



**MEDIA@LSE**  
Department of Media and Communications

---

## **MEDIA@LSE MSc Dissertation Series**

Compiled by Dr. Bart Cammaerts, Dr. Nick Anstead and Ruth Garland

---

# **Behind the curtain: women's representations in contemporary Hollywood**

**Reema Dutt,**  
MSc in Global Media and Communications

---

Other dissertations of the series are available online here:

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/mediaWorkingPapers/ElectronicMScDissertationSeries.aspx>

**Dissertation submitted to the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, August 2013, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MSc in Media, Communication and Development. Supervised by Dr. Giulia Battaglia.**

**The Author can be contacted at: reemadutt@gmail.com**

Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

Copyright in editorial matter, LSE © 2014

Copyright, [Reema Dutt] © 2014.  
The authors have asserted their moral rights.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing of the publisher nor be issued to the public or circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published. In the interests of providing a free flow of debate, views expressed in this dissertation are not necessarily those of the compilers or the LSE.



# **Behind the Curtain: Women's Representations in Contemporary Hollywood**

**Reema Dutt**

---

## **ABSTRACT**

People all around the world consume Hollywood media products, namely films, on a daily basis. Such films bear a profound role in our lives and help shape our ideas about social, cultural, political and economic issues. Films are peppered with messages that reach audiences far and wide. These messages contribute to our perceptions of the world, and in relation to this study, our perception about women. Women have made great strides in all aspects of life, but their depiction on-screen has been stuck to patriarchal stereotypes and normative ideologies that do not reflect reality. Hollywood's use of genre films has perpetuated such depictions. Through fixed formulas and set conventions, genre films tell familiar stories to large audiences. And genre theory tells us that these formulas have been preserved because of audiences' affinity toward such films and Hollywood's desires to make gigantic profits.

This empirical study looks at the top-grossing films of the last three years – *The Avengers* (2012), *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* (2011) and *Toy Story 3* (2010) – in an attempt to make salient the dominant messages that these films circulate with respect to women. Through a visual analysis of the semiotics of women within Hollywood, I found that while some genres portray women as independent, powerful and agentive individuals, many still succumb to patriarchal constructions. Positive images of women outside the action-adventure genre are relatively scarce. Though we have come far in our depictions, we still have a long way to go before women are represented in a more realistic manner. Future research must focus on uncovering the myths present-day films carry in hopes to create better cinematic representations for women.

## INTRODUCTION

‘Like fish, we “swim” in a sea of images, and these images help shape our perceptions of the world and of ourselves.’ (Berger, 2008)

‘What we watch on the screen could and should be interpreted as bearing a latent, and partly hidden, meaning, reflecting the profound concerns of the culture it emerges from, thus eliciting emotions, pleasure and pain.’ (Sassatelli, 2011)

Since the women’s liberation movement in the 1960s, their roles in social, cultural, political and economic life has drastically changed and progressed for the better, seemingly giving women an equal footing to men in most aspects of life. But the male dominance of the film industry, like many other industries around the world, is still evident in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While females have made tremendous strides, how much of these progressions have been translated into popular culture and the media we consume regularly? ‘Radio, television, film and the other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities, our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female...’ said critical theorist Douglas Kellner (Flew, 2007).

It is these products that have the power to circulate ideas, convey insightful stories and inform audiences. Because of this profound role, we must understand what messages these products are circulating about women. Do they convey the realities of the world or simply promote normative ideologies? Images, and particularly filmic images, have a great influence on our state of mind and are arranged in a way that touches us (Alcolea-Banegas, 2009). Surprisingly, or rather unsurprisingly, post liberation Hollywood films’ depictions of women adhere to patriarchal structures, but with time, have masked these messages under the façade of female empowerment and independence.

They show us what we are, what we were, and what we could, should, or (do not) want to be. When at their best, movies give birth to new visions of female strength and freedom. At their worst, movies ridicule, denigrate, deny what real women have long achieved, and replaced it with specters from the past (Kord, 2005).

In fact, now, more than ever, women in Hollywood movies are subjected to unattainable heights of beauty, brains, physicality and behavior, among other things. Basically, women must have it all...at least the ones on-screen. While much of the entertainment industry is considered to be just that, entertainment, we cannot deny its power to produce and promote ideologies far and wide. Many cultural constructions, societal norms, fantasies and

historical moments are conveyed and understood through films, so the way in which they represent women is of the utmost importance. But how do films with rather unrealistic messages continue to thrive? Theorist Thomas Schatz, in *The New Hollywood*, said, ‘The key to Hollywood’s survival and the one abiding aspect of its postwar transformation has been the steady rise of the movie blockbuster’ (Collins, 1993). Blockbuster films tend to follow a relatively fixed formula and are practically proven to be a hit before they are even released. It is interesting, and frankly predictable, to see that the top earning films of the last three years, the “blockbusters” – *The Avengers (2012)*, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2 (2011)* and *Toy Story 3 (2010)* - are all large, studio, franchise films that capture wide audiences and fit into very distinct film genres. A film’s “type,” is crucial to our understanding of gender representation. ‘Simply stated, a genre film – whether a Western or a musical, a screwball comedy or a gangster film – involves familiar, essentially one-dimensional characters acting out a predictable story pattern within a familiar setting’ (Schatz, 1982).

This familiarity, usually, translates into fixed representations, which includes female characterizations. The woman in a Western film was typically associated with the damsel in distress. But does this still exist today? With all the technological, social, political and economic developments in the world now, this study explores the ways in which women are represented in films in the twenty-first century. It is important that we understand what is going on *now* so we can break away from antiquated myths about women, if needed, and build more realistic female characterizations in the future. The results of this study can contribute to further academic research of present-day films that is needed films rather than relying on out-dated analyses from decades ago. To do this, I will use a visual semiotic analysis to uncover the ways in which genre films represent women in contemporary Hollywood.

## **THEORETICAL CHAPTER**

### **Literature Review**

‘The well-chronicled history of Hollywood moviemaking has been one long testimony to the immense power of visual images to evoke popular emotional responses, indeed to reflect and influence the process of social change’ (Codell, 2007). Films have power that move far beyond pure entertainment. In particular, they can sway our collective imagination and influence our perceptions on crucial issues related to race, class, gender, etc., but the extent

to which they reflect real world situations is bleak, particularly in regards to women. The female characters in films 'reflect and perpetuate the status and options of women in today's society' and play an active part in creating female role models (Kord, 2005). Accordingly, it is important to examine the ways in which women are represented on celluloid to better understand the ideologies they bear.

It's difficult to discuss female gender depictions without turning to theorist Laura Mulvey's approach to film studies via psychoanalytic and feminist film theory. Mulvey reveals how a filmic text communicates dominant and sexist ideologies through an active male gaze. She argues that Hollywood movies use scopophilia, sexual pleasure through viewing, to communicate through a patriarchal system (Mulvey, 1975). Women are constantly 'looked at and displayed' for the male spectator's pleasure (Mulvey, 1975). This is evidenced throughout countless films where women are 'undermined by lingering close-ups' of their curvy figures and tight clothes, all 'made to order for the male gaze' (Ross, 2006). Both male and female viewers look through this male gaze since the camera is constantly positioned in such a way. In this manner, women 'become the images of meaning rather than the maker of meaning' (Mulvey, 1975).

Along the same lines, Annette Kuhn, long-standing film professor and editor of *Screen*, discusses how women's representations in the media are not just economically and politically oppressed, but they are also symbolically oppressed (Kuhn, 1982). A recent study conducted by the University of Southern California that analyzed the top 100 grossing films of 2009 confirms Kuhn's statement. The study found that of the 4342 speaking characters, only 32.8 percent were female, the same percentage as 2008's top 100 films (Smith 2010). There is a clear imbalance in cinematic gender characterization with women capturing a little over one-fourth of speaking roles. Conductors of the study, Stacy Smith and her USC team said, 'Females are not only infrequent, but they are also stereotyped and sexualized in popular motion picture content' (Smith, 2010).

Women are increasingly used as visual accessories. There is a serious dearth of popular Hollywood films that reflect women outside of the man's world. In examining how media products perpetuate patriarchal ideology, Kuhn stresses the importance of looking at how women's representations in films are fixed and mediated, making them unable to reflect the real social world (Kuhn, 1982).

Her interpretation leads us to the study of genres that uses relatively static formulas to construct a narrative. A genre is a type of film that 'share[s] similarities in form and style,

theme and content, as well as communicative function' (Bondejberg, 2001). Most Hollywood films conform to one, or a combination, of genres among which action-adventure, science fiction, fantasy, and gangster are hugely popular, and repeatedly top the charts for highest grossing films. Schatz said, 'a genre approach provides the most effective means for understanding, analyzing, and appreciating the Hollywood cinema' (Schatz, 1981).

The lead theorist of genre studies is Rick Altman. In his 1984 piece, *A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre*, Altman outlines two distinct approaches in genre theory. First, there is the ritual approach that says Hollywood produces films that reflect audience preferences and desires (Altman, 1984). He highlights the role of the audience in perpetuating a particular genre and its associated stereotypes and mythologies. Producers do little to stop such developments and rarely challenge sexism or unequal gender relations in their screenplays (Ross, 2006). But who can blame them? Genre filmmaking is extremely lucrative. Because it's a tried and tested formula, studios know that audiences will enjoy a particular type of film, so that is what they deliver. Just take a look at the countless trilogy and sequel films that have endless iterations – from *Iron Man*, *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* to *Twilight*, *Batman* and *Bridget Jones* – they all have a fan base that is ever ready to consume these products. Genre films are also conducive to great marketing strategies since studios know audiences like them, they can build an entire franchise out of one film.

The second approach is the ideological approach, more Marxian in thought, which says that Hollywood manipulates audiences; it characterizes 'each individual genre as a specific type of lie, an untruth whose most characteristic feature is its ability to masquerade as truth' (Altman, 1984). The ideological approach certainly resonates in relation to female representations in cinema. 'Mainstream genres express broader cultural, social values than classic works of art' (Bondejberg, 2001). Imbalances in gender representations are long-standing and come out strongly in genre films via their fixed formulas. Hollywood producers prefer delivering a far less risky formulated lie than exposing true realities and potentially losing out a devoted viewer base.

Altman makes an important distinction between the two approaches – one responds to the audience the other manipulates the audience – but he sees validity in both. Schatz agrees, 'Film genres express the social and aesthetic sensibilities not only of Hollywood filmmakers but of the mass audience as well' (Schatz, 1981). So in essence, both the producers and the audience are responsible for the circulation of patriarchal ideologies in a cyclical process, where one claims to be responding to the other.

‘A film genre is based on a set of conventions that influence both the production of individual works within that genre and audience expectations and experiences’ (Bondejberg, 2001). We have preconceived notions about each genre. For example, when we hear a film falls into the action-adventure category, we expect the film will entail ‘a propensity for spectacular physical action, a narrative structure involving fights, chases and explosions, and in addition to the deployment of state of the art special effects, an emphasis in performance on athletic feats and stunts’ (Neale, 2000). These elements together ‘serve some larger social or mythological purpose for the viewing audience’ (Basinger, 1993).

Genres are constructed through these conventions, which can reinforce ideas about gender. ‘Genres have traditionally been central to preserving female (and male) stereotypes in classical Hollywood cinema’ (Gledhill, 2012). Large, blockbuster films that Hollywood continuously churns out tend to fall into a specific, long-standing and popular genre. It is not surprising that our samples of films – those that grossed the most profits at the box office in the last three years – each easily fits into a genre category. To study contemporary Hollywood, our sample examines *The Avengers*, an action packed superhero film backed by the mighty Marvel comics brand; *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*, a fantasy film spurred by the popular and gripping tales of J.K. Rowling; and *Toy Story 3*, an animated comedy film created in 3D by Disney-Pixar. All these movies thrive on large budgets, an already engaged and devoted audience base and identifiable and strong characters that create an entire filmic universe. Combined, these elements contribute to the perpetuation of genre categories, and in turn, to gender representations.

Many consider genre categories themselves to be gendered, even if not etymologically. ‘Westerns, war movies, action movies, marital arts movies, spy movies, gangster movies, and road movies are male film genres. Romance, romantic comedy, and melodrama, on the other hand, are female genres with a female protagonist and a female audience’ (Schubart, 2007). These segregations imply that men have a propensity for violent, dangerous, heroic and aggressive films, whereas women like sappy, dramatic and passionate films. Such implications say a lot about our society and culture today.

Each of these genres has their own construction for male and female characters. For example, if we look at the role of the ‘hero’ in past entertainment, we observe there is a separate criterion to qualify as a male or female hero, mostly stemming from patriarchal stereotypes about women. Even though the number of tough girl lead roles in action movies

has risen in the last 20-30 years, the expectations for a female hero are vastly different (Ross, 2006).

The first step to qualify as female hero in a man's world is to be young and beautiful. If not young, then she must be Botoxed to look young. If not beautiful, then she must have silicone breasts, be aided by plastic surgery, wigs, make up and never ever a wrinkle on her pretty face (Schubart, 2007).

This distinction is very important because it shows the extent to which genres can contribute to female representations and normative ideologies, in this case, that for women to qualify as heroes, they must be physically perfect. An ideal example of the superhero woman who broke man's patriarchal ideologies to a large extent is Xena the warrior princess, who dates back over ten years now.

What is attractive about Xena-as-hero is her inherently flawed character: she is dark, selfish, and venally bloodthirsty. Even if the narrative insists that her triumphs are always over evil, so that she is always the force for good, there is also a clear moral ambiguity in her dealings with the world (Ross, 2006).

While Xena is a tough, independent warrior who 'has more attachment to her horse and certainly to Gabrielle than to any man who she encounters,' we cannot deny that she is still thin, attractive, fit and wears very little clothing (Ross, 2006). This is what is most interesting about female filmic representations, both within popular mainstream genre films, and even non-commercial, independent films – the dualism and contradiction in female character sketches. The female hero 'combines the domesticated femininity of girl...with the kick-ass assertiveness of the action hero' (Ross, 2006). Such portrayals send mixed messages.

We consistently see contradicting gender representations in films, which Rikke Schubart refers to as 'in-betweenness.' 'The term captures the dual nature of the female hero composed from stereotypical feminine traits (beauty, a sexy appearance, empathy) and masculine traits (aggression, stamina, violence). From a feminist perspective, she is a victim of patriarchy. From a post-feminist perspective, she represents females agency' (Schubart, 2007). Similarly, Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer's 2005 book *Hollywood Divas, Indie Queens and TV Heroines*, talks about how Hollywood movies in the 1990s began to create female characters that appealed to the 'stay-at-home mom and the high-powered females executive, to the traditionalist and feminist alike' (Kord, 2005). Thus

started the contradicting female depictions, which were meant to offer something to everyone.

Today's on-screen women need to have it all, and then some; 'the gorgeous Amazonian butt-kicker with the great ass snug in super heroic spandex. This is the "empowered" woman of corporate consumer society' (Pevere, 2003). Women must be strong, aggressive, but still beautiful and sexy. But this so-called tough woman is a 'testament to a still male-dominant society's own contradictory responses to women's demands for equal treatment' (Ross, 2006). A duality is exhibited in most female characterizations in Hollywood—respect and rebellion, beauty and brains, power and submission, sexuality and timidity, etc. – so all viewers relate to and enjoy something.

At the same time, there are films that break out of this shell and give us hope for a more realistic portrayal of female characters on the big screen. For example, Jessica Willis' semiotic analysis of the 2007 film *Juno* sheds considerable light on this topic. *Juno* is about a young girl who gets impregnated in high school by her teenage boyfriend. 'Juno signifies an emerging cultural formulation of girlhood that incorporates independence and strength. This illustration offers a glimpse into early 21<sup>st</sup> century Western notions of young female sexuality' (Willis, 2008). *Juno* is empowered, eccentric, witty and unconcerned with her looks. She speaks her mind, irrespective of society's expectations and makes her own decisions. For example, she decides to opt for adoption when she finds out she is pregnant, regardless of her parents or her boyfriend's wishes. Her agency marks a considerable progression for female portrayals in films. *Juno* represents a 'visual characterization of newly emerging constructions of girls that fuse particular aspects of traditional "femininity" and "masculinity"' (Willis, 2008). *Juno* certainly makes a stride forward, but not without clinging to some normative viewpoints. The film's portrayal of 'girlhood [is] still intricately tied to social ideas about purity, innocence, and vulnerability,' (Willis, 2008) as well as the consequences of early sexual relations. Kord and Krimmer poignantly articulate that for every step forward a film takes toward a more positive portrayal of women, they undeniably take two steps back. 'In mainstream movies, emancipatory statements and images are invariably accompanied and countermanded by a plethora of reactionary messages' (Kord, 2005).

Though *Juno* is one of a small number of films that depicts women in a favorable, or at least contra-normative light, it is an independent film that does not have the far and wide-reach of Hollywood's mega blockbusters. That is not to say there still are not the occasional mainstream films like *Bridesmaids* or *The Iron Lady* that highlight the strength and



personality of females outside the patriarchal structure, but these films are few and far between. In fact, it is possible that a deeper analysis of such films could uncover normative gender myths. After all, a blockbuster film cannot be made to look like an ideology (Kord, 2005). This is the crux of this study's endeavor – to see if any mainstream films of late have such unexpected portrayals, like *Juno*, or if they all conform to patriarchal notions.

If we look at the top films from 2011, mainly action-adventure flicks, they 'have either no lead women characters or have the typical token semi-strong woman amongst a gaggle of male characters,' which is evidenced by *The Hangover Part II*, *Cars 2*, *X-Men*, *Rango* etc. (Wilson, 2012). But how are these women represented, in whatever role they are given? Does Hollywood continue to show women 'as partners or "booty" for men, as mothers, or as damsels in distress' (Wilson, 2012)?

Along these lines American cartoonist Alison Bechdel, who was attempting to identify gender bias in fiction work, created the Bechdel Test. The test asks three questions – Does the film have at least two women? Do they talk to each other? And if so, is there conversation about something other than men? According to the online Bechdel Test counter, of the 4193 movies in their database, 55.4% pass all three questions (Bechdel, 2013). Though not completely flawless, the crux of the test seems to be effective because it helps us realize that it is not enough to just have female characters present in a film, but it is important to give them independent agency and an individual context that exists outside of the patriarchal world. Just because a film has many female characters, does not mean that these representations stray from stereotypical images.

To delve further and unearth the ways in which women are represented in Hollywood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the conceptual framework of semiotics is useful and revealing. Schatz said if we extend the concept of semiotics to genre study, we can think of film genre 'as a specific grammar or system of rules of expression and construction' (Schatz, 1981). We begin to recognize the signs and visual cues in each image after watching many films of the same genre. Through this process, 'we come to understand the system and its significance' (Schatz, 1981). So, by looking at filmic images for their semiotic elements, we can see how women are represented in genre films and the signs that elicit these representations.

### **Objectives of Research**

Films are cultural artifacts that supposedly reflect reality, but do they? If women have more rights, power and voice in today's society, is this reality being re-constructed on screen in

contemporary, mainstream films that reach the widest audiences? To what extent are we actually consuming 'real' images and to what extent are the images just perpetuations of antiquated thoughts or reconstructions that continue to have the same subtle prejudices from before? Our digitally advanced and technologically driven age has sped up the rate and access of media products, so it is crucial to analyze present-day films that are consumed all around the world.

Thus, the purpose of this research study is to unearth the ways in which women are represented in mainstream, Hollywood films *today*. While previous scholarly work discusses gender imbalances in films in terms of the number of females present, the extent of their role, how they affect the plot etc., very few look at how they are represented through visual imagery, and what this imagery means. Even fewer use a pure semiotic analysis to answer these questions. The latest study was Willis' *Juno* piece, which though insightful, only provides a very small snapshot of female cinematic representations. In this manner, nearly no academic work focuses on the visual images of films over our very recent past and the meaning behind the signs they bear.

My purpose is to make visible the salient ideologies of women in today's Hollywood films to see if they are in fact progressing forward in a positive way, or simply clinging to outdated patriarchal stereotypes.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Approach and justification**

We live in a world of things seen, a world that is visual, and we expend much of our physical and emotional energy on the act of seeing. (Berger, 2008).

From advertisements to movies and from tablets to smartphones, we are constantly engaged with and surrounded by images, helping us deem the world in visual terms. Many academics argue that 'the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies,' marking the move to postmodernity (Rose, 2001). Writer John Berger appropriately points out that, 'seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak,' emphasizing the importance of the visual form (Rose, 2001). In fact, it is said that most of us receive over 80 percent of information through our eyes (Berger, 2008). This information conveys messages about our society and the world we live in.

Visual analysis is a research method that digs deep into the visual form and looks closely at images, whether they are film stills from a movie or photographs from a magazine, to understand the messages they convey. It is an effective way to study imagery and coupled with a conceptual framework like semiotics, it can be very revealing.

Semiotics is the study of signs that convey particular meanings and messages. More specifically, visual semiotic analysis asks ‘the questions of representation (what do images represent and how?) and the question of the “hidden meanings” of images (what ideas and values do the people, places and things represented in images stand for?)’ (van Leeuwen, 2001). In this manner, it is a useful tool that directly relates to my research endeavor of studying how women are represented in Hollywood films today.

In the twentieth century, Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure pioneered work in semiotics. He said, ‘language is a system of signs’ that has a form (the word or image), known as the signifier, and an associated idea or concept, known as the signified (Hall, 1997). Together the signifier and the signified produce meaning. Saussure and other constructionists saw the relationship between signs and meaning as arbitrary. For them, the relationship could only be understood through cultural codes. ‘Because of differences in education, region, class and so on, people often interpret (or decode) signs in widely varying ways’ (Berger, 2008). Saussure and his counterparts acknowledge the importance of individual social context when processing signs. But however subjective the method, there is still a dominant meaning that viewers take away from an image. Post-structural theorist Stuart Hall said, ‘we are able to communicate because we share broadly the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways’ (Hall, 1997).

At the same time, American philosopher Charles S. Peirce focused on studying visual images in particular, through semiotics. He said, ‘An image is a collection of signs, and each of these signs has meaning; in any image, there are many different levels of meaning and interactions between meanings’ (Berger, 2008).

French theorist Roland Barthes shared Peirce’s view on layered meanings in images. In Barthesian semiotics, the first descriptive layer is known as the denotative layer, or what Saussure called the signifier; the second conceptual layer is known as the connotative layer, or what Saussure called the signified. For Barthes, the denotations and connotations create myths that contribute to our perception of the world (Bignell, 1997). Hence, semiotics has the potential to reveal the ways in which images, and their accompanying mythologies are

circulated by the media. 'One can trace out many large cultural myths and models in film, such as assumptions about romantic love or social life as experienced by the parvenu' (Lesage, 1977).

Films, which are essentially images strung together to tell a story, are embedded with various messages and mythologies that reach large, global audiences. 'When we see a film, though we may not be aware of the fact, we are also seeing portrayals of certain types of people and of the societies in which they live' (Berger, 2008). So, a film study lends itself quite naturally to visual analysis, and more specifically, visual semiotic analysis, to further understand what portrayals are being projected on-screen.

Accordingly, filmic images carry tremendous weight in our lives since they transmit particular ideas about such critical topics, usually in a very indirect, subconscious and entertaining manner. By decoding the various signs in the filmic text, we can uncover visions on social, political, economic or cultural issues. Films then have the potential to subtly create and disseminate ideologies, and through a visual semiotic analysis, we can begin to dissect what ideologies, if any, are being circulated. 'Ideology is those representations that reflect the interests of power. In particular, ideology works to legitimate social inequalities. Semiology, then, is centrally concerned with the social effects of meaning' (Rose, 2001).

Cinematic semiotic analysis has fewer rules when compared to the strict grammatical rules of spoken and written languages, allowing viewers to assemble film signs into meaning on their own (Bignell, 1997). Signs include hairstyles, clothes, language, color, props, etc. More recently, films have also been examined 'in terms of how meaning is generated by what might be described as the grammar of film – the various kinds of shots and editing techniques that directors use to give shape to their vision' (Berger, 2008). Semiotics gives us the analytical tools to recognize and assess signs, both physical technical elements, to relate them to larger meanings (Rose, 2001).

My goal with this research study is to use these semiotic tools to examine the ways in which contemporary Hollywood films represent women and what mythologies these representations promote. The added advantage of visual semiotics, in relation to this particular study, is that we can connect the filmic signs to genre theory. As Schatz articulated in *Hollywood Genres*, 'a genre can be studied, like a language, as a formalized sign system whose rules have been assimilated, consciously or otherwise, through cultural

consensus' (Schatz, 1981). Therefore, we can see how the portrayals of women in recent films are related to the genres they embody.

To explore these portrayals, I chose to visually analyze scenes from *The Avengers*, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* and *Toy Story 3*.

### **Procedure and sample**

In order to have a valid and appropriate sample, I chose the Hollywood film with the highest box office collections in a given year. We can conclude that because these films made the most amount of money, they captured the largest audiences. With such a far-reaching viewership, we know the representations and ideologies these films promote are extensive. In this manner, I operationalized the term "mainstream" from my research question. In addition, by using box-office returns to create my sample, I managed to include a quantitative data measure to an otherwise qualitative research study, allowing me to create a controlled sampling system that avoids bias or immeasurable factors (i.e. the year's most highly rated film or most popular film, etc.).

Similarly, to operationalize "contemporary" from the research question, I wanted to use as recent films as possible. My purpose with this endeavor is to understand representations of present day cinema, which meant focusing on years that had annual box-office data in place (so 2013 was not applicable during this study). Fortunately, the information was compiled for the most recent year, 2012 and later. Given the time and space constraints for this study, I only had scope to go back three years (2012, 2011, 2010) and pick one film per year. Without these constraints, I would have preferred to examine the top three to five films from at least five to ten years ago, to look for patterns and threads over our recent past.

Accordingly, this paper studies *The Avengers* (2012), *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* (2011) and *Toy Story 3* (2010), which were all the highest grossing movies of their respective year (All, 2013, Chart).

To select the sample of scenes from each film was the most challenging since I wanted to avoid as much bias as possible, but at the same time, I wanted to choose rationally so I could select the scenes in the same way for each of the three movies. An arbitrary selection could subconsciously lead me to choose a particular scene because I know it means something in a larger, ideological context. To avoid this, I decided it would be practical and effective to analyze the first substantial scene with the female protagonist, which we can be deemed her

'first impression'. By substantial, I mean a scene that involves dialogue and not just a faint glimpse or allusion to the main female character. Similarly, I also decided to take a look at the female protagonist's final substantial scene. This way we can observe any changes in her representation throughout the story. Seeing how the female lead is represented in the beginning and at the end exposes a great deal regarding the intention of the filmic image.

Keeping this selection process in mind, I used two scenes from each film, and analyzed three stills from each scene, for a grand total of eighteen film stills. My analysis and results was done using Barthian semiotics as well as genre theory. I look at the denotative and connotative elements of each still to see what mythologies each image carries and how this fits into its respective genre. Again, to keep the analysis as methodical as possible, I chose to denote and connote the following elements in each film: clothing, physical features, facial expression, framing, camera angle, focus, background/props, and color. With these guidelines, I was able to compile productive qualitative data.

## **RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION**

### **The Avengers (Appendix 1)**

#### *Avengers Scene 1, Image 1*

In this first image, we see a Caucasian woman wearing a black sleeveless shirt, with bare shoulders and back. She has short, red, curly hair and fair, porcelain-like skin. Such physical features connote an image of an Eastern European woman, presumably Russian with her red locks. She is not like the typical Western female – blonde with blue eyes; rather, she is “the other” – exotic. The scene is dark and full of shadows, with the female protagonist, Natasha Romanoff, gazing downward and away from the figure that stands before her. The shot uses chiaroscuro lighting, which has strong shadows and conveys powerful emotion (Berger, 2008). We can tell that the scene is intense given Natasha's gaze and facial expression. Her pursed lips and narrow stare indicate unhappiness and irritation. The camera's use of a close-up 'suggests an intimate/personal relationship' that the viewer is allowed to partake in (van Leeuwen, 2001). In this instance, we know we are being privy to particularly crucial scene, given our proximity to the female protagonist. In the background, we see the outline of a male figure, from his neck down, who is out of focus and to the left of the frame. Natasha is in the foreground of the frame toward the right. Her prominence in this shot suggests that we are meant to pay attention to her at this moment.

*Avengers Scene 1, Image 2*

In the second image, we see Natasha from behind and we are looking into the scene from her point of view. She looks the same with her short, red hair, but now we see that she is tied to a chair. Again, the scene is very dark and black, except for the Natasha's fair skin and red hair, which is even more prominent in this shot given the lighting. The highlighting of Natasha's physical features connote that she is the most important element of this scene. We are meant to pay attention to her as she is the only thing we can clearly see. The light on her, juxtaposed with the darkness of the scene and the men, suggest that she is the good in all the evil that surrounds her. The camera uses a wide shot with Natasha off-centered to the right. The background, while dark, looks to be a warehouse, denoted by the exposed metal beams, industrial lights and high ceilings. Three men, two of whom are in leather jackets and one in the center who is wearing a military blazer, surround Natasha. The orientation and clothing of the man in the center suggests that he is in charge, and the other two are his minions. Because Natasha is tied up, we can deduce that she has either been kidnapped or is being interrogated for some vital information.

*Avengers Scene 1, Image 3*

We again see Natasha from behind in a wide shot, but only from the neck down. We can clearly see she is wearing a black, sleeveless dress with black tights. She is holding black, high-heeled shoes in her left hand and walking barefoot. This, combined with her cavalier stance, implies that she has managed to get out of the situation she was stuck in from the last image and did so quite effortlessly. Once again, Natasha is on the right of the frame, as per the last three images. In this shot, we see more of the background. There is trash on the floors and the premises look unfinished and disheveled, again signifying a warehouse type of space.

*Overall Avengers Scene 1*

These images collectively shows the female protagonist Natasha exhibiting both feminine beauty and power. The first two stills, though dark and shadowy, highlight her beauty by focusing on her fair skin and red hair. In the last still, we see all of Natasha's feminine attributes – her high heels, tight black dress and curvy figure. These elements of femininity are coupled with signs that allude to her power and brains. Through the progression of the stills, we can see that she was tied up and stuck in a compromising position, but in the end

she manages to relieve herself independently, quite effortlessly and without a scratch. Natasha represents the modern day female – the one who has agency, power and independence from men, but is also beautiful and feminine. She promotes the mythology of the empowered woman who has both the looks and the smarts. She is positioned to the right of the frame in all the stills, indicating she is ‘new’ and unfamiliar (van Leeuwen, 2001). This makes sense because not only is this the first time the audience is introduced to her, but also in some ways because a female characterization like this is surprising.

*Avengers Scene 2, Image 1*

In Natasha’s final scene of the film, the camera captures a medium shot of her in a black leather leotard and a black belt. We can clearly see her shapely figure. We see her fair skin and red curly hair, but now she is disheveled and has a bleeding limp, connoting she is injured and was just in some sort of physical brawl. Her leotard is dusty and dirty, confirming the connotation. Her frowning eyebrows and open mouth suggest she is worried and distraught. This scene has a lot more light compared to Natasha’s first scene of the film. It particularly highlights blues and whites, which are usually associated with purity, cleanliness, freshness and goodness. As opposed to her initial scene, she is now to the left of the frame, a positioning that is generally associated to what is familiar on screen (van Leeuwen, 2001). We see a large scepter device in the background with a beam shooting up into the sky.

*Avengers Scene 2, Image 2*

In this wide shot, we see more of Natasha in her tight, black leotard, but now she is in action. She is holding a spear-type object and is attacking, presumably dismantling, the scepter, illustrating her agency in this scene. She has returned to the right of the frame. The strained expression on her face suggests the task is difficult, but she is handling it. In the background we see a man, the doctor, holding a device but he somewhat out of focus so we are not meant to pay attention to him. We are meant to concentrate on Natasha and her actions. The colors of this image remain the same as the previous one.

*Avengers Scene 2, Image 3*



In this final image, the camera uses a close up on Natasha's face, looking upward toward the sky. Her determined gaze connotes a look of both hope and worry. It looks like she is waiting for something. We see nothing but gravel in the background. She has a cut on her forehead and lip, but neither are affecting her or breaking her determination. Her disheveled hair, coupled with the cuts and bruises, suggest that she has just come out of a physically difficult situation. We see Natasha from the front, allowing the audience maximum involvement since the 'viewer is directly confronted with what is in the picture' (van Leeuwen, 2001). In this case, we are directly confronted with Natasha.

### *Overall Avengers Scene 2*

In Natasha's final scene, we see her represented in a very similar way as in her first scene, but with a few additional signs that reinforce her representation. In these images, she still bears the mythology of the empowered woman who is pretty and powerful, but now she is in action. In the second still, we see her attacking the scepter on her own, with solid determination. In the last still, we can see her face has bruises, but we also see her beautiful skin and red hair. The action shots, coupled with the skintight leotard, portray her as a female hero.

### *The Action Genre and Natasha*

Natasha is an all too familiar female hero and exhibits numerous parallels to Xena, the warrior princess, discussed earlier. She is the typical female hero – beautiful, powerful and aggressive. She is continuously shown only in black leather. Natasha, like Xena and other empowered female heroes, has no love angle or romantic relationship throughout the film. Like Xena, she is 'she is dark, selfish, and venally bloodthirsty' (Ross, 2006). Along the same lines, like the typical female hero of the post-liberation era, she 'combines the domesticated femininity of girl...with the kick-ass assertiveness of the action hero' (Ross, 2006). Natasha keeps up with the five male superheroes in the film effortlessly. The representation of the female hero has not changed very much since she bears the same message of beauty and power as other heroines. It is important to acknowledge, however, that though beauty is emphasized, Natasha as a female hero has a great deal of agency and independence, portraying the female gender in a positive and non-normative light.

## **Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2 (Appendix 2)**

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2, Scene 1, Image 1*

Our first real introduction to the female protagonist, Hermione Granger, is done via a close-up shot. We see her dirty blonde hair, fair skin and thoughtful facial expression. Her semi-frowning eyebrows and straight stare connote worry and concern. The background is blurry and out of focus, so we are meant to pay attention to only her. The use of chiaroscuro lighting creates a dark shadow, which let's us only see half of her face. It also conveys powerful emotion (Berger, 2008). Hermione is to the right of the frame, a similar positioning to most of Natasha Romanoff's shots in *The Avengers*. The colors of this scene are very natural; only dark black tones and light white and skin tones, connoting realism.

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2, Scene 1, Image 2*

In this image, we see that Hermione has transformed into a different persona, one quite the opposite of how we initially see her. She is now donning black robes and disheveled black, frizzy hair, versus the blonde tresses from the previous shot. The camera uses a wide shot and again frames her to the right, with the profile of two of the male protagonists to the left, both gazing at her. Hermione's downward tilt of her head connotes embarrassment, guilt or shame.

In this still the background is calming, natural and serene with an ocean, sand and grass. This juxtaposed with the dark figures in the foreground are signifiers for the battle between good/purity and bad/evil.

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2, Scene 1, Image 3*

In this medium shot, we see Hermione is still cloning another persona. Now we are able to see more of her face with pursed lips and bright pale, almost lifeless, skin. Her jet-black hair is still frizzy and out of sorts, connoting the madness of this character. Hermione is again, placed to the right of the frame. Behind her is a man, also wearing dark black robes, but given his positioning, he seems to be an assistant or bodyguard. He gazes ahead, as does Hermione, while the camera seems to be looking slightly down on them, taking on a powerful authoritative perspective (Berger, 2005). In the background, the audience can see rich, marble floors, suggesting Hermione has entered a wealthy place while pretending to be someone else.

*Overall Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2, Scene 1*

These images collectively show Hermione embodying both good and evil, as well as beauty and sacrifice. We first see her closely with her blonde hair and fair skin in light color tones, representing her almost ethereal Western beauty. At the same time, in the next two stills, we see her transform and embody evil, signified by the blackness of her new persona. Her transformation also represents sacrifice; Hermione sacrifices herself – her looks, personality and goodness – to help her friends. Her transformation into evil for the sake of her friends represents her courage and boldness. In many ways, she bears the mythology of the contemporary, conservative woman – one that is soft, sweet, pretty and usually restrained, but bold, sacrificial and borderline evil when needed.

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2, Scene 2, Image 1*

In this scene, we are taken 19 years into the future and we see a presumably grown up Hermione with a little girl. The camera uses a medium shot that centers Hermione and the girl. Hermione is wearing a trench coat, a large purse and has her hair up in a soft bun; unlike we've seen her up until now, signifying her maturity. It looks as if she is zipping up the girl's sweater, connoting that Hermione is caring toward her. In the background we see crowds of people and a train, signifying that Hermione is at a railway platform. Given the direct gaze both figures are sharing, and the frontal view of the camera, we understand that we are being privy to an intimate moment. On the edge of the left side of the frame, we see the profile of an elder man looking toward Hermione and the girl. The colors of this scene remain natural again, highlighting realism.

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2, Scene 2, Image 2*

Subsequently, we see a very similarly arranged shot, but now Hermione and the girl embrace. The girl's head is on Hermione's shoulder and the way Hermione has grasped the girl, in a very loving and maternal manner, we can deduce that the two share a mother-daughter relationship or something reminiscent of that. Now we see less people in the background, which tells us that the train is probably leaving soon and others have already boarded and left. In addition, the man who was initially peering into this moment has now mostly left the frame, so the audience can focus on the emotional embrace the two characters are sharing. Hermione's gaze is downward, which tends to happen when people are in a thoughtful or nostalgic mood. Given the body language and facial expression of the characters, we can conclude that they are bidding adieu.

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2, Scene 2, Image 3*

In this medium shot, we now see Hermione centered between two men, with the head of a young boy peeping in. Hermione is emotional, denoted by the hand over her mouth, almost like she is holding back tears, but at the same time we see a slight smile on her face. This tells us that she is happily emotional and is experiencing a bittersweet moment. Her demeanor, compared to the two men in the still, is more emotional, highlighting the strength of her bond with the girl who has just left the frame and from whom she was parting. The color tones remain the same as the first two stills of this scene.

#### *Overall Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2, Scene 2*

Unlike *The Avengers*, where Natasha's character was portrayed quite similarly in the beginning and end, we see Hermione represented in a starkly different manner. In this scene, she promotes the mythology of an emotional matriarchal woman. The stills show her as a mature, loving and somewhat sentimental woman with no trace of the boldness from her initial scene. Because this is a peek into the future, this scene also bears the myth that women, in the end, succumb to a normative motherly role, despite the experiences of their youth. This representation reinforces traditional gender roles.

#### *The Fantasy/Action-adventure Genre and Hermione*

This film is a perfect example of one that combines elements of a few genres. While the Harry Potter series are certainly fantasy films, it has many elements of the action-adventure genre, such as 'spectacular set pieces, physical violence...[and] increasingly fast-paced editing' (Gledhill, 2012). In the same vein, Hermione, at least in her first scene is depicted as a female hero – a woman with independence, agency and intelligence. But this portrayal is atypical and unlike Natasha or Xena. Hermione uses her wit and skill to conquer evil, whereas Natasha, and more typical female heroes, use physical stamina. At the same time, in neither scene, nor really any point of the film, is Hermione clad in tight-fitting clothes or camera angles that only highlight her physical feminine attributes. In this manner, Hermione counters a traditional female hero in her first scene, but still portrays a strong-willed woman. However, in her final scene, Hermione has turned into a mother figure, and unlike her male counterparts, is emotional and attached. This depiction completely succumbs to patriarchal order. Hermione, nineteen years after combatting evil and helping save the world, is now a mother who looks to be dependent on or surrounded by men. Along these lines, Hermione also gives in to romance and love. These depictions in the last scene are more conducive to the fantasy genre because they 'center around their male

protagonists [and] women characters enter as princesses and/or love interests, slave girl, evil queens, or sidekick warriors' (Reid, 2009).

### **Toy Story 3 (Appendix 3)**

#### *Toy Story 3, Scene 1, Image 1*

In this still we see the female protagonist, Jesse the cowgirl, and the male character of Buzz Lightyear, the astronaut. The camera uses a wide shot and places Buzz to the left of the frame and Jesse to the right. Buzz is in his space suit, while Jesse is clad in her cowgirl outfit with cow-printed bell-bottoms that cinch her tiny waist, a western shirt and a typical cowgirl hat. Buzz's arm is leaning on something with his head hanging downward and his hand on his hip. His body language indicates disappointment and the notion of giving up. His eyes are wide and his gaze is fixed, as if he is trying to think of something to reverse the disappointment. Jesse, on the other hand, is angry, signified by her frowning eyebrows. Her fists are clenched, illustrating that she is enraged. In the background, we see other toys, particularly Mrs. Potato Head with her hands over her eyes. This connotes that she is crying, sad and upset. The scene, like much of the film, is brightly colored. The top of the frame is dark, possibly connoting trouble that is looming over the toys.

#### *Toy Story 3, Scene 1, Image 2*

In this still, we see Jesse's mood has completely changed. She looks happy, excited and hopeful, almost like she wants to shout "Eureka!" This is connoted through her body language and facial expression. She is flexing her arm in a positive manner and her wide eyes are gazing upward with a large smile, as if she has figured something out or solved a puzzle. We only see Jesse centered in this wide shot, so we are meant to focus on her. In the background we see a bush and some flowers, as well as some storage bins and a large bottle, showing that Jesse is walking from the outside to the inside. The colors in this still remain the same.

#### *Toy Story 3, Scene 1, Image 3*

In this wide shot, we see Jesse's mood has changed yet again, back to anger and irritation, connoted by her frowning eyebrows and glaring gaze. We only see Jesse from the waist up, but she is again placed to the right of the frame, sitting in a cardboard box. To the left of the

frame, we see a slight profile of Buzz and Woody, the sheriff, looking toward Jesse. In between the men and Jesse, centered in the shot, is a large cardboard box labeled 'Sunnyside.' Given its size and prominent placement, the audience is meant to focus on the box. Its positioning can also connote that 'Sunnyside' or the contents of the box will divide Jesse and the men. The camera is looking at the pair from the front, allowing for maximum involvement on the viewer's part (van Leeuwen, 2001). The background is dark and unidentifiable.

*Overall Toy Story 3, Scene 1*

These images collectively represent women, and particularly Jesse, as emotional. Jesse promotes the mythology of the emotionally erratic woman given the shift in her mood from image to image. In the first still, we see her as enraged (and in the background we even see Mrs. Potato Head sobbing). Then, in the next image, we see her happy and excited. And right after that, we see her as angry again. Jesse is represented through her emotional state and in her first scene; she has some mood swings that give in to the stereotype of the woman being weak and overly emotional.

*Toy Story 3, Scene 2, Image 1*

In this scene, the most prominent shift is the color. The color of this entire scene is very red, connoting fire, desire, lust and alarm. Buzz is yet again to the left of this medium shot, with Jesse to the right. Buzz is slightly out of focus in the foreground, but his wide eyes, expressionless face and open mouth tells us that he is scared, shocked and worried. Jesse shares the same expression, but her eyebrows are frowning even more, indicating that she is even more scared than Buzz. The background is unidentifiable from this shot, but it looks as if the two are in trouble and stuck in a pile of junk or wood chips. Their expression, coupled with the fiery red color, suggests that they are in a difficult, and possibly, inescapable position.

*Toy Story 3, Scene 2, Image 2*

Now we have a close-up shot of Jesse, but we cannot see her face. We can only see that she is stuck somewhere and someone is holding her hand, most likely Buzz whose hand can be identified via the astronaut suit. Jesse's hand is placed on top of Buzz's, signifying the two are sharing an emotional and tender moment together. Buzz is holding onto Jesse,

connoting the possibility that the two are more than just friends. The color of the scene remains the same.

*Toy Story 3, Scene 2, Image 3*

In this close-up, we only see Jesse's face. Her brows are raised and her eyes are wide open, like she has just realized something, is distraught, fearful and/or surprised about something, most likely a response to Buzz's gesture from the last still. The close-up shot 'suggests an intimate/personal relationship' that we are allowed into, which in this case could be Jesse's realization of her feelings toward Buzz (van Leeuwen, 2001). In this image, we can see that she has dirt on her face, connoting she has been through a troubling or grueling experience. The background and colors remain the same.

*Overall Toy Story 3, Scene 2*

Unlike Natasha and Hermione's scenes, this final scene with Jesse centers on love and romance. Surprisingly, Natasha's scenes did not highlight the discourse of love or a heterosexual relationship, as we typically assume is exhibited with female characters. This final scene bears the mythology of the heterosexual relationship. From the red colors to the emotional expressions and the holding hands, the scene entirely represents love, and in some ways the declaration of love. Jesse represents the love-struck woman, but not in a sappy or helpless way. In fact, in the first still, both Buzz and Jesse share similar expressions of fear, bringing equality to their relationship. In this manner, we cannot water down Jesse's representation entirely just because the scene focuses on love. But, the very fact that such a discourse is the focus of Jesse's final scene in the film is important because this is how audiences will remember her role.

*The Comedy/Action-adventure Genre and Jesse*

*Toy Story 3* is distinctive in that the film uses an animated medium meant for children, with a combination of comedy and action-adventure genres. The film amalgamates a few elements from each category. The uniqueness of animation films is that inanimate objects become personified with human characteristics, and they are usually based on stereotypical, simple characters and a colorful mise-en-scène. As a children's film, it is 'equipped with dazzling technology, sound effects, and imagery packaged as entertainment, spin off commercial products, and "huggable" stories' (Giroux, 1995). As a comedy film, it generates laughter, has a happy ending, represents daily life and always combines with elements of

other genres (Neale, 2000). While *Toy Story 3* is packed with action and adventure, there is really no female hero. In this movie, Jesse very much embodies the role of a spunky, erratic, physically fit and emotional woman. Animated children's films tend to focus on male characters, with females as ancillary accessories, and Jesse conforms to this as well. Jesse, though a cowgirl with some spunk, succumbs to love and romance by the end of the movie and hangs on to her male hero. In many ways, she becomes a damsel in distress, saved by the macho man. These portrayals are typical to children's animation films that generally rely on stereotypical characterizations. This is particularly disappointing given the fact that these films target impressionable children, who are being fed normative and antiquated portrayals of women at a young age. And the worse part is that Hollywood is condoning and circulating these myths about women.

## CONCLUSION

The visual semiotic analysis of filmic stills from the female protagonists' scenes in *The Avengers*, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* and *Toy Story 3* were quite telling of the ways in which women are represented in mainstream Hollywood today. Through this empirical study, we were able to see that women were not generally being portrayed directly or overtly in a patriarchal and normative manner, however peppered through the images were signs that pointed to a male-dominated society's expectations for women. Natasha Romanoff's character in *The Avengers* was the only film from our sample that represented a woman outside of a relationship with a man, indicating a great step forward for women's independence in filmic characterizations, as well as the action-adventure genre. While she embodied her genre's expectations well, with shots highlighting her beauty and physical attributes, this was secondary to her confidence, aggression and agency. At the same time, we cannot rely on one film, or one genre to 'carry the burden of all women's expectations' (Ross, 2006).

Along these lines, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* and *Toy Story 3*, perhaps due to the combination of genres in each film, did exhibit patriarchal stereotypes, the latter more so than the former. Hermione's character began as an empowered 21<sup>st</sup> century woman, but who eventually fulfills what is considered to be a woman's traditional gender role. On the other hand, Jesse's entire character sketch adhered to very normative ideologies of women as emotionally erratic and love-struck. This more conventional representation is possibly due to it being a children's film that generally relies on stereotypical characterizations.



In addition, genre theory resonated aptly with semiotic analysis in that we found connections among women's representation and the types of film they were in, illustrating that genres play a vital role in the perpetuations of a particular mythology. While the method of visual semiotic analysis applied here was fruitful and productive, future studies could gain from an analysis of both visual imagery as well as audience interpretation, to confirm what myths viewers are taking away from mainstream movies.

Accordingly, we must focus future scholarly work on unearthing the signs and conventions that blockbuster films use to circulate particular ideas. This study, while a great starting point, only scratches the surface of the work that needs to be done in this field so we can better understand what notions about social issues, like women, are being consumed by audiences. More empirical analysis in film studies must focus on present-day Hollywood films so we can begin to anticipate and change the course of future media products in Hollywood toward better representations of women. In this way, we will eventually reach a point where we are only taking steps forward.

## REFERENCES

- Alcolea-Banegas, Jesús (2009). "Visual Arguments in Film." *Argumentation* 23.2: 259-75.
- "All Time Box Office." Chart. *IMDB Pro*. Amazon.com, URL: <http://pro.imdb.com/boxoffice/alltime-world-wide?sort=-gross> [Last consulted 1 May 2013]
- Altman, Rick (2003). "An Interview with Rick Altman." *The Velvet Light Trap* 51.1: 67-72.
- Altman, Rick (1984). "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre." *Cinema Journal* 23.3: 6-17.
- Barthes, Roland (2009). *Mythologies*. Paris: Vintage.
- Basinger, Jeanine (1993). *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930 – 1960*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- "Bechdel Test Movie List Stats." Bechdel Test Movie List, URL: <http://bechdeltest.com/statistics> [Last consulted 6 Aug. 2013]
- Berger, Arthur Asa (2008). *Seeing Is Believing: An Introduction to Visual Communication*. 3rd ed. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Berger, Arthur Asa (2005). *Media Analysis Techniques*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Bignell, Jonathan (1997). *Media Semiotics: An Introduction*. Manchester: Manchester UP.
- Bondejberg, I. (2001). Film: Genres and genre theory. In N.J. Smelser & P.B. Baltes (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. New York: Elsevier. 5640-46.
- Codell, Julie F (2007). *Genre, Gender, Race, and World Cinema*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Collins, Jim, Hilary Radner, and Ava Collins (1993). *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*. New York: Routledge.
- Flew, Terry (2007). *Understanding Global Media*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Giroux, Henry (1995). "Animating Youth: The Disnification of Children's Culture." *Socialist Review* 24.3: n., URL: [http://www.henrygiroux.com/online\\_articles/animating\\_youth.htm](http://www.henrygiroux.com/online_articles/animating_youth.htm) [Last consulted 1 Aug. 2013]
- Gledhill, Christine (ed) (2012). *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*. Urbana: University of Illinois.
- Hall, Stuart (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. London: SAGE Publications.
- "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2." *The Internet Movie Database*. IMDb.com, Inc, URL: [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1201607/?ref\\_=sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1201607/?ref_=sr_1) [Last consulted 8 Aug. 2013]
- Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*. Dir. David Yates. Perf. Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint, Emma Watson. Warner Bros., 2011. iTunes.
- Kord, Susanne, and Elisabeth Krimmer (2005). *Hollywood Divas, Indie Queens, and TV Heroines: Contemporary Screen Images of Women*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kuhn, Annette (1982). *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge & K. Paul.
- Lesage, Julia (1977). "S/Z and The Rules Of The Game." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 12-13: 45-51.
- Moriarty, Sandra E (2002). "The Symbiotics of Semiotics and Visual Communication." *Journal of Visual Literacy* 22.1: 19-28.
- Mulvey, L (1975). 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Screen*, Autumn, 16(3).
- Neale, Stephen (2000). *Genre and Hollywood*. London: Routledge.
- Pevere, Geoff (2003). "Bumming-down Hollywood Women." *The Toronto Star* 18 July 2003: 1-3.
- Reid, Robin Anne (2009). *Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Rose, Gillian (2001). *Visual Methodologies*. London: Sage. *MyiLibrary*. Web. 23 Apr. 2013.

- Ross, Karen, and Carolyn Byerly (2006). *Women and Media: A Critical Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Sassatelli, R (2011). "Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture." *Theory, Culture & Society* 28.5: 123-43.
- Schatz, Thomas (1981). *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*. 1st ed. Austin: McGraw-Hill.
- Schubart, Rikke (2007). *Super Bitches and Action Babes*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co.
- Smith, Stacy L., Marc Choueiti, and Stephanie Gall (2010). *Gender Inequality in Popular Films: Examining On Screen Portrayals and Behind-the-Scenes Employment Patterns in Motion Pictures Released between 2007-2009*. Annenberg School for Communications & Journalism at University of Southern California. Web.
- "The Avengers." *The Internet Movie Database*. IMDb.com, Inc, URL: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0848228/> [Last consulted 8 Aug. 2013]
- The Avengers*. Dir. Joss Whedon. Perf. Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans, Mark Ruffalo, Scarlett Johansson. Walt Disney Studios, 2012. Netflix.
- "Toy Story 3." *The Internet Movie Database*. IMDb.com, Inc, URL: [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0435761/?ref\\_=sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0435761/?ref_=sr_1) [Last consulted Web. 8 Aug. 2013]
- Toy Story 3*. Dir. Lee Unkrich. Perf. Tom Hanks, Tim Allen, Joan Cusack. Walt Disney Studios, 2010. iTunes.
- van Leeuwen, Theo, and Carey Jewitt (eds) (2001). *Handbook of Visual Analysis*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Williams, Linda, and Christine Gledhill (2000). "Rethinking Genre." *Reinventing Film Studies*. London: Arnold. 221-43.
- Willis, Jessica L (2008). "Sexual Subjectivity: A Semiotic Analysis of Girlhood, Sex, and Sexuality in the Film Juno." *Sexuality & Culture* 12.4: 240-54. Print. Wilson, Natalie.
- "Hollywood's War on Women." Web log post. *Ms. Blog*. N.p., 13 May 2012, URL: <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2012/05/15/hollywoods-war-on-women/> [Last consulted 7 Aug. 2013]

## APPENDIX 1

*The Avengers*. Dir. Joss Whedon. Perf. Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans, Mark Ruffalo, Scarlett Johansson. Walt Disney Studios, 2012. Netflix.

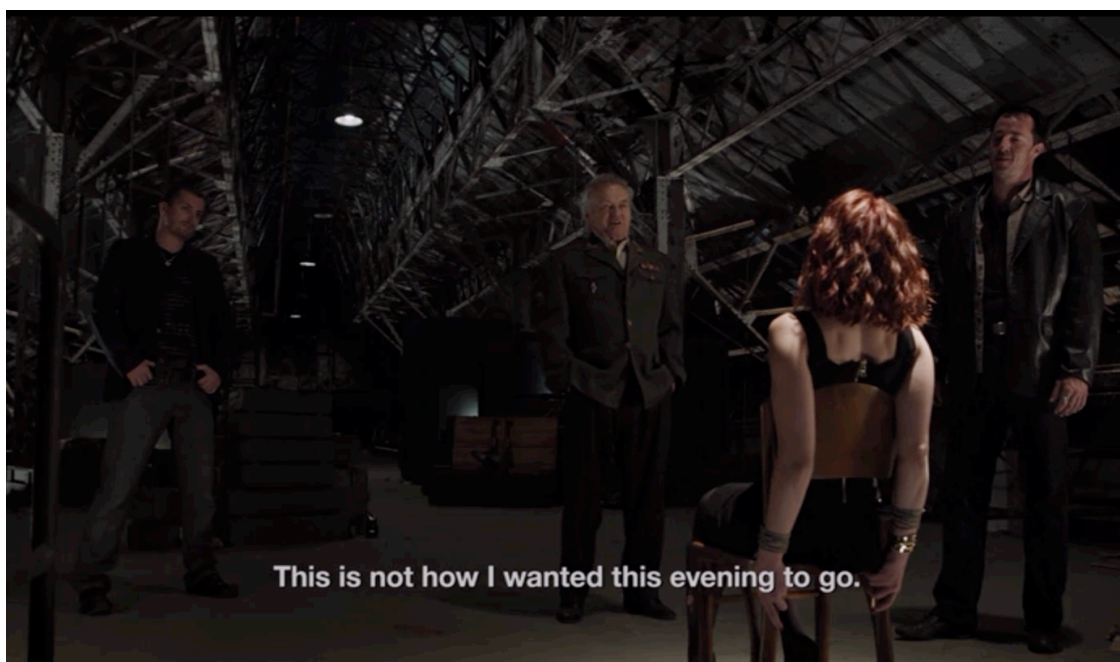
Synopsis: Nick Fury of S.H.I.E.L.D., a peacekeeping organization, calls on superheroes to help save the planet from the evil superhuman and his army. (The, IMDB, 2013).

FILM STILLS – SCENE 1 (12:06-15:16):

*Image 1*



*Image 2*



*Image 3*



FILM STILLS – SCENE 2 (2:00:58 – 2:07:39):

*Image 1*





*Image 2*



*Image 3*



## **APPENDIX 2**

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*. Dir. David Yates. Perf. Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint, Emma Watson. Warner Bros., 2011. iTunes.

Synopsis: “Harry, Ron and Hermione search for Voldemort's remaining Horcruxes in their effort to destroy the Dark Lord” (Harry, IMDB, 2013).

FILM STILLS – SCENE 1 (10:21-14:22):

*Image 1*



*Image 2*



*Image 3*



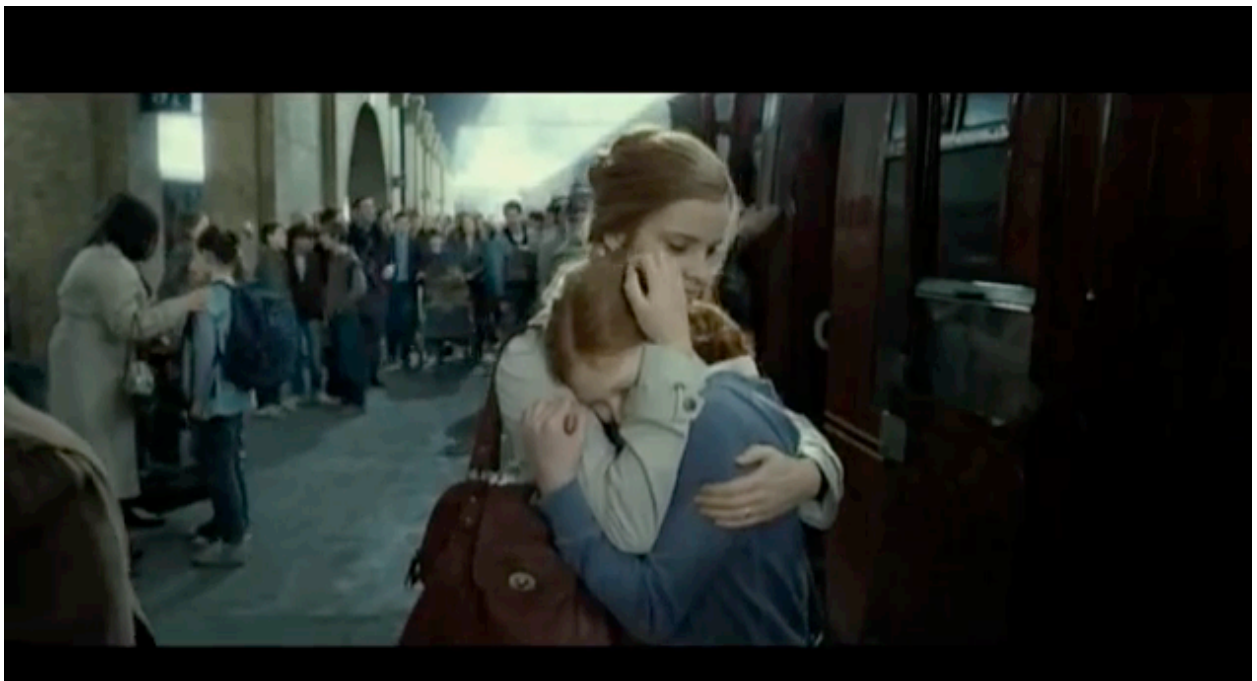


FILM STILLS – SCENE 2 (1:55:55-1:57:25):

*Image 1*



*Image 2*



*Image 3*



### APPENDIX 3

*Toy Story 3*. Dir. Lee Unkrich. Perf. Tom Hanks, Tim Allen, Joan Cusack. Walt Disney Studios, 2010. iTunes.

Synopsis: “The toys are mistakenly delivered to a day-care center instead of the attic right before Andy leaves for college, and it’s up to Woody to convince the other toys that they weren’t abandoned and to return home (Toy, IMDB, 2013).

FILM STILLS – SCENE 1 (16:05-18:10):

*Image 1*

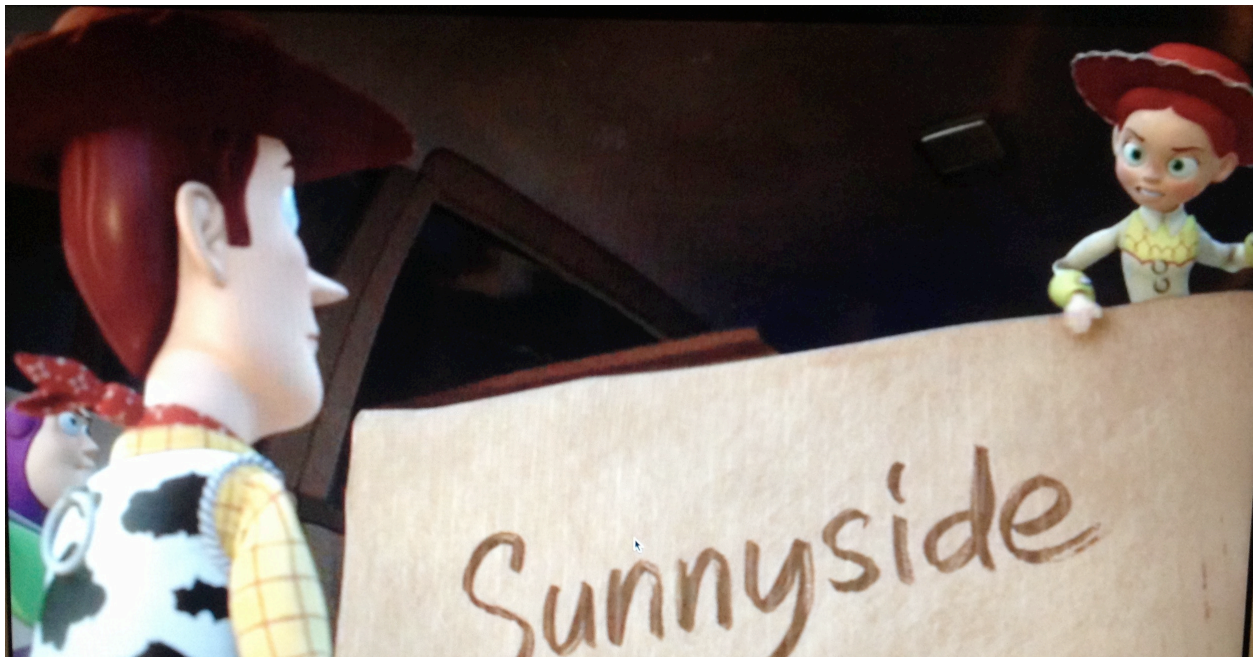


*Image 2*





*Image 3*



FILM STILLS – SCENE 2 (81:05-83:00):

*Image 1*





*Image 2*



*Image 3*



## **Electronic MSc Dissertation Series**

The Media@LSE Electronic MSc Dissertations Series presents high quality MSc Dissertations which received a mark of 72% and above (Distinction).

Selected dissertations are published electronically as PDF files, subject to review and approval by the Editors.

Authors retain copyright, and publication here does not preclude the subsequent development of the paper for publication elsewhere.

---

---

---