (Freeman, 2012).

Therefore, I decided to investigate the female characters of three of James Cameron's Films (Aliens, The Terminator 2, Titanic) to understand what he deems to be unconventional and interesting female characters.

Aliens released in 1986 and is the sequel to Alien which released in 1979. (Keller, 2006, p. 9). Given that the first film had a bare bones plot, with a conclusion that placed the only survivor of the first encounter with the iconic Alien, Ripley, into hyper sleep. It gave Cameron the chance to give Ripley a back story. Ripley's character was originally written however for a male but less than one month from filming, the director of the first Alien film, Ridley Scott, decided to scout for an actress instead and came across Sigourney Weaver in the process (Lewis, 2015). When it came to the second film, Ripley who has been in a hyper sleep in between the two films wakes up on earth to find that her daughter has died of old age. Ripley in Alien however does not mention that she abandoned her daughter to pursue work but instead this backstory is given to the audience at the start of the second film. (Keller, 2006, p. 10). This place maternal guilt onto the character (Keller, 2006, p. 110) that wasn't present in the first film and Cameron uses this to fuel Ripley's desire to head back to LV-426, the location of the first film.

When Ripley finds out that LV-426 has now been populated for over 20 years and has families staying on the surface, Ripley reluctantly heads with the military to discover the only survivor is a small child named Newt. After escaping

narrowly from the now expanded horde of Xenomorphs. Ripley starts to take actions into her own hands and begins to harden as the film progresses. Eventually this leads to the films climax where she faces the Alien Queen in a power lifter to protect Newt and stop the Aliens once and for all (Aliens, 1986). Through out the film, all these actions are contextualized by Ripley's maternal guilt and how she begins her redemption by getting revenge over the alien swarm. The last showdown of the film features the two mothers, Ripley and the Alien Queen, facing off against one another after which Newt runs to Ripley calling her mother as a final confirmation of redeeming herself of maternal guilt. (Keller, 2006, p. 10)

What makes Ripley different from other female characters is the delving into role as a mother. As James Cameron said in an interview:

"I do think Hollywood movies get it wrong when they show women in action roles – they basically make them men. Or else they make them into superheroes in shiny black suits, which is just not as interesting." (Freeman, 2012)

Ripley has formed into a conservative mother like the image of the “pentagon-inspired family-values for the Reagan 80s” (Keller, 2006, p. 60). Many academic

writers point to the last fight between Ripley and the Alien Queen as the summation of the core theme of motherhood but also because of what it represents. The white mother trying to protect the nuclear family of Hick, Newt and herself versus the uncomfortable resemblance to “a favourite scapegoat of the Reagan/Bush era – the black welfare mother,’ (Keller, 2006, p. 61). Although it only suggested via the design of the alien and by extension the alien mother’s ability to reproduce countless offspring. Cameron has infused the story of motherhood into the action genre by switching the point of view to a mother. Ripley’s redeeming herself by becoming the more traditional and conservative mother versus the swarming mother who endlessly reproduces. For contrast, Terminator 2 portrays the same theme but differently.

Although there are two Terminator films that Cameron directed, I will be mainly focusing on Terminator 2: Judgement Day or T2. However, looking into T2 and ignoring the first film and the differences between them ignores what made Sarah Connor different from other Action Heroes. The premise behind the Terminator films is about time travel and saving future members of the resistances like in the first film Sarah Connor. Sarah Connor starts as a single woman who is stalked by the Terminator, a cyborg from the future with indestructible force, while Kyle Reese is tasked with saving the mother of the not born yet future resistance leader. In the end, she is successful in fending off the Terminator at the cost of the now father of future resistance leader, Kyle Reese (The Terminator, 1984).

In between the two films plot wise. Sarah Connor is traumatised by the events of the first film and logically thinks that she needs to train John Connor for the future. However, Sarah was locked away in a mental ward where she is not allowed to see him for much of John's life. John is told by his foster parents that she is deranged but John tells that he learned about weapons and fighting from mercenaries, not from his mother. Even when we do see Sarah Connor, she is in direct competition with The Terminator who now has come back from the future to save young John Connor from a new model of Terminator, the T-2000 (Jeffords, 1993, p. 249) .

The status of Mother in this film should go to Sarah Connor as she is the mother of the future however the Sarah is "gently delegitimized in her role as the mother and protector of the human future." (Jeffords, 1993, p. 252) Although she is quite good at protecting her son and has foresight of the present actions leading to the future apocalypse in comparison to other human characters, "She is an animal. She Bares her teeth. She snarls . . . She has an animal voice. Like an animal, she does anything to protect her young. That is her strongest emotion." (Jeffords, 1993, p. 249). A problem with Sarah Connor is with this animal instinct is that she contrasts as well emotionally with the Terminator. Terminator as a father works as he doesn't teach him what many of the other father figures had done in

the past. Instead John needed care and attention of a mother which the Terminator would be able to give. As Sarah Connor states in the film:

Watching John with a machine. It was suddenly so clear. The Terminator would never stop. It would never hurt him. It would never leave him or get impatient with him. . . . It would die to protect him”

This implies that even Sarah Connor is aware that the Terminator is the better father figure. Instead of the line “It will never stop” being used by Kyle Reese in the first film to explain the power of the Terminator, the line has been switched for a positive motive, The Terminator is programmed to obey John Connor and support no matter what. As well, The Terminator is immortal unlike Sarah, it is entirely possible that as Susan Jeffords suggests “The Terminator is thus not only a father but a mother as well to John Connor – to the hope of a human future”. (Jeffords, 1993, p. 252) Even though she has the combative skills of a male, the film suggests that her maternal role has been failed in contrast to Ripley, who spends the film redeeming her status as mother whilst Sarah Connor although not expressed directly by the film, fails to live up to the Terminators space in both combative skill and emotional support.

Titanic for comparison focuses however on different feminine issues that Aliens and Terminator do not focus on. Titanic is all about the struggle of oppression and free spirit whilst also being a film about the Titanic and its short-lived journey to America. Unlike any of James Cameron's other films, this film is based in the past instead of the present or future. To James Cameron, Titanic is about memories and how someone moves on from an event or loss. He modelled the character of Rose who is the main protagonist on an artist who at the time was 103 and interviewed her to see how vivid her memory was. Historic accuracy wasn't the focus but emotional accuracy and thus chose to emphasize the story on characters rather than real people and non-fictional timeline (Cameron, 1998).

So, Rose is a fictional character based loosely on an artist who wasn't on the real Titanic when it sunk yet it is through Rose that we relate to the struggle of being an early 20th century woman which is what Cameron explores. When we first meet Rose, she is being pushed into a relationship and marriage with a wealthy man for the sake of family. Rose remarks about how she is heading to America "in chains" and sees the Titanic as a "slave ship" (Keller, 2006, p. 77). After trying to commit suicide, Jack intervenes and stops Rose. After this, Jack and Rose start falling in love despite Rose once arriving in America would be married to Cal, the heir to a wealthy family. However, the tragedy of the Titanic inevitably happens with Rose and Jack fighting to survive on board the sinking ship before Jack and Rose plunge into the icy waters with only Rose surviving the cold. Even

though the main love interest dies, the film concludes with a happy ending as Rose quietly passes away returning to the grand staircase of the Titanic itself. Even though at the beginning of the film the ship is a hostile container for Rose, in the end is nostalgic and romantic. Despite all that happened on board the Titanic, “Romantic Love is shown to be a force potentially as deadly as the icy water,” (Keller, 2006, p. 77).

From this experience of the Titanic. It revealed that after the trauma, Rose lived a “long and exciting life as an actress, aviatrix, traveller, potter, mother.” (Keller, 2006, p. 79). Rose goes against the convention of her gender in this period and go against the patriarchal that put her in oppression. Although “the twentieth century, which for so many men is a saga of loss, decline and displacement, has told a different story to women.” (Keller, 2006, p. 79). To the point that it spins the death of fifteen hundred people dying into a happy ending. (Keller, 2006, p. 79)

Rose learns to love her life though in the process breaks the romantic pact that she had with Jack. As Keller points out using Kramer’s observation: “When the present-day Rose talks about the guilt of the survivors looking for redemption without ever finding it, she may be also referring to her-self” (Keller, 2006, p. 77). Rose’s tragedy however is that for her to gain this freedom, she had to lose something close to her. Suggesting that trauma like the experience of the Titanic

and the loss of Jack, made her switch to the care free Rose of the present. Therefore, Jack needed to die for Rose to have continued (Keller, 2006, p. 77) not only physically but spiritly. Trauma is what brought Rose out of her oppression.

Although the film does not directly say this however, this conclusion comes mainly from Cameron's other films. That when comparing the films, *Aliens*, *Terminator 2* and *Titanic* together. The females in each film all face a trauma of some kind and grow from facing it. In *Aliens*, Ripley's maternal guilt and experience of facing the lone alien in the first film is something that Ripley faces in *Aliens*. She needs overcome PTSD and become the mother that she originally wanted to be if she arrived back from work to her own child. *Terminator 2* on the other hand however warns us of rejecting trauma. Sarah Connor tries to overcompensate by learning to defend herself and teaching John Connor things he will need in the future. Unlike Ripley who fights to uphold maternity. Sarah hasn't overcome her fear of the future and instead is choosing to fight traditional maternity by training John into the soldier of the future instead of nurturing John to become the leader of the future. In learning to trust the Terminator, she has learnt to trust in males and sees the errors of her ways, learning traditional maternal love. Rose spins the trauma into a positive connotation. Learning through trauma and moves on from loss into a brighter future. She learns that as a female she doesn't need to uphold conventions of gender and lives long after

trauma without it holding her back. She doesn't need to use combative skills like the other characters but the message of being the strong independent female is still there.

Which makes me wonder why James Cameron disliked Wonder Woman. Although Wonder Woman fights human issues like War and suffering and to even look at other. James Cameron's female characters fight more female issues like mother hood and feminine oppression. James Cameron has made "female action adventure heroines acceptable to both female and male audiences" (Keller, 2006, p. 77) pointing that the females were the emotional centre of each film (Keller, 2006). However Fatal Beauty proves that James Cameron wasn't the first to introduce the world to 'combative femininity' suggesting that it was an ethnic bias (Neale, 2007), he was the first to create mainstream heroines that influenced films like Demolition man, Speed, Twister and Contact (Keller, 2006, p. 76)

To conclude, James Cameron broke many conventions of cinema, but his female character launched a surge for female representation in action adventures that used combative femininity that broke through to the main stream.

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