

FURIOUS FEMALE JUST-WARRIORS OF POST-APOCALYPSE AND DYSTOPIA

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The intention of this thesis is to identify and analyze the precise shift from an exploitative archetype to an empowered representation of women warriors, to identify the arena in which male and female characters are given equal agency in the context of war, and finally explore the key characteristics that make up an empowered female hero. This thesis also addresses the sociocultural nature of the warrior woman archetype as it pertains to the current role of women in the military. The films analyzed in this thesis are all post 9/11 films; a fact that links them culturally to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In recent years, numerous milestones have been reached for women in the armed services, especially for those women in combat positions. For the first time in American history women are being recognized for their active role as soldiers in combat. Therefore, it is valid to consider the correlation between seeing women as military professionals, fighting alongside male soldiers in these films, and the cultural impact of female combat soldiers. This aspect of the thesis also imbues the female just-warrior archetype with a legitimate history, mythology, and current cultural reference; which is essential to the visibility of female combat soldiers of the 21st century.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS A "WARRIOR?"

After all the internet chatter about Mad Max: Fury Road (2015) I was finally sitting in the theatre waiting to see this much-anticipated film. As a feminist and a young scholar (attuned to the problematic history of representations of women onscreen), I tend to find myself preparing for the "but," the all-too-familiar rhapsody of reasoning that often accompanies enjoying mainstream cinema. I so badly wanted Fury Road to be all the feminist glory that certain critics had suggested, but I knew better than to hold my breath because, after all, this is an action film and I know what happens to women in action films. Their abilities are undermined in order to prioritize and protect male positions of power and masculinity. I was preparing myself to make the argument for the film; "yes I know the camera spent too much time focused on her ass and boobs, but at least she was participating in the action." But as I watched Furiosa (Charlize Theron) charge through the center of the narrative battling toxic masculinity and overt misogyny, unapologetically undermining Max's (Tom Hardy) centrality in the film, I realized that I would need no "apology" for Fury Road. I would not need to classify this film as a feminist's guilty pleasure. At the film's climax, as Furiosa falls to her knees and screams into the wind in rage, I found myself cathartically screaming with her. Yes to her fury, yes to her rage, yes to her violence. Furiosa's feminist battle cry was heard, and the Warrior Woman I had been waiting to see had finally arrived.

The Just-Warrior: Historicizing the Archetype

In Western culture, the most powerful and influential story is arguably that of the male just warrior...it saturates our consciousness and helps structure our institutions. The male just warrior is the responsible citizen whose willingness to shed blood for the common good entitles him to mastery over self and others. The male just warrior fights and dies for the greater good

Early and Kennedy

Early and Kennedy's definition of warrior can be applied to the multiple representations that currently dominate pop culture and media such as, superheroes, soldiers, and road warriors etc. While each of these might offer a variation on the traditional mythology of the just warrior, they still retain many of the fundamental

characteristics. However, as culture progresses and evolves so too does the iconography of the just warrior. Now women have entered this war space and have been given their own variations on the just warrior such as Amazon, Super Woman, Warrior Women, Female Action Hero, Action Women. How well these female archetypes connote the meaning of warrior and the hegemonic negotiation present within representations of powerful women onscreen will be addressed later in the thesis, but initially with this introduction it is my intention to consolidate and define the specific archetype to which I am referring. The elements of the archetype that inform my argument are specifically associated with the archetype's function as a warrior. The definition of warrior according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is a person engaged or experienced in war. Culturally warrior has a broader meaning that extends beyond the definition, as the synonyms of warrior reflect such as, champion, fighter, and hero. The warrior and the hero serve as the vehicle through which oral and visual culture is passed from one generation to the next. Therefore, if the word warrior is synonymous with hero, then it is vital to explore and challenge who gets to engage and enact these representations. My specific focus on the warrior is intended to explore how it functions to reinforce our understandings of who gets to protect and defend the citizens of a society, or who gets to "save the world" and how our understanding and acceptance is affected when the warrior is female rather than male.

To describe and precisely define a just warrior I look to Andrew Gordan Fiala's definition in *The Just War Myth: The Moral illusions of War*. "Just warriors, fight out of a sense of obligation that is supposed to be purely moral. The just warrior goes to war with a sense of tragedy and duty, not because he hopes for personal gain or because

he is inspired by hatred. The soldier is a servant of the state, God, and justice; he is not supposed to be motivated by individual desires” (Fiala, p. 50). This definition illustrates the historical and cultural context of the connection between the just warrior and the modern American soldier; how over time the essence and iconography of the just warrior has become synonymous with soldier. This definition also helps to distinguish the important distinction between vigilante justice and the moral obligation of the just warrior. Vigilante justice is individualized and therefore vulnerable to co-optation and corruption, whereas the intrinsic morality of the just warrior is unquestioned, and above reproach. The just warrior will always put themselves second to the service of the greater good. This definition, for the purpose of this thesis, excludes readings of characters with superhuman powers e.g. Wonder Woman. This is also why I chose to focus on sci-fi, specifically post-apocalypse and dystopia; it often provides the context of war or revolution without being specifically reliant on the more fantastical elements that fall under the broader generic umbrella of science fiction-fantasy. While I will still contend that characters such as Lt. Ripley and Sarah Connor can be read as and do in fact operate as warriors within their genre their narratives are not specifically about saving the world they are more about surviving the monster; this detracts from the female just-warrior being read as a representation of the present day female soldier.

The historical context and definition of warrior becomes problematic when used to describe women, as it is “essential to the definition of masculine identity” and limits any definition of feminine identity (Early and Kennedy 1). So, is it even possible to understand certain representations as both warrior and woman? If so, how much do the previous representations of this archetype affect the iterations of female warriors in

popular culture today? Is it possible for a female figure to function as a “just warrior” without relinquishing her identity as woman? For these reasons, I will attempt to avoid using the term heroine when describing the specific archetypes I am analyzing. These archetypes operate as the hero not heroines. The heroine connotes a history tied to women who operate in the narrative as the love interest, damsel to be rescued or sidekick and the female just-warrior directly confronts that traditional representation. I am also attempting to move away from the lineage of heroine, and towards reading these women within the lineage of heroes.

It is vital to see representations of women being violent and men being non-violent to offset the pervasive historical gender bias that has perpetually associated men with violence and women with peace. “Western Society’s just warrior narrative has been male privileged. The male “just warrior” fights and dies for the greater good, whereas the female “beautiful soul” epitomizes the maternal war-support figure in need of male protection” (Early, p. 1). These definitions have perpetuated a gender binary so rigid that when women or men operate against type they are considered transgressive, and as transgressive characters their ability to successfully enact the hero archetype is precarious at best. For men transgression is the rejection of violence in favor of passivity and peace, for women transgression is taking up arms and using violence in male spaces. This is where I would like to discuss the use of violence in Warrior films. As the just warrior label and definition suggests, violence in this context is necessary. It is often used against oppression and to instigate a desired revolution; for example, Katniss’s use of violence in *The Hunger Games*. Therefore this is not a celebration of violence but of violence used as a necessary tool for the “just warrior” to rescue, save,

and protect or to right wrongs and enforce justice. As a result, I am not going to engage with critical debate to either condone or condemn the use of violence in western popular culture, instead I intend to recognize and accept its function within the warrior/hero's narrative.

In her book, *Women and War* Jean Bethke Elshtain describes what she refers to as the Furious Few and the Non-combatant Many and their relationships to violence:

In the matter of women and war we are invited to turn away. War is men's: men are the historic authors of organized violence. Yes, women have been drawn in -- they have been required to observe, suffer, cope, mourn, honor, adore, witness, work. But the men have done the *describing* and *defining* of war and the women are affected by it: they mostly react (Elshtain 164).

Early also illustrates how female violence is often an eruption, or an aberration of violence rather than a controlled calculated process. In her definition of a warrior she mentions specifically an entitlement to "mastery of self and others," or in other words the just-warrior possesses a specific set of violent skills pertaining to battle and war that they have or will master over the course of their journey. When looking at understandings of female violence as uncontained or uncontrolled it becomes clear that female violence is not considered "mastery over self and others" as the definition suggests. This is problematic as it not only assumes that women will not be able to operate within the sanctioned organized violence of war and military forces but it both demonizes female violence (unless sanctioned) and moves it to the periphery of history. Male violence falls within an assumed and agreed upon structure that an explosive uncontained female violence cannot prescribe to. As males have "described and defined" violence their violence is sanctioned, moralized, and rationalized, it is within and of the law. However, this law was designed by men, which means that, even a

sanctioned explosion of violence from women is still framed to serve the interests of men. Traditionally, sanctioned female violence only appears in very specified spaces, to avenge her own rape, and or to protect her child, both of which have patriarchal underpinnings: the death of the child means the death of the man's lineage and the rape of a wife is presented as the ultimate insult or injury to the husband, as his property has been tainted by another man, which compromises the purity of his line. This leaves no place for women's violence, making a female representation of the just-warrior that much more complex and rare. As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4, Furiosa and Max's violence is paralleled in *Fury Road*; they understand each other's violence and it becomes a binding connection between them. This directly challenges the notion of sanctioned male violence versus unsanctioned or explosive female violence and promotes a space to celebrate female violence.

Excluding women from enacting violence as a just-warrior is simply a way to contain them, which also results in an equally problematic expectation of violence from the pacific male (Elshtain 4). I illustrate in chapter 3 how *Edge of Tomorrow* addresses this problematic expectation of violence from the pacific male through Cage's character, a soldier who is terrified of combat. Labeling women's violence as uncontrolled or explosive in comparison to male violence is especially effective in arguing against women's ability to operate as part of a unit in the armed services. If women's violence is uncontained and explosive then it cannot function within the rigid structure of expectations of military service. This thesis uses three films *Divergent* (2015), *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014), and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) to illustrate 1.) the visibility of violent women successfully operating within a military structure 2.) female characters operating

narratively as just warriors 3.) that both can be possible without significant sexual objectification of the main female characters.

Body Politics: From Exploitation to Empowerment

In her article "Hunger Games, Hollywood and Fighting Fuck Toys," Caroline Heldman describes the media archetype fighting fuck toy (FFT) as

hyper-sexualized women protagonists who are able to “kick ass” (and kill) with the best of them—and look good doing it. The FFT appears empowered, but her very existence serves the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer. In short, the FFT takes female agency and appropriates it for the male gaze. (Heldman)

This visual archetype is the essential contradiction that confines female leads in action roles. This double bind is the expected compromise that allows women to enter the action genre --a predominately male genre and space.

Ever since the big screen's camera panned down Lara Croft's body, the compromise necessary for female action heroes to have agency and visibility -- comparable to male actions heroes-- was determined. The female body becomes spectacle in action films; she is very literally an action figure to be manipulated and posed throughout the film. The focus is on the body not the development of the character. Lara Croft is a valid representation of the FFT but her origin derives from the videogame genre. Her depiction onscreen is informed by video games' female player-protagonists which exploit a problematic focus on point-of-view shots that pander to adolescent male fantasies of women. The FFT represents an exploitative representation of the female action hero.

An empowered representation of the female action hero is not limited to performances of masculinity while still prioritizing their objectified and overtly sexualized

femininity. Their “masculine” traits are being expressed through characterization *and* in their abilities to drive the narrative. The over exaggerated feminine signifiers are gone and what is left is a complex representation of femininity, female agency, and an uncompromised visibility in masculine spaces. As culture slowly catches up to women’s actual potential to enact the just warrior archetype there has been a hegemonic negotiation found within representations of female warriors. This section will discuss the ways in which the archetype has been negotiated in an attempt to include women.

Traditionally, the Warrior Woman—a specific distinction from the use of heroine but still a problematic label—by name alone connotes a contradiction in both representation and meaning. What it means to be a warrior has historically been understood as in direct opposition to traditional understandings of womanhood, the female role, and concepts of femininity. The discourses of body and gender that inform these understandings are firmly planted in the ideological and visual representations of women in film and television. It has been the expectation of women onscreen to represent and fulfill the traditional ideological understandings of western women which are often distinguished by an absence of what are currently deemed “masculine” signifiers. When a female character disrupts these understandings and expectations by exhibiting masculine traits, her ability to simultaneously connote traditional ideals of femininity is threatened.

In consequence, the representation of the warrior woman’s femininity must be negotiated and reallocated. This is often achieved through the over-promotion of her sexual objectification. If her character is performing a hyper masculine role then in order not to disrupt traditional understandings of femininity and masculinity as a binary she

must project some aspect of hyper femininity to maintain the balance. (it is an ironic representation, not earnest). Popular Hollywood genre films rely on uncomplicated representations or stereotypes in order to quickly establish characters' function in the narrative. In action films the women (if they are present) function as damsels in distress, love interests, or side-kicks that require a rescue or protection throughout the film. They operate as motivation for the male warrior/hero to muster his courage and strength to achieve the narrative goal as rescuer/protector. It is only recently and specifically in the example films of this thesis that audiences are presented with female characters whose narrative function is not as damsels in distress or as side-kicks, they are driving the narrative as well as enacting the masculine "just warrior" role.

Within the just warrior myth women are connoted with non-violence and peace if they are to use violence even as a just warrior they must do so as a man to avoid disrupting the legitimacy of the warrior/hero archetype. Therefore, women who embark on the just warrior path must purge their feminine signifiers; this is often accomplished through having the characters cut off their hair, and/or bind their breasts, as these are culturally understood signifiers of femininity. As Haug notes, "hair long ago lost its function of mere protection—in which its usefulness was defined in relation to heat and cold—and has become a symbol of femininity and masculinity—of potency, in its association with beauty" (Haug, p. 111).

Female just-warrior stories often begin with a female character who has traditional feminine signifiers but does not specifically invest in being read as feminine or masculine. Eventually they come to the realization that these feminine signifiers are holding her back from her goals and must be concealed or shed in order for her to move

beyond their restrictions. Usually the character's lack of desire to be read as feminine marks this as a liberating experience. "The desire for short hair: a protest against femininity, and an attempt to establish an alternative image. In this context hair has significance not so much as a means of gaining social recognition from others, but of coming to terms with gender as a social relation" (Haug, p.110). This is can be seen in military and war films across genres such as *G.I. Jane* (1997) and *Mulan* (1998). In *G.I. Jane* Jordan O'Niell (Demi Moore) walks into a barber shop on base and instead of waiting to let someone cut her hair decides to pick up the clippers and shave her head, this moment in the film is followed by a training montage of O'Niell finally succeeding in the rigorous military exercises and exceeding the expectations of her unrelenting instructor. In the Disney film *Mulan*, Fa Mulan cuts her long locks and ties what is left into the traditional top knot style of the Chinese army and then dons her father's war armor, this is also followed by a montage of military training at which she eventually excels. This "purging of feminine signifiers" is also seen in the *Divergent* series when, in the second film *Insurgent*, Tris abandons her flowing chestnut locks for a spiky short style. The significance of this narrative pattern is that it reinforces the position of women in the just-warrior history as being outside or unnatural when functioning as the warrior. They must reveal that they have been transformed, or conformed in some way to the role of the just warrior rather than it being inherently aligned with their character.

The absence of female signifiers is one of the ways in which the films *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *Edge of Tomorrow* can be read as a reframing of this notion that women are not in a natural state when operating as the just-warrior. Furiosa and Rita's appearances in the films do not shift or change. Furiosa's shaved head opens and

closes the film, and this is specifically significant as the audience is being asked to accept that she exists as the just-warrior and she does not have to change herself in order to fulfill that role.

Other than being expelled or marginalized from the historical lineage of the just warrior, when women are visible they function as the “beautiful soul” or as the symbols of peace and non-violence. They are tasked with balancing out the violence utilized by the just warrior with succor and compassion and to ensure that humanity is worthy of his sacrifice. This results in the fear that if both men and women utilize violence, as women begin to adopt the role of warrior, there will be no one left to safeguard humanity’s soul. In *Fury Road* it is Furiosa, a woman, who is tasked with safeguarding humanity’s soul, and uses violence as a just warrior for the greater good to bring peace. *Fury Road* functions as a reframing of the just-warrior as female not at all operating “under the illusion that she can offer an authentic substitute story”—she simply is the story (Early, p.2). I am arguing that history places women on one side of war and violence which calls for a re-writing of archetypes such as the just warrior to authentically include women. Until very recently the only re-writings that have been accepted in Pop Culture require the objectification of the female warrior or for her to visibly denounce her feminine signifiers. The films in this thesis are offering a re-writing and re-framing of the just warrior archetype to include women, without objectification, and aligns them with the historical lineage of the just-warrior archetype.

The female action-adventure hero is composed equally of her story, affirmative action, equal opportunity, and repudiation of gender essentialism and traditional feminine roles. While Helford claims a feminist history for these representations, she labels the newest incarnations of the female action hero as ‘postfeminist’ because of the “consequential emphasis on individual efforts over group activism.” This individual effort references the competitive postfeminism

advocated by Camilla Paglia and others. That is, these instances of female agency are for individual gain – financial, physical, emotional or otherwise – rather than for a wider engagement with the confines of patriarchal discourse. (Gillis, p. 10)

This post-feminist notion illustrates the difference between agency and empowerment, or in the interest of this thesis the difference between a FFT and a female just-warrior. The FFT has agency because she exists in spaces in which women were once restricted or entirely excluded, but what is she doing with and in those spaces? Does her presence or her narrative address more than just her corporeal existence in the role of an action hero? Not usually, and it comes at the expense of her sexual objectification. I am not attempting to dismiss these characters or their importance in the progression of the images of women on screen however I am attempting to recognize their limitations and suggest a need to move beyond them. With this thesis, I want to illustrate the visual and narrative differences between the FFT (Lara Croft) and the female just-warrior (Furiosa), the difference between a post-feminist representation that is not concerned with the general feminist agenda but rather an individual feminist agenda. Through this thesis, I illustrate how the female just-warrior is an empowered feminist archetype concerned with fulfilling the larger feminist agenda.

I end this chapter by defining the specific traits of the modern mainstream warrior woman or female just-warrior archetype. There are two sets of criteria that I use to textually analyze the warrior women in the three films. The first applies to the individual characterization of the warrior woman in each film and the second is applied to the overall narrative and structure of the film. Characterization of the Female Just-Warrior:

- 1) She is inherently brave (she runs towards danger) a protector and defender of those who cannot defend themselves;
- 2) She has mastery over herself and the skills she

utilizes in violent scenarios; and 3) She is physically capable but not impervious to pain or injury (she is willing to accept help). The second set of criteria is focused on how these films align with the “just-warrior” in narrative function, iconography, as well as assumptions and expectations of warriors/soldiers/heroes. Narrative depictions of the Female Just-Warrior: 1) Minimal to no sexual objectification of her body; 2) She is central to the narrative (if she were removed the narrative would be incomplete); 3) She has at least a partial backstory or history outside of the main narrative; and 4) She is willing to sacrifice herself (die) for the “greater good.” My main goal for this criteria that when applied to a female character in a modern Hollywood action films, they determine if she is operating as a FFT or an empowered female just-warrior.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 narrows my focus to female just-warriors in post 9/11 science fiction genre. I discuss the freedom and pleasures of the genre that provide a space to express and expose cultural and social anxieties. The chapter focuses on the specific freedoms within dystopian narratives and how they operate as a formidable setting for female just-warriors. I then analyze the film *Divergent* and the leading character Tris. I illustrate how Tris operates as an adolescent version of the Warrior Woman archetype but that she still encompasses the main qualities of the just-warrior.

Chapter 3 analyzes *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) which provides the example of the post 9/11 anxieties expressed through alien invasion films. My main focus on this film is to explore how the film sets up a futuristic but realist depiction of a military institution that employs successful integration of the sexes. The military professional females

depicted in *Edge of Tomorrow* serve as a fundamental element of the female just-warrior archetype as this is a space in which her warrior traits are celebrated and utilized, rather than ignored or belittled. I illustrate how the power dynamic between Rita and Cage is an inversion of traditional male-hero and female side-kick roles. I argue how Rita's character functions as a celebration of female soldiers in combat as well as creating a positive highly visible representation of professional military women. I define and apply cyber post-feminist theories to Rita's character and explore how she engages with the futuristic technology available to her. To conclude I do a textual analysis of Rita as a cyborgic body and explore the freedoms and limitations of reading her as a cyborgic female just-warrior.

Chapter 4 on *Mad Max: Fury Road* focuses on the film's feminist narrative and explores the film's use of objectified characters to address and challenge previous FFT archetypes. I also argue the importance of a feminist agenda for a female just-warrior and the potency of Furiosa's physicality and violence. I revisit previous action women in post-apocalyptic films and look at the ways in which they were contained in order to defend Furiosa's status as an uncontained justified violent female warrior.

Chapter 5 begins by consolidating the three case studies and pinpointing each film's strengths and limitations to illustrate how the lineage of female warriors informs each new archetype. I then discuss future archetypes and the attention to casting in mainstream Hollywood which seems to be moving towards more empowered representations in the action genre. Chapter 5 ends with a discussion of race and the whiteness of female just-warriors, illustrated by a case study of Zoe Saldana's roles in sci-fi and action films.

CHAPTER 2

THE ADOLESCENT WARRIOR: TRIS

As chapter 1 provided a broad overview of the just-warrior archetype with examples in history and representations in culture, in this chapter I focus on how the just-warrior archetype functions in dystopia film. For this thesis I am looking specifically at dystopia and post-apocalyptic films for two reasons: first, they provide a narrative arena that presents a need for the just warrior archetype to save the day, and second that in a post 9/11 society, films that depict war and revolution provide a modern representation of the American soldier.

In his analysis of the effects of 9/11 on the science fiction film genre, Geraghty describes the use of the events on 9/11 and the realities of the ensuing wars as real world references for fictional narratives. "The bleak landscape of personal loss, paranoia, and political cynicism has since inspired Hollywood's output: in the first instance, movies like family films and comedies were made to help America forget about the attacks, this was soon replaced, however, by the more typical action blockbusters and films that used 9/11 and its fallout as narrative backdrop" (Geraghty ch.6). I refer to Geraghty's analysis of post 9/11 science fiction films as well as Dixon's *Film and Television after 9/11* to discuss the impact of 9/11 on this genre with films such as *War of the Worlds* (2005), *Cloverfield* (2008) and *District 9* (2009) that operate as allegories for the attacks on 9/11 or the anxieties of the aftermath. If these types of films are read as allegories for the fallout of 9/11 then they can also be read as images of the modern American soldiers. In other words, if the films can be read as influencing how society understands and copes with the aftermath of 9/11 and the wars on terrorism

then they must also influence how we understand and perceive the men and women fighting in these wars. This is specifically where a female just-warrior performs an important role for representation of women in combat because within the context of these films she represents American female soldiers. Since women in combat have been confined to the periphery of both factual and fictional history and representations of war it is vital to acknowledge the importance of such roles in fiction films. This is because such an acknowledgment in fiction will help to also acknowledge the presence of and enhance the visibility of women in the factual history of the American military.

Dystopia: A World in Crisis Calls Her

Dystopia is an important genre for the representation of female just-warriors because the crisis of dystopia encourages society to adopt new ideas and alternative actions. In the literary tradition, critical dystopias allow writers to express their discontent with social or political systems by reflecting elements of society into the false world of the dystopia:

The dystopian imagination has served as a prophetic vehicle, the canary in a cage, for writers with an ethical and political concern for warning us of terrible socio-political tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia's underside. (Moylan, p. 2)

Specifically, the critical dystopia that came out of the 1970's was "shaped by ecological, feminist, and New Left thought" (Moylan, p 2.). This makes it not only a suitable vehicle for challenging gender representations but also a way to critique hegemonic ideologies that limit non-heteronormative identities and practices. The critical dystopia as defined by Lyman Tower Sargent is

a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with utopia. (Moylan, p. 7)

Differing from the definition of dystopia as "a place or society depicted as worse or indeed a potential future of the contemporary world" (Geraghty, p 52) critical dystopia offers the potential for change and radical restructuring of the political and social systems of power. The critical dystopia, therefore, provides both a critique of systems of power and oppression while offering a possible solution. This significant shift in the genre is also important when considering Hollywood adaptations of dystopian narratives. Traditional dystopias are a "bleak, depressing genre with little space for hope within the story" (Moylan, p. 7) and thus, do not appeal to the Hollywood blockbuster formula which typically requires a resolution of hope or a happy ending.

The narrative formula of dystopia also lends itself to the recognizable mono-myth or hero's journey structure of Hollywood films:

The typical structure of the dystopia (with its presentation of an alienated character's refusal) facilitates this politically and formally flexible stance...most obvious in the decade's representation of the lone individual fighting the corrupt forces above him (the protagonist is usually a man) and offers an interesting twist on the American narrative of the self-made man who succeeds through individual endeavour and enterprise. (Geraghty, p. 52)

Therefore, within dystopia when the protagonist is female and not acting as the object or reward for a male protagonists' conquest she also becomes a just warrior fighting the oppressive systems of power. She becomes the beacon of hope and ignites the "refusal" which evolves into the revolution required to bring about a new world that holds potential to become the new utopia (Geraghty, p. 52). The familiar and stable

structure of dystopian narratives allows for some specific freedoms for female protagonists.

Within the science fiction genre, dystopia has a rich literary history with roots reaching back to the early 20th century (Moynan, p.1). The function and expectation of a dystopian protagonist has become solidified through that rich history as well as the generic narrative structure. The protagonist's role within the narrative is to provide the initial refusal or to question the society's oppressive inequalities and restrictions. According to Hemphill, "the most obvious oppression in dystopias tends to be determined by social class rather than gender or race" (Hemphill, p.11) and thus the narrative function of the protagonist is not specifically reliant on gender roles or expectations. The critique of class structures within dystopia also operates as a unifying (although still oppressive) element as it pertains to gender. "These societies, while later exposed as deeply flawed and oppressive, on the surface represent an ideal typically associated with modern-day feminist movements — full equality of the sexes" (Hemphill 14). Therefore, their equality stems from their places within the class system as men and women are more likely to be initially assessed based on their class rather than their gender. The protagonist's characterization is formed through their struggles within and against their oppressed class which helps to minimize gender-based characterizations. Therefore, the rich history of the genre, minimal focus on gender as a definitive characterization, and the focus on class systems makes dystopia a perfect setting to see a female successfully enact and fulfill the expectations of both, a dystopian protagonist, and in a broader sense of representation, the just warrior archetype. This is

because female characters as dystopian protagonists do not disrupt the foundations of the genre.

Another narrative element required for the just warrior archetype and provided by the dystopian world is the "just war." The oppressive forces present in the dystopian narrative provide an unambiguously evil enemy for the protagonist to defeat. The bleakness of dystopia along with the imbalances perpetrated by those in power make for a villain whose motivations stem from their desire to maintain the exploitative imbalances of the dystopian government for their own selfish gains. Such examples as the High Chancellor in *V for Vendetta* (2005), President Snow in *Hunger Games* (2015), the Father in *Equilibrium* (2002), and the Chairman in *Aeon Flux* (2005) are all examples of dystopian villains who abuse the exploitative system used to govern. Their sole motivation is to remain in a position of power and to ensure that the imbalances in power continue to serve their individual interests. This makes them uncomplicated enemies for the dystopian protagonist, who determine within the course of the narrative that overthrowing the corrupt dictator will result in the subsequent collapse of the totalitarian system, liberating its citizens. The protagonist's fight becomes justified through the revelations that the system is flawed, exploitative, and oppressive and that innocent people will continue to be hurt if the system is allowed to thrive. The dystopian protagonist then also becomes the just warrior fighting the just war by defending those who cannot defend themselves -- the oppressed citizens -- and safeguarding humanity - which would continue to be corrupted by the totalitarian rule. The film *Divergent* provides the villain, the just war, and a society in need of a just warrior.

The Adolescent Warrior: Tris

Divergent opens with a voiceover from Beatrice (Shailene Woodley) explaining the history and structure of her city. She explains that there was a devastating war and their founders built the wall "to keep us safe" and divided the surviving population into 5 factions "to keep the peace." The five factions are based on the fundamental values of a community and placement within a faction is based on aptitude and inclination towards the central value of each faction: Abnegation value selflessness and service, Candor value honesty and order, Erudite value knowledge and logic, Amity value kindness and harmony, and Dauntless value bravery. Beatrice expresses her fondness and admiration for the Dauntless faction by stating: "I always thought they were amazing. They're our protectors, our soldiers, our police; brave, fearless, and free."

Beatrice goes on to explain that when each child turns eighteen they must choose their future faction. The "construction of the hegemonic order" in this dystopian world is the interpellation of the youth into the faction system based on their ability to choose the faction they wish to enter as adults, as "fully-fledged members of society". This system is reliant on the subjects knowing their own mind and not "wishing they were someone they're not," but choosing based on "who you truly are and where you truly belong." This false presentation of free will is undermined by the fact that once they choose a faction they cannot change factions or return to their families; "factions before blood" is their most important ideal. Any citizens unable to acclimate to their faction live factionless (homeless) on the edges of the city. The young citizens are given an aptitude test that indicates which faction their personalities most closely align with. Beatrice expresses her struggle with the faction she was born into, feeling that she is

not naturally inclined towards Abnegation and fears having to leave her parents for a new faction.

During her aptitude test, Beatrice discovers that she is an anomaly referred to as "divergent" meaning she is not primarily inclined towards a single value but that she has equal aptitude for every principle value of each faction. She is told to hide this from everyone as her existence threatens the faction system because she has the potential to fit into anywhere, disrupting the fundamental idea of "belonging" to a specific faction. At the Choosing Ceremony she chooses to leave her family and join the Dauntless faction. Her time with Dauntless begins with ten week training, broken into two phases (physical and mental) that determine the initiates' jobs within the faction. Beatrice (now Tris, a name she chose for herself upon joining Dauntless) and the other initiates discover that they must pass this training according to set standards or be "cut" from the faction and forced to live factionless. Tris struggles in the first phase but excels in the second phase.

In the second phase of training, the initiates are subjected to "fear landscapes" which simulate their worst fears to assess their ability to overcome fear. It is during these assessments that Tris' trainer discovers that she is divergent due to her ability to see through the simulations. He then vows to keep her safe and teaches her how to pass her final assessment and remain undetected by Dauntless leadership. Together Tris and her instructor Four (Theo James) discover a plot by Erudite to overthrow Abnegation who is the governing faction. Jeanine (Kate Winslet) the leader of Erudite believes that "divergents" must be eradicated for the faction system to survive. Jeanine expresses to Tris that she believes that Abnegation has been breaking the law by

harboring divergents. Jeanine decides to use Dauntless to overthrow Abnegation. With the help of Dauntless leadership, Jeanine supplies Dauntless with what they are told is a tracking device, which is actually a mind control serum. Tris wakes in the middle of the night to see the rest of her unit dressing in battle gear and lining up. The serum injected for mind control does not work on Tris because she is divergent, so she pretends to be in the trance and follows the unit onto the train. On the train, she finds Four and grabs his hand to confirm that he is not under the trance. The Dauntless army arrives at the Abnegation compound and begin removing citizens from their homes. Tris and Four break off from the Dauntless army and try to locate Tris' parents in an attempt to save them. They are captured and Jeanine orders Four to be placed under the trance and for Tris to be executed. Tris is rescued by her mother Natalie (Ashely Judd) who attempts to take Tris back and rejoin the other Abnegation leadership, including Tris' father (Tony Goldwyn), who have escaped but is fatally wounded before they make it back to the others. Once Tris finds the group she leads them back into Dauntless to rescue Four and stop Jeanine from carrying out a mass execution of the entire Abnegation faction. Her father dies when he bravely charges the Dauntless soldiers to provide access for the rest of the group. Tris finds Four and breaks him out of his mind control trance and together they fight their way through other Dauntless soldiers until they reach Jeanine. Tris injects Jeanine with the mind control serum and forces her to terminate the program. Tris and Four are forced to abandon the Dauntless faction and travel to the edge of the city; the film ends here with the notion of an impending revolution, which unfolds in the second film of the trilogy.

As Tris volunteers for Dauntless, begins training and eventually succeeds in completing boot camp, this film reveals the potential and benefits of gender equality in military spaces. *Starship Troopers* (1997, Verhoeven) is another important example of how sci-fi dystopia films provide a space that highlights the ideal of integrated military troops and directly informs the depiction of the Dauntless troops in *Divergent*. The military troops in *Starship Troopers* are integrated in every way, the men and women soldiers train together, bunk together, and even shower together. The integrated shower scene in *Starship Troopers* is iconic, provocative and essential to depicting the ideal environment for an integrated military because it is depicting a non-sexualized space in which opposite sexes coexist as equals absent of any objectifying gaze (from each other). The characters in *Starship Troopers* are also not asexual or desexualized as is sometimes the case in dystopian worlds. *Starship Troopers* present characters that are capable of effectively compartmentalizing their relationships with fellow soldiers. Parallel to locker-room scenes in sports films, seeing integrated military units presented in the same spaces and in the same manner as similar all male groups in other genres helps to normalize integration of the sexes.

As a post-apocalyptic sci-fi film, *Starship Troopers* depicts a world in which gender is a non-factor in combat and military service. However, as it is not a female lead nor is it a post 9/11 film, therefore, the cultural context does not have the same implications as the films in this thesis. *Divergent* goes a step further than *Starship Troopers* in that it not only shows an integrated military force, but *Divergent* allows audiences to identify with a female soldier as she is subjected to the rigorous and un-gender-biased training that will gain her entry into the elite military faction of Dauntless.

Divergent can be read as addressing and challenging some of the underlying anxieties about women in combat through Tris' struggles in the first stage of boot camp. As *Divergent's* female just-warrior, Tris also meets the predetermined criteria for an empowered female warrior archetype. My purpose in beginning with this film is to show by the final film *Mad Max: Fury Road* these archetypes are appearing in different age groups across the genre, and this reinforces the archetype as a representation of female military professionals. These films provide a representation of different stages of a military career. Tris's character represents the early stage of boot camp and the phase of establishing individual ability and utility within the military institution.

To establish the characterization of the young warrior in comparison to the other two archetypes of this thesis (specifically *Furiosa*) I will use Moylan's definition of the trajectory of the dystopian protagonist:

The dystopian text usually begins directly in the terrible new world; and yet...the element of textual estrangement remains in effect since the focus is frequently on a character who questions the dystopian society. The text is built around the construction of a narrative of hegemonic order and a counter narrative of resistance...The protagonist is always already in the world in question, unreflectively immersed in the society. However, a counter-narrative develops as the dystopia citizen moves from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation and resistance. (Moylan, p. 5)

This helps to frame her initial willingness to serve the state as a soldier in the Dauntless faction and why she is initially content when she is accepted into her chosen faction. Tris does not begin to question the dystopian society until after she becomes fully initiated into the Dauntless faction. Her resistance does not begin until the final few minutes of the film, her alienation from the dystopian society closes the film, and her rebellion or her "just war" is fully realized in the later installments of the trilogy.

In the previous chapter, I outlined criteria for the female just-warrior in both narrative prominence and characterization. I use these criteria through textual analysis to illustrate how Tris functions as a female just-warrior and how this character promotes a positive and prominent visible representation of female soldiers.

The first quality of characterization listed in chapter 1 is bravery: *she is inherently brave (she runs towards danger) a protector and defender of those who cannot defend themselves*. This is first evident in Tris' description of Dauntless as brave and that she "always thought they were amazing." Her admiration of this quality paired with the visual flashback of Tris running behind a group of Dauntless soldiers as a child reveals her desire to be a part of this group and how much she values their bravery over the core values of the other factions, even if she does not yet recognize that quality in herself. She is also naturally inclined to protect and defend those who cannot defend themselves. This is expressed even before she takes her aptitude test. While waiting in line for the test she witnesses Peter (Miles Teller) bully and intimidate a smaller-statured member of Abnegation. When the altercation becomes physical Tris immediately lunges forward only to be stopped by her brother Caleb (Ansel Elgort) who simply says "Tris, don't." His tone and quick reaction to her desire to intercede on behalf of someone else indicates that this was not a new or unfamiliar behavior from Tris. Tris' bravery and tendency to put herself in harm's way to rescue others is revealed during an exercise in the first phase of training. Al (Christian Madsen) one of the initiates is struggling during a knife throwing exercise, Eric, (Jai Courtney) the instructor, in an effort to expose Al's fear to the group, demands that Al stands in front of one of the targets while Four throws knives at him. Eric tells Al that if he flinches at any of the knives being thrown he will be

cut from Dauntless. Tris, visibly bothered by Eric's cruel hazing, challenges his method; "Stop! Anyone can stand in front of a target, it doesn't prove anything." To which Eric predictably replies, "well it should be easy for you to take his place then." Without hesitation, Tris walks up to the target and stands unflinching as Four throws the knives, all of which land inches away from her body, the final knife landing so close it cuts the side of her ear. When she returns to the bunk the other initiates all cheer and celebrate her selfless act of bravery.

During the second phase of training Tris' unique ability to react positively to fear is exposed. Four tells Tris that her speed and ability to move through the fear simulations is unprecedented. She responds to the simulations with cunning and unconstrained courage which Four finds both curious and admirable; "Fear doesn't shut you down, it wakes you up." Her courage is a key characteristic when Tris is considered alongside both mythical and historical depictions of female just-warriors. Tris possesses the same characteristics present in female figures seen charging into battle (Joan of Arc, Queen Elizabeth I, Maria (Yashka) Botchkareva¹ et al.) even if this and other essential characteristics are not fully realized or tapped into until the later films in the trilogy. However, this also reinforces the reading of Tris as an adolescent female just-warrior, she is made aware of her skills but is still learning mastery over herself and her abilities. Her status as an adolescent just warrior --still learning to master her skills and how to use them in violent situations— means that she is still in the process of learning the second characteristic of a female just-warrior: she has mastery over herself and the

¹ In 1917 Maria Botchkareva led an all-woman battalion of the Russian Army known as the "Battalion of Death."

skills she uses in violent situations, for a majority of the film. However, the final few minutes of *Divergent* do offer a glimpse at the fully formed female just-warrior in Tris as she storms the Dauntless compound to take down Jeanine. She uses skills the audience has watched her hone over the course of her training and succeeds in her goal to save Abnegation and stop Jeanine. She is not restrained in her use of violence. She fights off other members of Dauntless (mostly male) and even throws a knife through Jeanine's hand to stop her from carrying out the mass executions. Her use of violence in the final fights of the film solidify her status as a fully formed female just-warrior even if she does not spend the entire film this way. Her struggles to become a skilled fighter in the first phase of training are another essential element in presenting an authentically integrated military unit.

The lack of curbed expectations for the female Dauntless members both addresses and overcomes the presumed inferiority of female soldiers. The differences in size, stature, and ability are addressed in the first phase of training when both Tris and Christina (Zoe Kravitz) are expected to fight men and women much more skilled and much larger in stature. Tris is told by Four that she is "weak" and has no muscle, but he teaches her how to overcome this when fighting someone who is bigger, stronger, or a more skilled fighter. At first, she fails multiple times. Her first fight is against another female initiate much larger and stronger than her. Her second fight is against Peter who is the top ranked initiate and Tris is still struggling at the bottom. He does not hold back. He fights without mercy or regard for her as a lesser opponent, which maintains an environment absent of gender bias, or vacillating expectations. These fights are also important because she is learning hand to hand combat and is

only able to rely on her own physical skills rather than her skills with a weapon. This space of hand to hand combat between men and women is often a space of scrutiny in real world scenarios and realist depictions of integrated military in film. For example, in the film *GI Jane* Lt. Urgayle (Viggo Mortensen) isolates Lt. O'Neill (Demi Moore) and mercilessly beats her in front of the men to expose their inability to see her as an equal. Her male comrades' reactions to her being violently beaten in front of them reveal the underlying anxiety about women in combat spaces –that male soldiers' inability to see women as their equals will manifest in a desire to protect women who are fighting alongside them which would compromise the efficiency of the unit. Despite Four's help, Tris is beaten down in both fights during training, but in the final moments of the film, the audience is able to see her succeed in hand to hand combat, reinforcing the rationality of unbiased expectations of the Dauntless soldiers and the success of an integrated military force.

The third characteristic of female just-warrior is that *she is physically capable but not impervious to pain or injury (she is willing to accept help)*. As previously mentioned this is a more obvious characteristic for the adolescent female just-warrior, however, it is vital to the representation of these archetypes as real world references to modern female soldiers. It is imperative that the just warrior possess an element of physical imperfection. The idea of these women being super-human undermines their influence on perspectives of actual women in combat because it offers another layer of deniability. Beyond representations existing in a fictional world, if the character has super human powers she cannot authentically represent a female soldier because her ability to engage with the world around her and her expression of violence is in-human.

In order to read the female just-warrior archetype as being informed by authentic historical figures, her skills and physical abilities must have real-world references. This also seems to correlate with the objectification of the female action hero; if the audience is being asked to accept a world in which super-human abilities or powers exist then they are also more likely to accept an over-sexualized costume rather than a functional one, perfect hair and makeup after battle scenes, and a hero that always manages to survive unscathed.

Each of the case studies in this thesis presents the strength but also the very real weaknesses of the human body, which helps to reinforce the characters' strength of will as well as their identifiability. None of these characters survive unscathed, some do not survive at all. The potential threat of injury and death is a crucial aspect of the female just-warrior representing the modern female soldier. Every bruise, cut, broken bone, and bullet wound is evidence that these women are real women, not meant to be seen as super-human.

This last section explores the visible and narrative function of Tris as an adolescent female just-warrior. As mentioned in the introduction there has been a tendency for female action heroes' bodies to be objectified on screen. This becomes a pivotal aspect for female just-warriors as there is not the same tradition tied to male just-warriors. This is how and why certain female action heroes are labeled FFTs, their main narrative function is to appeal to male heterosexual desires. "[Lara] Croft is an over-sexualized stereotyped character who appeals primarily to males" (Inness, p. 9). Therefore, to identify the shift in narrative presentations of FFTs versus female just-warriors the first narrative criteria is that there be minimal to no sexual objectification of

her body. In comparison to some of the more extreme versions of the FFT such as *Barb Wire* (1996), the lack of sexual objectification in *Divergent* is remarkable. Her costume is utilitarian, not provocative or sexual.

The potential to sexualize the character is written into the narrative, with the switch from Abnegation-- a modest selfless faction (see Fig.1) to Dauntless (see Fig.2)-- a liberated and proud faction. However, the cinematography and costuming work together to present a desirable but not sexualized Tris.



Figure 1: Beatrice during initiation jump.



Figure 2: Tris during Dauntless training.

When undressing for the first time in the front of the male initiates, Tris makes a conscientious effort to cover her body while switching clothes. Peter makes a comment "nice legs, stiff" as Tris pulls her pants up over her thighs. Peter's comment brings attention to the modesty Tris still retains from her time in Abnegation as she visibly cringes at his comment, but this also associates his objectification of her with his character type. Peter is the only character to make comments about her body and he functions as the antagonist throughout the first film, so his objectification of her within the film is judged rather than celebrated. The camera also never takes on an

objectifying perspective. There are no low angle shots specifically positioned to focus attention on her ass. Her costume does not reveal or accentuate her breasts, butt, or stomach. There are no slow tilts down the length of her body to give the viewer ample time to admire her curves. The camera maintains a medium shot at eye level for a majority of the film. The cinematography also reinforces the first-person perspective of the story. Tris' voiceover opens the film, she is telling the story. This is further solidified by the numerous point-of-view shots from Tris' perspective.

The first-person perspective works to establish her narrative prominence as well which is the second criteria for the female just-warrior; *she is central to the narrative (if she were removed the narrative would be incomplete)*. Tris is unquestionably the central character of *Divergent*. It is her perspective through which the story is being told and she the main connection between all other characters. In the same way in which the dystopian protagonist operates to drive the narrative, it is Tris' actions and discoveries that drive the narrative of *Divergent*. The flaws of her dystopian world are exposed as Tris discovers the untold truths of the wall and the faction system, but rather than looking to someone else, she takes it upon herself to liberate her community.

This brings us to the third narrative criteria; *she is willing to sacrifice herself (die) for the "greater good."* While Tris' ultimate sacrifice does not occur until later in the series the willingness to fight and potentially die for the greater good is written into the values of the Dauntless faction. Dauntless is the military faction "the soldiers, [the] protectors" it is mentioned throughout their training that the initiates are expected to put their lives on the line to save the citizens of Chicago. The potential to die fighting underlines all aspects of their training: in the hand-to-hand fight, no one can concede,

the "bullets" used in the war games simulate the pain of real gunshot wounds, and the fear simulations are manifestations of terrifying ways to die. But beyond being initiated into Dauntless and trained as a soldier, Tris maintains her just-warrior status even when the system she believes in is revealed to be corrupt. When the faction systems begin to collapse, she continues to see the citizens as innocents and herself as their protector. Throughout the trilogy, Tris leads the others through multiple dangerous missions to safeguard the city. While her ultimate sacrifice does not occur until the final installment her propensity to sacrifice herself to save others is established by the conclusion of the first film. She risks being discovered as a divergent to try to rescue her family from the Erudite's planned execution. She turns a gun on herself to pull Four out of the controlled trance he is placed under by Jeanine. Despite losing her mother and father in the attack on Dauntless, Tris stays the course until Jeanine is stopped and the threat to the innocent people of Abnegation is eliminated. This reveals that her desire to serve the greater good and protect the innocent overpowers her pain of personal loss and her self-preservation.

While *Divergent* does not offer a fully-formed depiction of the female just-warrior it does provide the environment and foundation for both the female just-warrior archetype and a responsible and authentic rendering of an integrated military force. By following Tris through initiation and training in the Dauntless faction, *Divergent* provides a fundamentally accurate albeit fictional portrayal of military women's struggles and victories in the early stages of a military career.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLDIER WARRIOR: RITA

Throughout the history of war there is one component that has been consistently and irrevocably tied to it, shaping it and defining it... technology. War historians note how the technology available during war determines the level of devastation, types of injury and loss, and often the outcome of the war (Edgerton). Depictions of wars onscreen are no different; audiences often associate specific wars to the types of technology and weapons being used in the film. Warfare can also be where new technologies are invented, revealed and utilized for the first time. This is precisely why sci-fi war films are a thriving Hollywood genre. Sci-fi war films allow for the manifestation of future technology and exhibit a promise of sophisticated weapons within a familiar but safe space, on screen. These films often focus specific attention on future technologies that retain recognizable-enough qualities of current military weaponry; this allows audiences to speculate about the weapons technology that may populate future wars.

Future weapons of warfare span the technology spectrum from aircraft and nuclear bombs to mechanical surveillance and handheld firearms. Regardless of the level of technology being illustrated in sci-fi war films, there still seems to be a vested interest in the narrative of the soldier; as many of these films still feature an infantry in some capacity. Invasion films, specifically, offer opportune scenarios that both showcase and validate technology while simultaneously celebrating humanity and the human will to survive. Sci-fi invasion films are another prime arena for the female just-warrior. The attention to technology in these films provides the female just-warrior with the tools necessary to overcome biological and gender essentialist views about women

in combat, promote seamless integration of military forces, and invert predetermined gender hierarchies of military leadership. The final aspect of this genre of films that facilitates a positive environment for the female just-warrior is the “just war” elements of invasion, and a homeland under attack. This is the primary reason for my focus in this thesis on films made post 9/11. The analogous relationship between films depicting war after the attacks on 9/11 and the resulting wars with Iraq and Afghanistan help to reinforce a reading of those wars to be “just.” As Dixon describes in *Film and Television after 9/11*; “unlike the Vietnam war, which was hotly contested throughout the United States, the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington have galvanized the American public into a call for action” (Dixon, p.1). While the public’s opinion and perception of the current war changed over the years the icon of the American Soldier remained untarnished by the public’s shifting views of the war.

For this chapter I analyze the sci-fi alien invasion film *Edge of Tomorrow* (Liman 2014). In *Edge of Tomorrow*, Rita Vrataski (Emily Blunt), is a central character but not the lead role. However, she exhibits important traits of the female just-warrior archetype, specifically her position as a highly-decorated combat soldier. The narrative inverts the aggressive-male pacific-female dichotomy by positioning her as the superior warrior who is forced to train the terrified Cage (Tom Cruise). If we compare *Edge of Tomorrow* with *Divergent* on the trajectory of the military professional, Rita is the seasoned soldier with battle experience and notoriety within the military system. Her position is neither questioned nor undermined in the film as is often the case in realist filmic depictions of high ranking military women.

Cyber-Postfeminism and the Modern Battlefield

In this chapter I contextualize and utilize cyber-postfeminism to address the film's attention to technology and body modification through technology. When cyber-postfeminism is applied to this genre it offers another avenue of empowerment to the female just-warrior. The men and women can use technology to modify their body to fit the demands of the science-fiction warzone. Rita's mechanical suit in *Edge of Tomorrow* presents the site of analysis and application of the cyborg metaphor and cyber-feminism as empowering. "[cyber-postfeminism] offers an opportunity to think about the body without the boundaries of gender" (Genz and Brabon 147-148). This theoretical position helps address *Edge of Tomorrow's* focus on Rita's body, her abilities, and how her character's just warrior qualities collapse the gender bias present in realist war films. I am arguing that Rita's character embodies two subjectivities, sometimes simultaneously, the first being a feminist cyborg and the second a female just-warrior; her ability to shed the armored suit at will allows her to occupy both spaces throughout the film.

The "cyborg" has been a centerpiece in the debates of gender and technology since the 1970s. The cyborg is often the site of the hopes and also the fears of advancements in medical technology. The cyborg in a literal sense is a blending of human and machine, which now commonly takes place in western culture. However, the benefits of machines that can perform organic functions when used to replace failing organs, enhance eyesight, or restore hearing are still not as controversial as the use of biotechnology for body augmentation. The cultural references of the cyborg represent both the advancements in biotechnology as well as a reifying of the iconography of an

idealized femininity. As expressed by Genz and Brabon in their chapter on cyber-postfeminism, “the figure of the cyborg –as witnessed in a number of contemporary popular manifestations... is problematic, often reinstating a traditional, sexualized, and hyperfeminine female body” (Genz and Brabon, p. 146). Stacy Gillis also offers a critique of contemporary cyborg representations:

The meanings generated by these representations are articulated upon an understanding of the body as highly gendered and sexualised, physically, intellectually and/or emotionally. This apparent contradiction/conflation of woman and technology results in a cyborg which is *always* over-represented. It moves throughout cyberpunk texts, disrupting through its uncanniness and its simultaneous lack and surplus of meaning. As a figure of a sexualised female, it speaks of irrationality, drawing upon Gothic tropes of femininity, while as a figure of technology, it speaks of rationality and order. (Gillis, p.11)

In other words, traditional cyborgs look more like an exploitative FFT than an empowered female just-warrior; consider for example the fembots in *Austin Powers* (1997) who shoot bullets from their breasts or the more realist and nuanced Ava in *Ex Machina* (2014). While very different in style and tone, both cyborgic archetypes focus attention on the female body and the sex appeal of cyborg characters. However, within the context of war and taking into consideration the correlation between emerging technologies and warfare, it is essential to consider how the cyborg metaphor also functions to empower female soldiers. Much in the way that women have been excluded from the history of war “women have [also] been historically othered from technology” (Genz and Brabon, p. 147), and these two spaces of exclusion for women intersect and form the arena for an empowered representation of cyberfeminism In *Edge of Tomorrow*.

Rita is a cyborg but *not* a fighting fuck toy (FFT); I argue that reading Rita as a cyborg within the context of war marks a shift away from the FFT and moves the cyborg

metaphor towards a less feminized representation. Stacy Gillis argues that “popular representations of the cyborg often fail to move beyond the patriarchal script of femininity/female identity as they walk the tightrope of transgression and conformity” (Genz and Brabon, p. 149). In her article "The (Post) Feminist Politics of Cyberpunk," Gillis goes on to articulate the specific limitations of what can be read as (post) feminist iterations of cyborgic bodies in masculine spaces:

The ass-kicking techno-babes of cyberpunk film and fiction should be read as examples of the (post)feminist subject. These women are positioned as very much at home in the traditionally masculine domains of both technology and physicality, remarkably so given the gender arrangements involved in *noir* and gothic fictions. Yet this articulation of female agency is mediated by the ways in which the bodies of these cyborgic women are reduced to either a sexualised or monstrous femininity. (Gillis, p.10)

Edge of Tomorrow challenges Gillis notion by presenting an empowered representation of cyborgic female identity that is, “at home in the traditionally masculine domains of both technology and physicality,” but is not reduced or bound by femininity. Donna Haraway frames the feminist agenda of cyborgs through the responsibility of cyberfeminist and cyborg writing.

Cyborg writing is concerned with the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other...Feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control...cyborg writing is involved in the re-appropriation of the symbols of oppression by rescripting gender identities and subverting the language of patriarchal domination. (quoted in Genz and Brabon, p. 148)

Rita’s use of the armored suit is an example of feminist cyborg writing in which she is seizing the tools that once marked her as other. Rita’s character presents an empowered version of cyberfeminism because she does not use these tools to simply gain access and then conform to patriarchal scripts but is able to usurp the signifier of

the grand narrative of Western culture. Rita is not only replacing the hero (Tom Cruise) but within the text as the ‘angle of Verdun’ she is signifying ‘command and control.’ While Rita has no intention of recoding the phallogentric world (as Furiosa does) in which she exists--she seems quite at home welding her massive metal blade across the sci-fi battlefield—however her visibility in the phallogentric world of modern warfare is a progressive step towards a post-human world in which gender is not a determining factor in who gets to write and code our history. Rita’s visibility is also a utopian representation of integrated forces. Because of her skill and ruthless demeanor, she becomes the most decorated and successful soldier of the mimic war. She is able to step into and become the face of the military—simply because she is the best (see Fig. 2 and 3).



Figure 3: UDF recruiting poster featuring Rita.



Figure 4: UDF recruiting poster appears on the side of a building.

The notion of skill as a soldier being the only factor in determining who is chosen to represent the military to the public regardless of gender is an ideal future to hope for. The suit *facilitates* her abilities but is not a fundamental aspect of her success as

evident through Cage's bumbling attempts to operate the suit and his long enduring struggles learning how to fight mimics.

Due to the unique structure of the narrative and to justify using a film with a male lead as a primary case study I include a rather lengthy synopsis of *Edge of Tomorrow*. This section assists in pinpointing specific sites of analysis within the plot summary and both the significance of Rita's character within the plot and as a strong case study of the female just-warrior. *Edge of Tomorrow's* tagline "Live. Die. Repeat" references the film's non-linear narrative structure in which the main character William Cage (Tom Cruise) dies in battle against an alien invasion, wakes up, and then relives the same day repeatedly until the war against the aliens is won.

The film opens with a montage of news reel clips that depict the timeline of the alien invasion. The clips cover the mimics initial impact on earth and then the ensuing invasion, showing the devastation and the hopelessness of the attempted resistance by humans. The news reels then become hopeful as they report on the very first battle won against the mimics; the battle of Verdun. The victory is largely credited to Rita Vrataski (Emily Blunt) whom the media christened the Angel of Verdun for her overwhelming success on the battlefield "killing hundreds of mimics" on the first day of battle. She is seen as the "new hope for this war," and her image becomes a PR tool to recruit men and women to enlist. The media coverage shifts to a PR campaign lead by Major William Cage for the new jacket technology which Rita wore at Verdun. Cage explains that "with the new jacket technology and limited training" soldiers will finally be able to combat the mimics in battle. Cage describes Operation Downfall, the next planned invasion on the mimics, as the "largest mechanized invasion in the history of mankind"

in which the United Defense Force (a global military) will finally be able to defeat the mimics. He ends his final interview with the words “We fight, that’s what we do.” This phrase becomes incredibly ironic in the following scene.

Cage is brought to meet with General Brigham who is coordinating Operation Downfall, Cage assumes that Brigham wishes for Cage to help him recover his public image in the wake of what will likely be tremendous casualties after the invasion. Brigham informs him that he wishes for Cage to sell the invasion to the public by joining the soldiers on the front in the first wave of the invasion. “Your camera crew is standing by, you ship out to the coast in one hour.” Cage scoffs and explains that he does “this to get out of doing that” referring to his position in media relations to avoid actual combat. “I am not a soldier,” Cage admits. Brigham then relays to him that this is an order. Cage attempts to blackmail the general which leads to him being arrested by military police and sent to the frontlines to fight alongside the enlisted infantry. Cage wakes up in handcuffs in the processing sector of a military FOB in France the day before the invasion. He meets Master Sergeant Farell who informs Cage that he was warned that Cage would do “anything to get out of combat.” The next morning J-squad suits up in the new jackets and straps in to the plane that will take them to the beaches of France for the invasion. Sgt Farell catches Cage retreating from battle and drags him back to join J-squad in a trench just shy of the battlefield as a mimic rises from the trench and wipes out J-squad. Cage fumbles with his suit and manages to kill the mimic just as a much larger mimic crawls across the trench. Cage sets off an explosive killing both the mimic and himself simultaneously. Cage is covered in the mimic’s blood, and then suddenly wakes up back in processing the previous day.

The entire day plays out just as it had before everyone has the same reactions and the same dialogue. When he lands a second time on the battlefield he sees Rita and attempts to approach her. He dies again and repeats the day over only this time he is able to reach Rita. When Rita witness his ability to anticipate events on the battlefield she stops and tells him “come find me when you wake up.” She and Cage both die just after she says this and Cage wakes up again in processing. It takes him multiple attempts but he finally manages to break off and find Rita. He approaches Rita in her specialized training facility and at first she is dismissive, aggressive, and curt with him asking him, “who told you that you could talk to me?” He answers, “you did, tomorrow on the beach.” She softens towards him and asks him what he means, he explains that the mimics know that they are coming and the invasion is a slaughter and a failure. Rita takes him to an expert on mimic biology, Dr. Carter, who was removed from his position because military leadership did not believe his theories about the mimics’ abilities to loop time. Together Dr. Carter and Rita explain the battle of Verdun.

The same event that led to Cage reliving the same day over and over happened to Rita in Verdun. The battle that was perceived by the world as a single day victory took Rita 300 days to win. She too lived the same day over and over until she was able to defeat the mimics in Verdun. She explains to Cage that his death is now the event that triggers the time loop. Each time he dies the day begins again. Rita explains to Cage that she will train him every day until he is skilled enough to survive the battle and take her to the mimic’s central control so that she can destroy it. Along with the ability to restart the day Cage is also able to see the location of the central control, the Omega through visions shared with the mimics.

Rita spends months training Cage who is still desperate to avoid the battle obsessing over ways to transfer the power to Rita. She is relentless and ruthless in her training. Cage is slow to learn how to control the suit and how to master the combat tactics Rita attempts to teach him.

Eventually Cage is ready for battle. He comes to Rita every day and maps out the battlefield. Rita and Cage make it out of the battle and begin their trek to find the omega. Cage begins seeing visions of the omega and its location. In the final act of the film with the help of J-squad the group charges into the Louvre the evening before the battle to destroy the omega. When it is just Cage and Rita left, Rita changes the plan and tells Cage to destroy the Omega while she leads the mimics away. Cage's lack of battle skills and her knack for killing mimics is her reason for leaving Cage to blow up the Omega alone. "You won't get ten feet with that mimic behind you," she tells him, once again reinforcing her combat skills over Cage's. Cage bravely dives into the water and releases a bomb that destroys the Omega. Without the Omega the mimic invasion fails and the United Defense Force is victorious. Cage retains his rank position as a military media relations expert. He returns to Rita's training facility and relives the moment he first met her; he chooses not to tell her of their experiences together and walks away a stranger to her.

What makes *Edge of Tomorrow* such a strong case study for the female just-warrior is how the film positions and reinforces her as invoking the fundamental essence of the American soldier. She constantly exhibits intrinsic traits associated with the mythology of the just warrior, and by comparison presents the qualities of a soldier that Cage knowingly lacks. Rita is constantly pushing Cage towards combat regardless of

his reluctance and his premonitions of her death. Her response to his attempt to protect her and avoid her death is "I am a soldier, I volunteered. I'm not walking away from this." Indicating her understanding of her role as a soldier; it is her duty to fight in battle knowing that she may die doing so. This is significant for many reasons: it fulfills the fourth narrative criteria for a female just-warrior; that she be willing to sacrifice herself for the greater good. It also fulfills the first characterization criteria of the female just-warrior; that she is inherently brave and will run towards danger. Another reason that this line is so significant is that it confirms the film's presentation of the controversial inversion of the pacific male and aggressive female. Cage repeatedly states in the film that he is 'not a soldier' desperately hoping that will be enough to keep him from battle. Rita's response in every dangerous situation is in direct opposition to Cage. Cage's instinct is to retreat while Rita's is to charge in.

After the two make it off the beach on their way to find the Omega they stop to rest, at Cage's insistence, in an abandoned barn. Cage sees that Rita is injured and convinces her to let him treat the wound, she reluctantly agrees with the reassurance that they will continue as soon as he is done. She seems unbothered by the injury while Cage gags at the sight of it. He continues to stall after he treats her wound, and when she realizes why she demands that they continue. Her resolve is never compromised, she is never satisfied with waiting or hiding from the next fight or battle. She drives the narrative forward and pushes Cage beyond his instincts to retreat and hide. She is using Cage's ability to get herself deeper into the battle (as he desperately attempts to avoid it). She has a sense of duty and a desire to save the day. Cage has no such desire. During training he pleads with Rita to find another way to win the battle saying

once again “I am not a soldier!” “No!” she responds, “You are a weapon.” A weapon that she, the soldier, is using to win the battle.

The casting in *Edge of Tomorrow* reinforces an awareness of the expectations being manipulated by inverting the gender roles of a sci-fi war film. By casting Tom Cruise as a bumbling cowardly male lead, and Emily Blunt as a capable fearless soldier to save him, the film is banking on the audiences’ expectations of Cruise as a leading A-list actor known specifically as an action star, the exact type of character Blunt is playing. This brings specific focus and attention to the lack of visibility of women in these spaces and the gendered expectations within mainstream cinema.

Cyborg Fighting Fuck Toy or Female Just-Warrior

To analyze the film’s depiction of Rita as a cyborg metaphor I want to revisit some of Gillis’s sentiments about the female cyborg versus the male cyborg.

As Gillis maintains, figures like Molly Millions²... embraces the image of the ass-kicking techno-babe, she is still restricted by her sexuality. Her nails may conceal a weapon but they are painted burgundy and serve to lengthen her fingers...Ultimately the cyborgic female body is modified only so as to accentuate or enact sexual promise. (Genz and Brabon, p. 149)

I would argue that Rita’s cyborgic body resists this assessment. Rita is the least sexualized and the least feminine when she is operating inside of the new jacket. When in the new jacket Rita’s flesh is entirely hidden under cold hard metal, her profile becomes bulky and large almost twice the stature of her naturally petite body and she welds a massive phallic blade on the battlefield; a weapon specific to her skills as no

² Molly Millions is a reoccurring character, a cyborg bodyguard and mercenary, in novels by William Gibson.

other soldiers are seen using them.

Genz and Brabon describe the differences between the male cyborgic body and the female cyborgic body “the cyborgic male body is limited in its representations of the excesses of masculinity... [it] can only revolve around displays of masculine aggression, attempts to become more human and/or a protecting father figure. Contrastingly, the female cyborg blends sexuality with assertiveness,



Figure 5: Rita's cyborgic body.

hyperfeminine characteristics with tough girl strength, allowing her to transcend the patriarchal limits of female identity/femininity” (p. 150). Her body is a blending of mechanized weaponry and combat skill but she is not signifying a “heteronormative sexualized femininity” (Genz and Brabon, p. 150). I would argue that along with inverting the aggressive male pacific female dichotomy of action films Rita is also presenting an inversion of the cyborgic male and female in her character as well as her body. She is cold, calculated, unforgiving, and unemotional. Cage desperately attempts to make a human connection with Rita which she resists for most of the film. In one moment on the battlefield before Cage has started his training with Rita he is injured and she approaches him. He asks if his injuries are bad, assuming Rita is there to help him, “there’s a hole in your chest,” she tells him as she removes his last remaining batteries from his ‘new jacket’ and returns to the battle leaving Cage to die. She is first and foremost a soldier concerned with fighting and winning the battle.

Rita's body outside of the new jacket is not sexually objectified in the ways in which FFTs have been depicted in the past. The focus on her body outside of the suit showcases her muscular tone and strength. In similar ways to male action heroes Rita's body signifies strength and toughness operating as a visual recoding of traditional femininity. Rita is costumed in gender-neutral, modest and casual attire, or utilitarian training gear, with her hair pulled back from her face. Her body represents a negotiated femininity that includes traditionally masculine signifiers without having to reject, purge, or over-emphasize her feminine signifiers. Rita is fetishized by Cage as she becomes the object of his affection but she is not fetishized as a cyborgic female body, and her human body is never sexualized, much like Tris she is depicted as desirable but not specifically in a sexual way.



Figure 6: Cage first meets Rita; Cage's point-of-view.



Figure 7: Rita coaches Cage during training; objective point-of-view.

Rita's nickname Full Metal Bitch also supports the reading of the inversion of the cyborgic male and female. The name represents her cyborg persona—a reference to her attitude in the suit and on the battlefield. This nickname reveals that the world in which Rita exists may support a utopian view of integrated forces but it is not entirely removed from the sexist underpinnings of a hyper-masculine patriarchal environment. She is called 'bitch' not because she exists in this space but because she exhibits

masculine traits *better* than the male soldiers around her. It is framed within the film as a derogatory nickname.



Figure 8: Rita's nickname spray painted across her image on the side of a bus.

It is shown tagged over her image on a city bus, and when a male soldier sees her and exclaims "It's the Full Metal..." she knocks him out before he can finish the phrase. Her resentful attitude towards the title maintains a reading of her character as empowered and not exploitative. Full Metal Bitch, as a title, is in direct opposition to her media persona the Angel of Verdun which illustrates the existence of a gender bias but also her ability to problematize those labels. The world wants to view her as an Angel because it helps *soften* her violence, the military wants to view her as a Bitch because it *validates* her violence, however her character defies being labeled as either. This also helps to illustrate my argument for the need to see women enacting violence as the just warrior archetype, if she is read as a just warrior her violence is automatically validated. *Edge of Tomorrow* successfully depicts an empowered female just-warrior but does not ignore the difficulty of breaking from preconceived gender expectations.

As a female just-warrior Rita fulfills each of the criteria even though unlike Tris she is not the central character with whom the audience is encouraged to identify. She does not offer a strong emotional connection for audiences (compared to Tris and especially Furiosa) but is observed from a distance through Cage's perspective. She

does however move beyond the limitations of Tris's character as a seasoned high-ranking professional military soldier who has seen and excelled in combat. This is evident in her *mastery over herself and the skills she utilizes in violent scenarios*, the second of the female just-warrior characterization criteria. While Tris's narrative was about learning to master herself and her skills, Rita's narrative positions her as the master teaching Cage how to obtain mastery (which he never fully achieves). Rita is also *physically capable but not impervious to pain or injury* even when fighting outside of her armored suit. Cage witnesses her die many times, but also witnesses her strength and steadfast will to save the day. When their suits lose battery power at the farm Rita is not dissuaded and is content to continue the battle with only a handgun. Her physical strength is highlighted by the new jacket and her performance in battle. Cage witness her flying across the beach charging towards the mimics cutting them down with her massive blade. She sustains injuries throughout the battle but is never slowed down or halted by them.

As for her narrative criteria, despite not being the lead role Rita has enough screen time and storyline to fulfill all the narrative criteria for the female just-warrior. While she is not the lead *she is central to the narrative (if she were removed, the narrative would be incomplete)*. For Cage's character she represents the solution, the obstacle, and eventually the goal. She represents a love interest and a prize at the end of the hero's journey (even though he rejects the chance to be with her in the end). However, this does not reduce her to a two-dimensional character with no individual narrative or backstory. During a drive between the beach and the barn Cage attempts to learn more about Rita which she initially resists because it serves no function to the

mission at hand, but when Cage mentions a specific name Rita has an emotional reaction and tells Cage not to mention him again. When Cage presses for further information she finally breaks, and tells him that she watched Hendrix die three-hundred times, "I remember every detail so I don't need to talk about it." This helps to flesh out her character because it not only reveals a past trauma but also a past relationship (not necessarily a romantic one) and this helps offer some context for her seemingly callous disregard for Cage.

In conclusion, Rita's character offers a significantly positive and prominent representation of a professional military female participating and excelling in combat within an idealized integrated military force. She also brings a validation and visibility to women successfully and justly using violence within the context of war helping to align the mythology of women in war with a modern visual representation in popular media.

Rita's character in *Edge of Tomorrow* disrupts Haraway's notion that..."a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defense, about the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war" (Haraway, p. 295). *Edge of Tomorrow* imagines a positive approach to the cyborgic female within the Star Wars apocalypse. She is not only able to participate in the war but is able to access and celebrate her warrior qualities, excel within a masculinist orgy of war, and render biological essentialism irrelevant as an argument against women in combat.

CHAPTER 4

THE NEO-ROAD WARRIOR: FURIOSA

This chapter outlines the filmography of female warriors in post-apocalyptic sci-fi films. My main focus is on *Mad Max: Fury Road*. The film's main character, Furiosa (Charlize Theron), fulfills my specific outline of traits (detailed in the introduction and explored in each case study) more thoroughly than the previous two examples, Tris and Rita. Her narrative agency is not overshadowed by her male counterpart, Max, in fact, she dominates and drives the narrative much to the chagrin of some avid fans of the original trilogy. She is not presented as sexual (it could even be argued that she and Max are both asexual), therefore she is not sexualized and her body is not dissected or objectified on screen.

Sherrie Inness in her book *Tough Girls* (1999) discusses the qualities and the limitations of women in action films. I build on her analysis of women of the post-apocalypse by using her format to analyze Furiosa from *Mad Max: Fury Road*. I argue that Furiosa's character embodies many of the desired traits that are unrealized in the pool of characters available to Inness at the time of writing her book. Furiosa as well fulfills my specific outline of traits more thoroughly than the previous two examples, Tris and Rita. I argue that Furiosa's character provides the most feminist and least compromised (uncontained) version of the female just-warrior archetype. She is rescuing herself and other women from a toxic patriarchal system, her salvation is a utopia comprised of women whose desire is to replenish the earth, and finally her capability and violence does not come at the price of dismissing or emasculating her male counterpart.

When Sherrie Inness began writing about warrior women in the 1990s and 2000s the pool of female leads in action films was much smaller and her focus was on what negotiations were being made by leading women in what were deemed male spaces. She argued that women in these transgressive roles are forced to straddle the masculine-feminine boundaries to avoid posing a threat to socially constructed heteronormative gender roles. As I have previously suggested sci-fi action films allow more freedoms for female action heroines as they offer the potential of worlds not bound by realist depictions of gender, however as Inness points out this is a blockbuster genre therefore the need for mainstream appeal tends to limit the potential freedoms of the genre. So, to present tough women in an action genre they must also be desirable. “Most men do not want women who are too violent, too tough, or, too masculine in films... the new action babes have to celebrate women’s power without being so threatening that men would be afraid to sleep with the leading lady” (Inness, p. 8). The results of this notion are that if women become more tough and more powerful they must also become more sexually desirable to counter their toughness. In consequence, the post-apocalyptic fighting fuck toy (FFT) develops as a manifestation of the investment in sexually desirable female action heroes. Inness’s chapter helps guide my textual analysis and reveal the specific differences between characters such as Sarah Connor, the exploited FFT of the post-apocalypse; *Resident Evil: Extinction’s* (Mulcahy 2007) Alice; and the empowered feminist female just-warrior. Furiosa. While the world of *Mad Max: Fury Road* is not absent of heteronormative gender representations it does offer—maybe for the first time—a female just-warrior archetype that is able to move

outside the limited and exploitative gender parameters that have traditionally contained female action heroes since they first entered the action genre.

In her chapter "Post-Apocalyptic Tough Girls: Has the Road Warrior Met His Match?" Inness looks at the standout depictions of warrior women in post-apocalyptic films, she uses three characters to pinpoint the specific ways women are contained (narratively) within these films:

In the often barbaric and excessive world of the post-apocalyptic narrative, women are freer to act tough and be independent because it is evident that the world has been turned topsy-turvy. In such a universe, girls are sometimes free to act like boys. Yet, at the same time, such a fictional world can be used to reaffirm traditional gender stereotypes. For instance, *Mad Max* and similar futuristic male heroes typically need to rescue women (and sometimes children) from harm. The reverse scenario is far less common...post-apocalyptic narratives explore gender differences yet still support the notion that even the toughest woman is no match for a man. (Inness, p. 123)

I revisit this quote more specifically later in the chapter to establish the connection to the *Mad Max* franchise and how *Furiosa* directly challenges this notion, but before I analyze *Furiosa* as a female just-warrior I want to contextualize her position in the lineage of female warriors and specifically post-apocalyptic female action heroes. Inness's case studies will provide specific examples of the ways in which post-apocalyptic female action heroes have been contained or undermined. I then compare these case studies to *Furiosa* to reveal how the *Fury Road* simultaneously engages with these previous archetypes, and directly rejects or challenges them.

The first case study is *Terminator's* Sarah Connor who has the most substantial arc over the three films but is also according to Inness the most contained. "Sarah's pregnancy encompasses her heroism, in reassurance that maternity differentiates and secures the feminine, however strong a woman may become. Her toughness is

controlled by her re-inscription as a mother. Notably, *she* is not going to save the world her son will” (Inness, p. 124) The narrative reinforces women’s gender role as mothers and as vessels of hope for a future generation as well as a resistance to depart from the male warrior. She can facilitate a male just warrior but not eclipse his role. Inness also illustrates that it does not matter how tough Connor becomes over the course of the narrative she is always compared to and dwarfed by Schwarzenegger’s Terminator. “Ultimately by emphasizing her femininity and [his] masculinity, the movie backs down from making her into another Rambo. She still possesses the emotion that sets her apart from male action heroes (Schwarzenegger does not break into tears)” (Inness, p. 129).

The second case study is of Kidda from *The Blood of Heroes* (1989 dir. Peoples). Kidda is an aggressive and tough fighter and desires to participate in the ultimate gladiatorial fight the League and become a professional fighter, a jugger. Her aggression and desire to make violence her profession makes her characterization a significant deviation from the traditional stereotype. However, she is contained in multiple ways in the narrative; she is positioned alongside a more experienced jugger who trains her and takes her with him to the League. Much like Connor and Terminator, Kidda acts more as a side-kick or apprentice to a more masculine and skilled fighter. She also eventually becomes a love interest for him as well. “Kidda’s toughness is modified by the more extreme toughness of a male. *Edge of Tomorrow* also engages in this trope but by inverting this dynamic; Rita is positioned as the masterful and skilled fighter who is training the less experienced Cage. Another way that Kidda’s toughness is weakened is by showing her developing sexual relationship with Sallow—a

relationship that allows Kidda to show her tender side” (Inness, p.132). While *Edge of Tomorrow* also situates Rita as a love interest for Cage it does not function to reveal her softer side as is the case with Kidda. The love story in *Edge of Tomorrow* is also an inversion of the traditional narrative structure exemplified in *The Blood of Heroes*; it is Cage who develops feelings for Rita. Rita’s disinterest in Cage or anything other than other than succeeding in their mission reinforces her determination and devotion to her job as a soldier, above all else.

The final case study is Alex in *Nemesis 2: Nebula* (1995, Pyun). She is a genetically modified fighter who survives on her own in the post-apocalyptic desert. She was designed to fight the homicidal alien cyborgs that have come to claim earth. Alex is a fully autonomous female action hero that challenges gender stereotypes visually and narratively. Her body is extremely masculine with bulging muscles everywhere and her agility and fighting skills match or overshadow all the men in the film. Narratively she has unlimited agency however, the caveat of her genetic mutation offers an explanation for her body and her abilities. “Alex can be so muscular because she is genetically enhanced; thus, she is not a ‘real’ woman” (Inness, p.134). She is othered from both the men and the women in the film. The film reinforces a stance that she is unnaturally strong and skilled, therefore a compensation is needed in the form of sexual-objectification of her body. “Ultimately Alex’s tough image proves too much for a film geared towards a mass audience. Her sexual desirability is stressed, which makes her a less threatening figure because it stresses her vulnerability and presumed availability...she displays more than a generous amount of cleavage. Clad in the skimpiest attire, displaying a great deal of her tightly muscled flesh” (Inness, p.135).

As more women entered the post-apocalyptic genre geared towards mainstream audiences they were less contained by the narrative as in Inness's original case studies. However, the women of later post-apocalyptic sci-fi films are compromised and undermined by sexual objectification as is the case with characters such as Alice in *Resident Evil: Extinction* and Eden in *Doomsday* (Marshall 2008). Their physical prowess and capability are not undermined however, their body becomes a spectacle and their character development is minimal. Their proficiency at wielding phallic weapons while kicking-ass is constantly in competition for viewers' attention with their exposed skin, tousled flowing hair, glistening cleavage, and tight revealing clothing. Their objectification takes precedence as evidenced on the movie poster; Alice's thin exposed thighs peek out from under her short skirt above her stockings and garter. Alice's character could not achieve *full* narrative gender equality if her toughness is seen as a threat, and she is seen as an object "she is both subject and object, looker and looked at, ass-kicker and sex object" (Inness, p. 52).

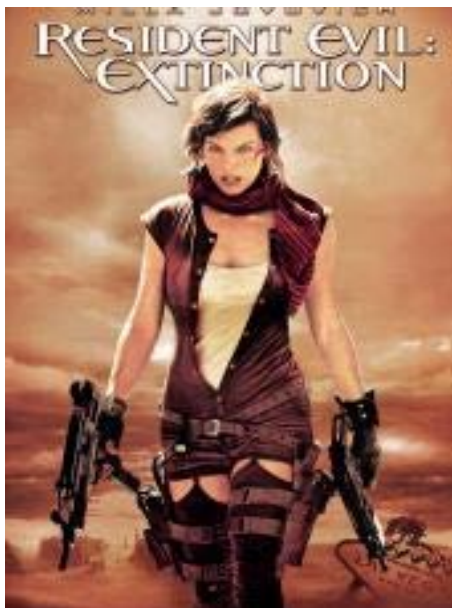


Figure 9: *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007) movie poster.



Figure 10: *Doomsday* (2008) movie poster.

Both Rita and Tris move beyond these examples of spectacle over character development. Tris's character arc in *Divergent* and over the course of the trilogy is a central and crucial element of the narrative, it is a hero's journey and without the significant attention to Tris's character development the films would lack a hero or any forward momentum. It is Tris's realizations about herself and the world around her that drives the narrative of *Divergent*. Unlike Tris, Rita's body is presented as a spectacle in various moments throughout *Edge of Tomorrow*. Cage often watches in awe at her effortless mastery on the battlefield however, her character development becomes central when, as the object of his desire, understanding Rita becomes Cage's goal. It is Rita's desire to remain an enigma that functions as his obstacle and creates the emotional friction in the film. If Rita were to be operating as a FFT her body and her skills would be the only necessary aspects of her character.

Redemption: Achieving Narrative Gender Equality

Furiosa's character breaks through not only the narrative tendencies to contain women in Post-apocalyptic films but also the more recent FFT exploitative tendencies to sexually objectify them.

When viewed as a female just-warrior and as a soldier her relationship with Max shifts from possible love interest to platonic battle comrade. Achieving narrative gender equality would mean she is able to rescue him (a notion that Inness's quote deemed "far less common" which she does, many times), their skills are given equal significance and importance, he is not always the superior action hero (in some instances hers are superior). It means that her aggression and violence is indistinguishable from his. My

final argument about *Fury Road* details how this film not only achieves narrative gender equality but how *Fury Road* makes a point to go beyond equality between male and female action heroes by allowing Furiosa's character to eclipse Max as the ultimate Road Warrior.

To read Furiosa as a female just-warrior *Fury Road* must be read as a war film however this is apparent when looking closely at the details and structure of the world of *Fury Road* and specifically Immortan Joe's "kingdom." Immortan Joe's domain, the Citadel, is structured very much like a medieval monarchy. There is a single ruler with ultimate power and an obsession with producing a genetically pure heir. The class structure is determined by access to resources, the lowest class having the least access to resources which are hoarded and sparsely distributed by Immortan Joe. The jobs within the Citadel are determined by both genetic purity and gender. Women who are still able to produce milk (but do not meet heteronormative standards of beauty) provide the palace with an alternative to drinking water. Women who are genetically pure (unaffected by radiation poisoning) and do meet heteronormative beauty standards are locked away and kept as wives by Joe and are made to breed the next heir. The workers in the Citadel are called war boys or war pups all of which are severely disfigured or diseased from radiation poisoning. Joe sends them on raids to retrieve gas (another valued resource).

Imperator Furiosa is Immortan's most venerated driver. As Furiosa prepares to set out on another raid, Joe gathers the kingdom to celebrate and announce her mission as if he is sending a knight into battle. The people cheer for her as she climbs into her war rig and leads the war party into the desert. She is referred to by Joe and the

Citadel as Imperator Furiosa, an indication of her status in the military rankings of the war boys. The war boys on her rig refer to her as boss and obediently follow her orders with a sense of pride, at least until they realize that she is stealing Joe's wives and attempting to escape the Citadel. Once the war boys realize her plan, they do whatever they can to stop Furiosa and return Joe's wives in the hope of gaining praise and glory from Immortan.

Furiosa breaks from the war party and sets off towards "the green place," her home from which she was kidnapped as a child. Max stumbles into Furiosa's path when he is captured and used as blood supply by one of Immortan's war boys. Nux (Nicholas Hoult), the war boy chasing Furiosa crashes his car with Max in tow and the two end up stranded in the desert. Max finally reaches Furiosa's rig dying of thirst and after a raucous battle with Furiosa he forces her at gunpoint to allow him a ride on the rig. What begins for Max as a means of survival –joining Furiosa and the wives on the war rig— transforms into a battle for redemption for himself and Furiosa.

It is important to note that Max's position in the beginning of the narrative as a lone survivor whose agenda is an entirely selfish one elevates Furiosa's agenda and reading as a just-warrior. As a just-warrior her actions driven by a concern for the greater good and a desire to protect the innocent. In contrast Max, initially, is only acting in service to himself, his actions are driven by a concern for his own survival and desire to be isolated; to retrieve his car and head back out into the desert alone. Max is reluctant to attach himself to Furiosa's cause, and while he eventually is willing to put his life on the line it is through circumstance not specifically a moral obligation that he joins and fights alongside Furiosa. This is the first evidence of her character as a just

warrior eclipsing the male just-warrior/hero that has previously dominated not only this franchise but action films in general.

When reading *Fury Road* as a war film it becomes clear that the ambiguous relationship between Max and Furiosa is that of combat soldier comrades in battle or brothers-in-arms.³ Inness's discussion of *Blood of Heroes* that suggests tough women are often also positioned as the love interest alongside male counterparts and this is still a prevalent Hollywood standard in action films as I have stated is the case with both Tris and Rita. However, when looking at their relationship in the film it becomes apparent that *Fury Road* breaks away from this standard by depicting a platonic relationship between Max and Furiosa. The result of which is an empowered female just-warrior, Furiosa, achieves narrative gender equality with an established and notorious Road Warrior. While there is an argument for a sense of intimacy, and even love present between Max and Furiosa, it is not a romantic love, or intimacy. It is a love that has been accepted and understood because of the extreme environment of war and often occurs between soldiers fighting together on battlefields. When we accept the fact that Max and Furiosa are soldiers, then the moments of love and intimacy between them look no different from the all-too-familiar scene of one soldier dying in another's arms on the battlefield. As Max cradles Furiosa's battered limp body and touches his head to hers there is a recognition and respect for her and all that they have fought through together. He is not mourning the loss of a lover but of a comrade who has died to save the lives of others, including his.

³ Obviously working with the gendered terminology of war and military which further bolsters the need for visibility and recognition of women in these spaces. The preference would be terms that include women in utterance as well as sentiment.



Figure 11: Max cradles Furiosa as she clings to life.

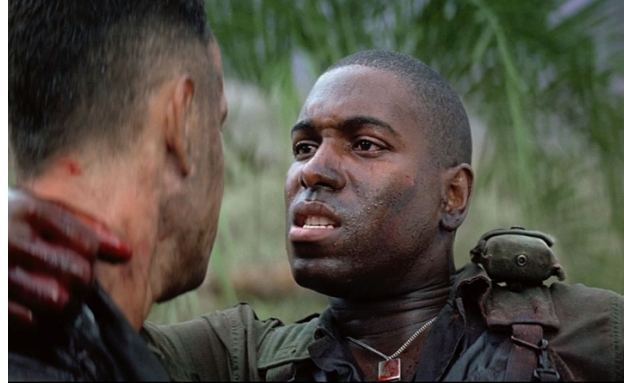


Figure 12: Forrest cradles Bubba as he dies in Vietnam.

This is also reinforced in Max's exit from the Citadel at the end of the film. As in a typical war film when the war ends soldiers part ways and return home. As Furiosa returns to the Citadel to liberate the people and begin a new world, Max slips away in the crowd, he does not stay to claim his prize (her) as would be the case if *Fury Road* were a traditional male-hero female-heroine narrative.

The recognition of Furiosa and Max as soldiers fighting on a battlefield together is also reinforced in their use of violence both towards each other and then to fight off the pursuing war parties. Their violence is often mirrored or paralleled through the other. The matching buzz-cuts and tandem fight scenes present a strong visual parallel between the characters. They require very little spoken language to communicate. They anticipate the other's movements and actions and respond intuitively to each other. For instance, Max is attempting to shoot the Bullet Farmer with only a few bullets left in the gun. When he misses, twice, Furiosa walks up behind him and without any exchange of words he relinquishes the gun to her and she rests the barrel on his shoulder to take the fatal shot. Later, Max disappears into the dark to slow down the other war parties while Furiosa and the wives dig the rig out of the mud, when he returns covered in blood the wives rush to find where Max is wounded. Furiosa calmly informs them without

inspecting him herself that “it’s not his blood.” Furiosa understands him, in a way no one else can. They are the only ones who entirely understand each other because her violence is not “othered” or different from his. This is crucial to shifting the assumptions about sanctioned male violence versus sanctioned female violence.

They also each carry battle wounds, hers are visible; the burn on the back of her neck and most importantly her severed arm. These are indications that she has a history of violence, that she has fought battles before, and survived. Although her past is slightly vague, there is no doubt that her past informs her aggression, skillset, and her particularly savage and yet entirely natural displays of violence. She can be calculated, restrained, and unemotional but also highly volatile, effective and inspiring in battle.

Unlike Furiosa, Max’s wounds are not visible, they are mental. Throughout the film, Max suffers horrifying flashbacks of victims he was unable to save, they call out for his help as they die. Max’s mental wounds can be read as an allegory for soldiers returning from war with post-traumatic-stress-disorder. It is significant that Furiosa wears the visible physical scars of war while Max carries mental scars. Mental instability is often used to excuse or contain violent women, as Inness illustrates with Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, “she is also judged insane because she is tough and hard-boiled in a way that women are not supposed to be” (Inness, p. 126). It follows the prescribed notion that women are too emotional and not able to control their own minds. Violent women are considered hysterical, not rational, as men are presumed to be. *Fury Road* is able to reverse this stereotype; Max’s masculinity is not compromised by his mental instability, and Furiosa’s capability is not hindered by her physical disability.

Another element that helps shift the stereotypes and assumptions about female violence is that Furiosa uses her body for violence. Within films that present a FFT the lead female character always signifies beauty, as she is the object of male desire. A FFT is often hurt or injured but her wounds rarely compromise the quality of her physical beauty; she may become disheveled, but the framing, lighting, and costume still emphasize her sexual attractiveness. This is also why FFTs tend to use large phallic weapons, it saves her from having to engage in too much close proximity combat that might result in unattractive exertion or physical disfigurement. While it can be argued that Furiosa's war rig represents her phallic weapon, by the final fight she is engaging entirely in hand-to-hand combat. She is willing to use any part of her body to inflict pain. When she is out of weapons she uses her arms, legs, hands, and face. This fulfils the second characterization criteria of the female just-warrior *she has mastery over herself and the skills she utilizes in violent scenarios*. This is also specifically significant because it reveals the uncontained level of aggression she possesses. The injuries she sustains from her unapologetically violent skills—specifically her encounter with Rictus in which, her body being pinned, she bashes him in the face with her head—results in a significant toll on her physical appearance. Her face and body are mangled and disfigured almost beyond recognition. The level of injury she sustains also fulfils the third female just-warrior criteria. *She is physically capable but not impervious to pain or injury (she is willing to accept help)*. As Max desperately attempts to save her life in the back of the war rig her battle wounds begin to appear; her face is swollen almost beyond recognition and she gargles on her own blood as she struggles to breathe (another reason it is difficult to interpret this as a romantic moment between the two of

them). Even the last shot of the film is of her mangled swollen face. This realistic depiction of her sustained injuries reveals the desire to move away from an exploitative female action hero and declare that her worth lies beyond her beauty. Furiosa directly contradicts the FFT archetype as it has been outlined by Inness and throughout this thesis when considering that she is the most violent (tough) of the three case studies and yet she is the least (not at all) sexually objectified.

Fighting Fuck Toys Fight Back

As audiences have become more and more conditioned to the FFT—specifically women costumed in unsuitable and revealing outfits—the reasoning behind costumes that make little to no logistical sense pertaining to the characters' occupations and or circumstances has fallen away. *Fury Road* returns a sense of logic and even a sense of self-awareness in its presentation of the objectified female body. One of the ways the film does not initially appear to be an empowered feminist warrior film is the physical depiction of Immortan Joe's wives (see Fig. 13). These women are stunningly gorgeous; the epitome of heteronormative beauty (the director even casting models rather than actresses for some of the roles) and their costumes leave very little of their bodies unexposed. They are well cared for and fragile. The harsh environment of the desert take a visible toll on them while Furiosa remains unaffected. The wives act as a proxy for previous objectified female characters in action films, however they resist their objectification and escape their oppression.



Figure 13: The first image of Immortan Joe's wives.

They are not happily traversing the hostile violent post-apocalyptic terrain in togas, as FFTs of the past would be. They are not empowered by their revealing clothing, they are oppressed by it. They are seeking freedom from their objectification which is expressed when the line “We Are Not Things” (see Fig. 14) is found painted on the wall above their empty beds. They even literally cut their chains of oppression and objectification which leaves audiences with a chilling image as the last wife’s gruesome chastity belt falls to the ground (see Fig. 15).



Figure 14: A message left for Immortan Joe.



Figure 15: Chastity belts worn by the wives.

The prior tendency to present the female body as spectacle is expressly challenged by the character ‘Splendid’ who is described as Joe’s favorite and most

precious wife. Her body is spectacle throughout the film, because she is at least 8 months pregnant, however this pregnancy does not empower her as a mother; she can resist the pregnancy and motherhood as a victim of the oppressed society Joe has created. Splendid even uses her pregnant body to save Furiosa's life. In a scene in which the wives are trying to escape through a narrow pass with Joe close behind them Splendid throws her body in front of Furiosa and Max shielding them from Joe's gunfire.



Figure 16: Splendid shields Furiosa with her pregnant body.

Her willingness to be reckless with her pregnant body empowers her against her own objectification as an incubator for Joe's heir. This is a significant recoding of the narrative tendency to use motherhood to soften a woman's toughness as Inness had pointed out with Sarah Connor. Pregnancy for Splendid does not contain her or promise a softer more nurturing character, but rather operates in specific moments as a protection from Joe's violence, but only if she is willing to put the unborn child at risk and play against the established expectations of a mother. This comes full circle when Splendid falls under Joe's truck and he retrieves her dying body only to tear it open to deliver the baby (who also dies). The violence against women, Joe's disregard for Splendid (and the other wives) beyond anything other than a sexual/procreation vessel, and his callous discard of her body legitimizes the wives' rebellion on a narrative level

while thematically fueling the feminist agenda of liberation from a patriarchal society that oppresses women and exploits their bodies.

Furiosa's body while not at all sexualized or objectified can be read as a cyborgic body. The war rig operates like an extension of her body and it is used in a similar way as the new jacket in *Edge of Tomorrow*, the battlefield in *Fury Road* consists of armored vehicles rather than armored uniforms. The war rig is modified to specifically fit her needs and no one else can drive it without her. Furiosa also uses a metal arm that wraps over her shoulder and around her torso. It might be easy to overlook the arm as merely aesthetic however she uses it during the final fight scenes in ways in which a human arm may not have been able to withstand. Much like Rita, Furiosa shows she is entirely capable without her metal prosthetic arm or when operating outside the metal war rig, however she is using the technology available to her to supplement her physical abilities. Furiosa was kidnapped and forced into Immortan's command, where she gains enough skill and trust to be allowed access to the technology that she uses to facilitate her freedom. As a soldier, Rita appears content to work within the system as long as she is given access to combat, which is all she desires. As a cyborgic body, Rita's actions are much less radical than Furiosa's, as Furiosa is attempting to use the technology to entirely recode the system that once oppressed her.

Cyborg writing is concerned with the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other...Feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control...cyborg writing is involved in the re-appropriation of the symbols of oppression by rescripting gender identities and subverting the language of patriarchal domination. (Genz and Brabon, p. 148)

Furiosa provides a strong example of a Feminist cyborg story, unlike Rita she is

not interested in simply gaining access but desires to ‘subvert command and control.’ She moves beyond previous post-feminist cyborgic bodies because she is attempting to rewrite the patriarchal codes that have been the source of her oppression. She moves beyond even Rita’s cyborgic body. Immortan’s out dated views on gender roles and his need to control these women is what Furiosa is breaking away from. He marks the past while she presents hope for a recoded future.

As a female just-warrior Furiosa fulfils my previously outlined narrative and characterization criteria more fully than the first two case studies while simultaneously fulfilling a feminist agenda as well. The first criteria is what the entire plot of *Fury Road* is built on; *she is inherently brave (she runs towards danger) a protector and defender of those who cannot defend themselves*. Furiosa’s desire to save the wives is the central narrative of the film and the bulk of her characterization. Although her initial mission is to save only the wives the resulting effect of her killing Immortan Joe and returning to the Citadel is the liberation of the entire population. The war she wages can be read as a just-war considering that only Immortan’s sons are able to benefit from his rule, and even they are not shielded from the effects of the radiation poisoning. It is a “toxic” environment for everyone, but Furiosa and the wives bring the promise of salvation and redemption.

The third criteria *she has at least a partial backstory or history outside of the main narrative*, is initially implicit. We never discover how she lost her arm or the horrors she must have endured as a child but when asked about “the green place,” Furiosa reveals that it is her home, that she and her mother were kidnapped when she was a child and she has been counting the days until she can return to her family, the many

mothers. There is also the suggestion of a past between Joe and Furiosa; just before killing him she looks into his eyes and asks, "Remember me?" The history of women in action films is built into her character. Her history suggests that after being kidnapped as a child she was likely made to serve Immortan in some way, exploited and objectified as a wife or a sex slave, and it is because of the atrocities she experienced that she was unable to sit idly by while the current wives are exposed to the same cruelties. The fourth criteria; *She is willing to sacrifice herself (die) for the "greater good"*, is evident in not only her uninhibited violence and relentless resolve but also in her final words to Max. She tells Max "Get them home." Her only concern in that moment is not for herself but for the wives. She is content to die knowing he will fulfil her cause.

In conclusion, Inness points out that tough women in male spaces are "considered tough because they adopt roles and behaviors associated with men" (Inness, p. 18). This gender binary restricts women in these spaces because she is always othered. The best way to overcome this gender binary is a text in which being a female within a violent environment *benefits* her success rather than seeing her succeed *despite* being female. *Fury Road* offers that because it is a feminist agenda against a violent misogynist patriarch. Furiosa is simply better at the job of the just warrior than Max is, her violence is more intense because she can fully empathize with the victims of Immortan's oppression. Other prior examples of sanctioned female violence such as a mother's ruthless ferocity when avenging or protecting her child, or the violence enacted by the victim in a rape-revenge narrative directly inform the violence of the female just-warrior when she exists in these spaces, uncontained. However, the female just-warrior has a much broader agenda, her violence is not

excused by individual injustices. As a just-warrior she is fighting against *all* injustices therefore her violence is not excused or warranted but rather welcomed and revered. It has never been my desire to obscure her gender but to allow her gender to be celebrated in these spaces rather than criticized, or exploited. If her violence is fueled by all injustices (including her gender's oppressions) then the impact of the archetype is elevated by her gender not reduced by it. She is empowered, successful and powerful because she is female not despite being female.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: THE FEMALE JUST WARRIOR OF TOMORROW

Each of the films in this thesis presents an element of the female just-warrior archetype that the other do not, and as I have stated the structure of this thesis was intended to reinforce a visible progression to a strong uncompromised representation of a female just-warrior. Tris's adolescence in *Divergent* positions her as less masterful and skilled than Rita and Furiosa. She must learn to master her skills and strengths; she does not enter the narrative possessing these skills. However, her adolescence provides an opportunity to focus on the character development and the mental attributes of a female just-warrior; her need and desire to protect the innocent, her bravery and determination, and her desire to serve. *Divergent* also provides a representation of military life, with specific focus on everyday life, training and integration. By the end of the trilogy Tris is a fully formed female just-warrior however, her character in *Divergent* is contained and limited by her reliance on Four and their romantic relationship. Four saves Tris when some of her peers try to murder her and she is unable to fight them off alone, he trains her in hand to hand combat, and teaches her how to conceal her gifts as a divergent so she is not discovered. While Tris does eventually save Four and in the later films (the two work in tandem), the impact (and limitations) of her adolescence cannot be overlooked.

Therefore, the weakness in *Divergent's* presentation of a female just-warrior emphasizes the strengths of *Edge of Tomorrow's*. Rita training Cage reverses power dynamic between Tris and Four in *Divergent*. Rita is the skilled soldier training her male side-kick in hand to hand combat. Rita is the strongest representation of a glorified

female soldier within an integrated military structure. While Rita is the most masterful and skilled fighter in *Edge of Tomorrow*, she is contained by her position as a supporting character, and lack of subjectivity. The narrative is not told through Rita's perspective (as *Divergent* is told through Tris's) but through Cage. This means that even though the moments are few and fleeting she is still fetishized as an object of Cage's gaze. Rita is also positioned as a love interest to Cage, despite that love being mainly unrequited by Rita. This is also how *Mad Max: Fury Road* is able to emphasize the limitations of the two previous archetypes. Unlike Tris, Furiosa is a fully formed female just-warrior with mastery over herself and her violent skills and unlike Rita, Furiosa is not positioned as a love interest, and she and Max both operate as the main perspective for the narrative at different times.

The potential cultural impact of actual female soldiers finally able to see themselves authentically represented in mainstream cinema is reason enough to retrieve and maintain the mythology of the female warrior. But it is also important to address that there is still an absence of positive functioning depictions of women in combat roles, in realist films. Realist depictions of female combat soldiers still fall short of the depictions in these sci-fi films, they often isolate the main female characters or the focus of the film is on the problematic nature of a female presence in combat spaces. However, as I have illustrated no one film in my thesis is able to stand as the singular, quintessential representation of the female just-warrior archetype and it is important to recognize that while these are each strong examples of the archetype they are more impactful when seen alongside each other. The hope is future representations of powerful violent women in film will not require seeing the culmination of multiple

elements from different characters to fully flesh out an empowered representation, that singular representations will begin to carry the full impact of empowered feminist archetypes. Will the future see the female just-warrior existing outside of post-apocalyptic and dystopia films? Will we see her replace the fighting-fuck-toy (FFT) in traditional action films? Is the casting of Alicia Vikander as the new Lara Croft evidence of a recognition of the exploitative nature of the FFT and a desire to move beyond it?

By simply comparing the trailer and the movie poster to the original filmic representation of Lara Croft the progression from sexually exploitative representations to a more complex empowered representation becomes apparent. The trailer for the new Lara Croft film emphasizes Croft's (Alicia Vikander) physical skills and abilities rather than her sexual appeal. She runs through the jungle dispatching enemies with knives and a bow and arrow. Her clothing is utilitarian and her hair is in a simple ponytail rather than the complex braids donned by Jolie's version of the character.



Figure 17: *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001).



Figure 18: *Tomb Raider* (2018).

This side by side of the two characters illustrates the prominence of sex appeal with the first depiction of the game icon; a result of the desire to contain the threat of

women's toughness by fulfilling a heteronormative male fantasy. The 2001 poster (see Fig.17) emphasizes her curves and draws specific attention to her tiny waist her exposed thighs and her prominent breasts. Her face and hair are glowing and flawless, not one strand out of place. The 2018 poster (see Fig.18) is emphasizing Lara's arms and back (the source of her strength and skill with a bow), her face and arms are cut suggesting that this is a more "realistic" depiction than the 2001 version. This Lara is *not* flawless, her hair is disheveled and flows naturally around her face, she is not donned in short shorts or a skin-tight curve-hugging shirt. The use of shadows in the image cause the muscles in her arms to stand out and her pose does not accentuate her curves but rather minimizes them. I would argue that such evidence suggests a progression however, there is still much more progress to be made in terms of visibility and representation.

Visibility for Whom?

One of the most obvious observations that can be made about this archetype when looking at the lineage and similarities between them is that these are *all* young, white, cisgender, conventionally beautiful women. So, while progress can be observed the limits of mainstream Hollywood representation also become evident. Over the course of collecting research for this thesis I have seen the whiteness of "warrior women" addressed by many scholars. "Tough women characters, however, do not entirely escape gender role expectations...these females adhere to gender, sexual, racial, ethnic and class stereotypes... the characters are predominantly white, upper or middle class, attractive, feminine, and heterosexually appealing" (Inness, p.8).

To properly address the whiteness of this archetype requires acknowledging the origins of powerful violent women of color and specifically black women onscreen. Blaxploitation films and specifically the work of Pam Grier saw an empowered black woman using violence against (white) men. Grier was powerful, capable, and violent long before Ripley was killing Aliens, but this was specifically because of the prevalent stereotypes of black women.

Her identity as a black woman figured prominently in the way she was constructed—even fetishized—as a phallic heroine. The discursive myth of black women as bitchy matriarchs is coterminous with the racist notion that black women are tougher, stronger, more masculine, and/or more controlling. Grier could be presented and marketed by the culture industries as an aggressive woman because notions of black womanhood were already in place. (Mask, p. 69)

Blaxploitation films mark the beginning of violent women in male spaces however the niche nature of Blaxploitation and the history of black women's association to violence meant that black women would be limited and contained by their race much longer, and in different ways than how white women have been contained by their gender. Outside of a few notable exceptions, black women have been largely excluded from mainstream (white) Hollywood action films. Kimberly Springer addresses the history associated with violent black women in her chapter, "Waiting to Set It Off: African American Women and the Sapphire Fixation."

In U.S. cinema, the violence of Black women always seems as a result of their being black, while the violence of white women is often celebrated as liberatory... I maintain that when it comes to women, race, and violence, white North American women are assumed to have been provoked to violence; they are not permitted violent impulses. Oppositionally, African Americans are thought to be always already violent due to their "savage" ancestry. (Springer, p. 174)

The inherent violence I am celebrating in the female just-warrior archetype simply does not have the same connotation as it does for black women, which complicates the

ability to read a black woman as a just warrior when her violence has always been framed as derogatory. Inness also addresses this, “a fierce kick-ass black woman is more likely to be read as hyperaggressive, wild, untamable, and vicious rather than as an admirable warrior woman breaking down age-old stereotypes that white women invoke” (Inness, p.111). The black female body has also been fetishized and eroticized more often and more prominently than the white female body; which means less mobility for black women to move away from an exploitative depiction of an action heroine, such as the FFT. Blackness has also almost always signified “otherness” alongside whiteness, which is positioned as a presumed universal perspective in mainstream Hollywood cinema. It is for these reasons along with Hollywood’s racial hierarchy that women of color are excluded from mainstream spaces much longer than white women. However, we are at a specific moment in time in which these types of imbalances are no longer going unnoticed or unchallenged, and while white women have been able to traverse “male genres” and enact previously male-only archetypes we are also seeing progress for women of color in these spaces.

For this final section I look at contemporary black women in the sci-fi and action genre to pinpoint the specific ways in they are contained (differently than white women) in mainstream Hollywood films. Zoe Saldana has carved out a unique position in the sci-fi genre that has resulted in specific attention to her skin color. Her roles in *Avatar* (2009), and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn 2014, Gunn 2017) place her alongside a white male, and neither character is human. Neytiri, her character in *Avatar*, is a tall blue-skinned alien species called Na’vi. Her character is a female warrior that fights and hunts alongside the male Na’vi hunters. Her character is not inherently violent but in the

same way that Rita teaches Cage how to survive combat, Neytiri teaches an American marine how to become a Na'vi warrior. With a black woman in a leading role, *Avatar* is considered one of the highest grossing films of all time. This should mean that Saldana will now have access to any leading role in a Hollywood blockbuster film, however, the fact that her race is contained or shielded by CGI allows room for cognitive dissonance. This actually operates to contain her black identity rather than it being a celebrated aspect of her portrayal.

The same can be said for her role in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, although (unlike in *Avatar*) it is Saldana's body we are seeing onscreen but her dark skin is entirely concealed. Again, acting alongside a prominent white male actor (Chris Pratt) known for his roles as an action hero, Saldana plays Gamora a “cyber-netically enhanced super assassin.” She is a violent phallic FFT but her character's green appearance, again disconnects



Figure 19: Zoe Saldana as Gamora.

Saldana's black body from the history and connotations of the violent black woman onscreen. It divorces Saldana from the negative connotations of the Sapphire stereotype but also entirely obscures her black identity. In fact, even though the films depict a “diverse” group of “Guardians” (see Fig. 20) the only characters that are left unobscured by makeup or CGI are white characters. This leaves whiteness as the only visible race in the film reinforcing the assumed universality of white subjectivity.

Lastly, looking outside of Saldana's sci-fi success in mainstream blockbuster films, her role in *Colombiana* (Megaton, 2011) should also be considered. Saldana carries the film as the hardened assassin Cataleya, she is ruthless, violent, and a highly skilled fighter. Cataleya has all the skills of a just warrior, but the central narrative theme is revenge. As an assassin, her violence is criminalized and the narrative reinforces her inability to assimilate into a "normal" life or a "normal" relationship. She is "othered" throughout the film: as a woman, as a black woman, and as criminal. While There is no substitute for the visibility of a powerful black woman kicking ass onscreen, at this particular moment in cinema it is important to also consider the context in which black women are given the spotlight and the ways in which their violence is still being contained.



Figure 20: The cast from *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017).

I do not wish to undermine the impact of Saldana's career—which is substantial for black actresses in Hollywood—but I do wish to ask what are the possible consequences of obscuring or containing black identities onscreen. Black women were the first autonomous violent women onscreen therefore they inform the female just-warriors of today and as such should be able to occupy the same spaces, and enact the

same archetypes. It is an intersectional approach within feminist representations that demands the visibility of women of color in mainstream Hollywood films to be considered along with the visibility of military women, disabled women, trans women, *all* women. It is through intersectionality that we will begin to see more complex roles for women that challenge the gender, race, class and sexuality of mainstream Hollywood archetypes.

In an effort to end on a celebratory note rather than a critical one I want to draw attention to an upcoming film that may be offering a glimpse of the future female just-warrior; the casting of Tessa Thompson as Valkyrie in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2018) (see Fig. 21). Her presence as a black woman and the only female in a group of white male superheroes might be a significant indication of progress in mainstream Hollywood representation. She is most well known for her roles as black female activists in *Dear White People* (2014) and *Selma* (2014) so her image as a strong feminist black woman was not an obscure one. The character Valkyrie is described as “an Avenger, well educated and a feminist as well as an Heiress and an adventurer” (Imdb Character Biography: Valkyrie).

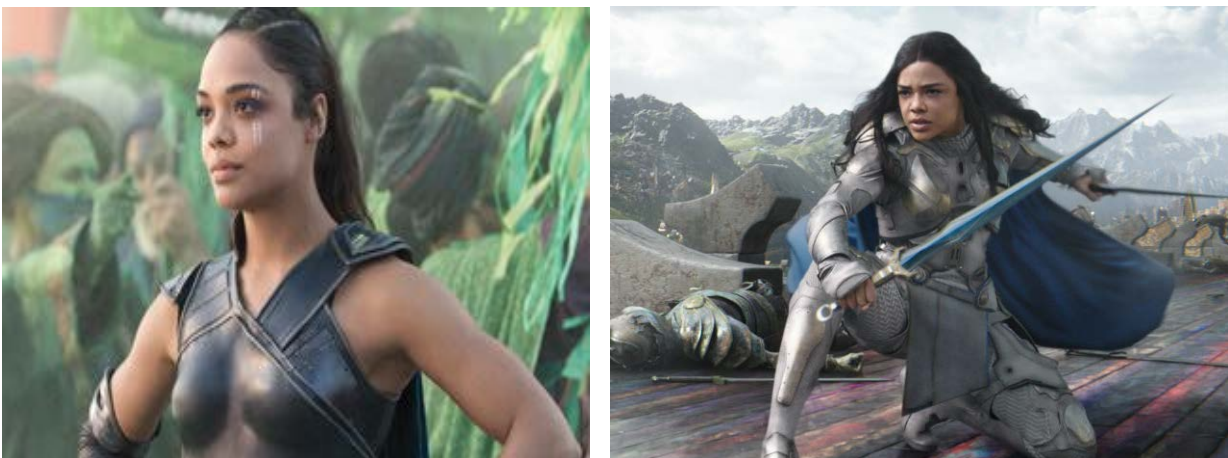


Figure 21: Tessa Thompson as Valkyrie in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2018).

An empowered feminist violent black female character taking a central space in a blockbuster film will not only challenge the status quo but will ensure a feminist sensibility in mainstream spaces. Sci-fi's fictional futuristic worlds will be the arena for women of color to step out of niche markets and into mainstream leading roles that will celebrate their non-white identity. Maybe it is in sci-fi narratives with fictional worlds divorced from the racial prejudices that have plagued American society, that characters like Valkyrie will not be contained by race or gender. Tessa Thompson's Valkyrie will see *sanctioned* black female violence move out of the periphery and into the center of big-budget Hollywood blockbusters, ushering in the next generation of female just-warriors.

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