

Heroism and Gender in War Films. Edited by Karen A. Ritzenhoff, Jakub Kazecki.  
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The very idea of intertwining two contradictory concepts such as heroism and gender in war zones or battle fields, seem to be far-fetched from the onset. The reader, in his/her consciousness would confer the heroic title to the man since History has been the witness of many a war and battle where masculinity, with all its vigor, power, and glory, has stood tall above everything else. The current publication however, attempts to juxtapose the two antithetical ideas of heroism and gender in war, and explore and analyze them at length through a series of very relevant essays written on the basis of appropriate motion pictures from the USA, Canada, Europe and other parts of the world across time. The variety of films chosen by the cluster of authors is interesting, and many of them are perhaps much forgotten, or probably are lesser known to the current crop readers, and thus the book calls for an even more interesting read.

The preface, by Anna Froula, depicts the gender roles during war time and portrays the interplay of the male and the female bodies, as well as the sexuality and the sexual perversion associated with them through a series of examples from motion pictures that were filmed mostly in the USA. She explains the American perspectives about the woman's body and her role during key wars such as WWI and WWII, much later during the Vietnam War, and more recently, during the barbaric Abu Ghraib torture period. The motherly role of women, their subjugation to domesticity, and their being caregivers as nurses to the man's wounded body in the war zone, clearly brings out typecasts about women and specifies the gender roles. It is a successfully written preface to the book, which is capable of triggering the readers' interest and inducing them to navigate through the rest of the text.

The introduction by the editors Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Jakub Kazecki talks about the life and heroism of Nelson Mandela which seemingly is to influence the rest of the writings in

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the book. He is designated as one of the most powerful heroes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries owing to his war against racial injustice and his sacrifices on the political, national and personal fronts to bring independence and democracy to the country. The editors refer to the 2013 motion picture *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*. The roles of women, mostly the family members who surround Mandela during his imprisonment, fortifies the fact that there has been a change in the gender politics and the same is simulated through their onscreen fierce personas of radical and intelligent freedom fighters.

Both editors move on to describing the gender politics, depicted through an array of essays that opine that a conscious effort has been made by a number of authors, of such essays, towards the deconstruction of heroic mythification that surrounds the male hero and the image associated with him. The 100 years of war filming in Hollywood has been taken into serious consideration while observing such changes in national discourses. Apart from that, one more fundamental aspect treated in the book is that of the female warriors and their depiction in the modern day war films (twenty first century) along with the role of female and male veterans. The contributors to the book intend to fortify the fact that shift in the cultural forces in the current society is bringing in the changes in the images of women, and this is augmented even more because of the real-life changes in the American military. Women in strong combat roles are featured in blockbuster films like *G.I. Jane* and *A Few Good Men*. Curiously, there have been attempts at gaining mass public appeal through Steven Spielberg productions such as *Pearl Harbor*, *Schindler's List*, and *Saving Private Ryan* where women are portrayed in their age-old motherly, care giving roles along with the stereotypical roles of romantic interests of the male hero.

The next popular category in American popular culture is the female super heroine, where her role is positioned either in the recent past, or in the realm of a dystopic future, which

perhaps symbolizes that the future belongs to the woman warrior. Films like *Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* emphasize this vision.

The emergence of female teenage heroine in American popular culture is another milestone that is changing the face of the entertainment industry. The filmic adaptations such as *The Hunger Games* and its sequel, *Catching Fire* show the emergence of a commoner as a spearheading leader of a whole community that starts a revolution against the dictatorial regime. These kinds of films are a hybrid genre where heroism and gender are intertwined, and so are war and fantasy. The editors also bring in a relevant and principal current issues such as increased government interference, media, and surveillance against which such wars are being fought, especially in the context of these aforementioned films.

Finally, many of the authors of the essays question, and draw attention to, the issue of hero construction and their representation in the media with regard to the war films.

The first part of the book “**Historical Leaders and Celebrities: Their Role in Mythmaking in the Cinema**” is a collection of three essays written by Clémentine Tholas-Disset, Janis. L. Goldie and Tara Karajica. The first chapter is dedicated to Mary Pickford and her WWI patriotism through which Tholas-Disset intends to highlight the feminine approach towards Wartime Mythical Americanness. It was under the threat of the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 that Hollywood took the position of “practical patriotism” during wartime. Many actors who believed in the championing of America’s Democracy took the lead as war effort spokespersons, and some prominent names are Charles Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, William S. Hart, with the most distinct being the aforementioned Pickford. She became the embodiment of the new young American woman who symbolized American courage. Her actions and careful role building in three war films, namely, *The Little American*, *Johanna Enlists* and *One Hundred Percent American* are analyzed by the author. Cinema thus becomes an important propaganda tool that brings men and women, and other ethnicities, close

to each other and thus becomes a gender sensitive device. Different genres come together and give rise to a hybrid form of cinema, and the gender sensitivity is even more highlighted when women are depicted as independent heroines. Pickford started changing the face of American Cinema through the personification of Americanness, someone who is young, fearless, valiant, and ready to do anything to rescue other people. The idea of the “New Woman” in the period of 1900-1910 is symbolized by the characters played by Pickford, a woman “with a college education, suffragettes, reformers for social justice, and women who remained single in order to pursue careers” (p. 15 ). This new kind of woman was also allowed sexual freedom along with economic autonomy. The author gradually deconstructs the sexualized image of the new woman towards the end of the essay and presents her as a genderless national symbol.

The next chapter is dedicated to the Canadian cinema and the reluctant hero who is constructed and deconstructed in the 2008 Paul Gross film *Passchendaele*. The hero, Michael Dunne, is the body of the idealized Canadian soldier, and the author quotes a slew of dialogues from the film to establish the same. The film embodies a hero who is reluctant to go to war since it’s a futile effort, but when he goes, he outshines others and stands as victorious.

In the third, and the final chapter of Part 1, the reader moves on to European Cinema, and this section stands out as a truly transnational analysis. It analyzes a debate over the filmic representation of Gavrilo Princip, the hero and/or villain, the terrorist and/or the liberator, who caused the famous Sarajevo Assassination, in Yugoslav historical films dated 1968 to 1990 where the debate has been ongoing regarding the real role construction of Princip. In the film of Fadil Hadzic he is portrayed as a “terrorist” and is ironically called a hero. There is a duality between an idealist and an anarchist in his character portrayal. In the other films too, his position is ambiguous. All the films condemn violence and terrorism as a means of action and liberation.

In all, this first part deals with construction and deconstruction of the myth of hero in mainstream cinema of USA, Canada, and Europe. Gender politics and the change of the role of women are also wisely handled by the authors. It calls for a good cross-cultural and transnational read.

The next part, “**Hollywood’s War Myths in the 1940s and 1950s**”, is constituted by two essays that portray the war myths created in Hollywood in the 40s and 50s. Rochelle Sara Miller opines that women were made to disappear from the war films during this epoch, and a ‘Gentlemen only’ stance was taken to cater to the audience. *Fighting 69<sup>th</sup>* is a Hollywood propagandist film, especially noteworthy because of the presence of an all-male-ensemble in a gradual, and intentional building of a male homosocial community that finally eliminated the requirement of females in their traditional roles. For the author, women pose a threat to men and are the cause of their vulnerability, and thus there has been the conscious misogynistic decision of eliminating their presence altogether. Women’s antiwar views also could be a possible cause behind such a decision. The analysis of the film is successful in bringing out the causes and reasons behind such misogynistic tact. Other films like *Kathleen Mavourneen* and *Thoroughbreds Don’t Cry* are taken into consideration while analyzing and interpreting the gender issues.

In Chapter 5, Lesley C. Pleasant discusses the postwar anxiety issue that is associated with the American pin-up. The 1946 film, *The Best Years of Our Lives* rivets the attention of the audience since they see emasculation of the man and masculinity of the woman with adequate role reversals. A third feminine angle is presented. Marie, Fred, and Peggy form the trio in the film where Marie is the “patriotute”, an interesting neologism coined to describe her hyper-sexualized, anti-mother-daughter-wife image who dares to have her own liberated space and economical liberty. Traditionalist views about women are juxtaposed with the empowered

ones, and the presentation of an emasculated man in between them is the ironical twist of such a wartime tale.

In “**Part III: Ideologies, Nationality, and War Memory**” the reader once again enjoys a transnational flavor with essays about Germany’s Heroic Victims. There is an attempt to redeem German Soldiers in German Cinema through four films: *Cross of Iron*, *Platoon*, *Stalingrad: Dogs, do you want to live forever* and *Stalingrad*. However, the chief emphasis has been given to the first film which is primarily an adaptation of the many postwar novels where the soldiers are shown in a good light, where they are apolitical, and they fight and die heroically. Besides redeeming the German soldiers by completely de-historicizing them, the film promotes an antiwar message. The concluding part of the essay elaborates the other films to some extent and infers that redemption of Wehrmacht was done by illustrating it as another victim of a criminal regime. The film attempts to generate masculinity, male bonding, and construction of German heroism through it. Gender bias and misogyny form a conspicuous part of it when it comes to women, but homoeroticism is underlined in a noteworthy way, which brings in a different gender angle to the film; although in my opinion as a reviewer it’s been a deliberate attempt to strengthen the concept of masculinity and male comradeship in the terrain of war. It, in a way, gives out a message that war is a no-woman’s zone and heroism belongs to male body solely. Notes and citations are abundant for the purpose of scholarly reference. .

Chapter 7 is humorously titled as “Balls and Bullets” where people’s humor is considered as an aesthetic stratagem in the 1998 transnational film, *Golpe de Estadio* which is a joint collaboration of Colombia, Italy, and Spain. Claudia Aburto Guzmán opines that the film’s humor stems from the popular working class culture of Colombia, where Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of carnival and folklore can be put to use for deciphering it. There are literary strategies, such as parody, and intertextuality, which are utilized in the film. The author locates humoristic inter-textuality between Francis Ford Coppola’s and Cabrera’s work where

the latter does a parody of the famous *Apocalypse Now*. The dialogical relation between the two films is extensively analyzed and an underscoring of an antiwar sentiment, by both the films, is inferred. Classic wartime masculinity is deconstructed through the use of humor, and the Latin American reality and its relation with the USA are decoded in a specific way.

In the final chapter of the third part of the book, the reader gets a taste of the Korean War films that investigate the issues of G.I.s, women, and children, under the title of “Saviors and Rapists”. This essay has a serious undertone unlike the previous one, where emergence of USA as a neocolonial power in Korea is broadly highlighted. The benefit of the Korean War was reaped by Hollywood which created a new genre of war films that ran parallel to the war films created on the basis of WWII. Race discrimination is something that was widely treated in this genre, and it could be divided into four broad categories as per Paul M. Edwards who is cited in the essay. Very gender-specific themes such as Western Male pleasure, male gaze, and disciplinary gaze, are analyzed in this essay through three films: *Battle Hymn*, *Silver Stallion*, and *Spring in my Hometown*. The author argues that the first film evokes the sentiments of a typical “Orient” that embodies the Saidian concept of romantic exoticism, despite its being a mainstream Hollywood film. The active/male/gaze versus the passive/female/spectacle binary, is widely present in the film which involves the Western male gaze or an imperial vision that indicates the obligatory subjugation of Korea and/ or the Korean self to a White protector. In the next film, the gaze is fortified through the projection of stereotypes, such as Korean women serving as sex objects and prostitutes to the American soldiers, and Korean children begging and rummaging for food, etc. The shaming of the “guilty body” of women who served as prostitutes, or their return to the role of traditional motherhood, are some of the gender stereotypes that one sees in the film. These indicate the subjugation of women’s body to the Korean Confucian patriarchy. Thus it is not just the white male gaze, but also the “oriental”, or rather, the traditional gaze, that plays a crucial role in the film and provides it with a new angle.

The final film is a record setting Korean film which features Korean women's sexual victimization by US soldiers. The film utilizes Foucault's Panopticon theory in order to give it a disciplinary and surveillant framework within which the characters function.

The fourth part, "**Men Women and Trauma: Heroes and Anti-heroes**", consists of four chapters which are penned by Debra White-Stanley, Janet S. Robinson, Jessica R. Wells and Jinhua Li. The review is brief and combined on purpose, in order to avoid repetition. Topics like military heroism, gender, and race depicted in the Danish film *Brodre* (2004) and in its US remake *Brothers* (2009) are highlighted by the author in the first essay. Wartime heroism, gender inequality, and racial identity are some of the key features of the film. The shortcomings of the military masculinity, and the damage caused by war, are central themes of the film where a love affair between the brother and the sister-in-law becomes a pivotal feature. It's an example of a hybrid film genre about which the editors write in the introduction. The interesting feature is the woman's passive-aggressive support for the combatant role which goes beyond the war zone and enters a domestic space like that of the kitchen. This gives a unique twist to the stereotypical gender roles to which women are generally subjugated. The author calls it a feminist antiwar film. The parallelisms with respect to heroism and gender politics have been successfully brought out by the author through well fleshed out and apt examples taken from the films. Finally, the author calls it a war melodrama where middle-class military masculinity crosses path with the new, sensible masculinity. There is a simultaneous construction and deconstruction of the gender roles in the film. The reader finds an extended gendered geometry in the next essay where the Freudian binaries of gender difference (male/phallic/war versus female/vaginal/home) are explored in the Hollywood film *Hurt Locker*. A similar gender politics is shown in the home and war front as that of the earlier film, where philosopher Roland Barthes has been challenged as per the author's argument.

The next chapter deals with the myth and spectacle factors in the US film *Hunger Games* which symbolizes Greek mythology as per the argument of the author, and the female protagonist, Katniss embodies both masculinity and femininity in triumphs against the dictatorial regime through the usage of gladiator-style violent spectacle.

The final chapter is a transnational production, again from China, which deals with themes such as national myth and trans-cultural inter-textuality in two films namely, *Mulan* by Disney Films (1998) and *Hua Mulan* produced in China (2009). The myth of a woman disguised as a man who fights a battle in the war zone forms the crux of the film. Post-feminism is the theoretical approach of the Chinese film through which the woman is made to believe that she is not inferior to man, rather, she is strong, confident, and beautiful. Comparing the two films, the Chinese production supersedes the American version in bringing out the post-feminist characteristics of the central female character. Chinese geopolitics, ethnic issues, and the antiwar message, are evident in the Chinese version which doesn't return to the patriarchy.

**“Historical Reality, Authenticity of Experience, and Cinematic Representation”** is the final part of the book and it consists of two chapters; the first one deals with the bastardized histories and corporeal inscriptions of Quentin Tarantino, and is authored by Tiel Lundy, whereas the second one talks about being/becoming a heroine and about the “war on terror”. It is authored by Charles-Antoine Courcoux.

The first essay portrays a comparison between the premises of two of the Tarantino films, *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) and *Django Unchained* (2012). The narrative is that of the victim's journey towards his vengeance, which is a common trope utilized in genres such as war films and the Western. There is debate regarding the realistic and/or accurate representation of Nazi-occupied France during WWII by Tarantino in *Inglourious Basterds*. The author opines that it would be apt to call it a “postmodern history film” where he cites the

critic Robert A. Rosenstone. In the second film, Tarantino consciously deconstructs the myth of Western film masculinity and, instead of perfection, he portrays flaws in it. There is a comparison with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* which makes the film's premise philosophical, rather than a pastiche.

The second essay is a comparison between the female protagonists and the narrative of two films, *Homeland* and *Zero Dark Thirty*. According to the author, the feminist approach seems troublesome in the films since the protagonists who suffer from the "fashion-beauty complex" could possibly be structured on the side of depoliticized post-feminism. Also, the films appear as thrillers, more than war films, where the characters favor a "soft power" compatible with the "hero" status that is granted to the women. The masculine gendered hegemony and the gender-power dynamics are discussed.

The book is an all-encompassing attempt towards the detailed analysis of dissimilar issues such as heroism and gender, and mostly it is successful in transmitting its message. It is truly transnational; all the essays are interconnected, and they well flesh out the editors' arguments in the introductory chapter.

The key argument about the construction and deconstruction of the hero myth and the gender politics that surround it has been successfully chalked out. It encompasses both classical and contemporary world cinema, and a wide time period has been included which makes it uniquely compelling. It is a good academic publication which can be helpful for the students and the researchers in various interconnected fields such as Film and Media Studies, Communication and Cultural studies, and most certainly Women and Gender Studies, but may not be so in its entirety.

This is because of the vastness of different topics which seem to be too broad at times and the reader might get lost shifting from one essay to the other. In other words, all the essays cannot be used for a single research purpose, but rather, in specific groups they can be used for different kinds of research work. Undergraduate students could benefit more than graduate students and/or higher level researchers. Curiously, the abundant notes and work cite references mentioned at the end of every essay, appear to be more useful, dense, and concrete than the actual body of the essays; and these can serve as very good sources at the time of conducting profound research.

There is lack of queer theory and the approach is mostly feminist and/or feminine when it constructs its gender theories. Apart from that, the initial claims of the editors about the inclusion of Nelson Mandela and his influence sound a bit vague since none of the essay writers mention him and his struggle anywhere in their research. This probably would be the most befuddling and bemusing factor of the book for the readers. Also, its excessive length that embraces too many details, as well as the diminutive font size of the body of the essays, makes it a labored read.

Debarati Byabartta, Texas A&M University, Department of Hispanic Studies, College Station, USA