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Women in Science Fiction:

Representation in Space

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Science fiction media has always had a unique relationship with women and female representation. A genre of media that was initially invented by Mary Shelley and her groundbreaking novel *Frankenstein*, science fiction has gone through an array of transformations and advancements since the publication of *Frankenstein* in 1818. With the rise of film and television technology, science fiction has become one of the most popular and imaginative spectacles in modern entertainment, however, the roles and positions for women in these productions have always created issues within the industry. As a genre, science fiction was both invented by a woman in the 17th century, and revolutionized by women in the 1980's with films like *Alien* and *Terminator*, however a closer study into the intricacies of science fiction writing and casting will show that women are still often cast aside or reduced to stereotypes in these films and productions. With a focus on both physical and emotional masculinity and femininity, as well as the use of the female gaze, I will analyze how women have been represented in science fiction media over the years, as well examining how the female perspective can be better used in future science fiction productions.

### Visual Presentation

Since the 1980's science fiction films have developed a reputation for presenting their female characters as overly masculine. Most notably, Sigourney Weaver's character in the 1979 film *Alien* became a female icon after breaking several boundaries of what female characters could do in action and science fiction films. However, this also came at the expense of sacrificing the character's femininity, further contributing to the hyper masculinity that was already being illustrated in many of the action and science fiction films of that time. Sigourney Weaver's character Ellen Ripley was strong and muscular, with a no-nonsense attitude and short haircut that was mostly associated with the tomboy aesthetic of the time. This is further

expounded upon in Lisa Purse's article "Square-jawed Strength: Gender and resilience in the female astronaut film", wherein Purse describes how the presentation of overtly masculine female astronauts could have negative repercussions on society's views on space travel and femininity as a whole:

Certainly, visually associating these adult screen astronauts with the figure of the tomboy rhetorically positions participation in space exploration as more usually a male endeavor. Even as their screen colleagues treat them as unsurprising equals, these female astronauts are visually framed as out of the ordinary, implying an underlying association of the world of space technology with masculinity. (par. 7)

There is clearly a deeper connection between this concept of a masculine woman in space and the traditional ideas of what it means to be a soldier, astronaut, or scientist. Framing women in science or in the military as being uniquely masculine or different from the average woman, sets a precedent that these fields are inherently masculine, therefore reinforcing traditional patriarchal gender roles. Lisa Purse goes on to discuss how even minute details like camera framing and lighting can have an effect on how female characters are perceived in science fiction films. Specifically, Purse points out how shadows are used to emphasize female characters' strong jaw bones, often in an attempt to replicate the sharp bone structure often found in traditional male hero characters. "Yet the repetition of this trope of the square-jawed female astronaut establishes associations between robust female facial structures and the technological structures within which these women have to work and survive that can exceed the reference back to a historical notion of masculine strength." (par. 12) While the late 20th century can be looked at as an important moment for women in cinema, even the characters that were perceived to be

progressive at the time still contributed to the reinforcement on masculine stereotypes and traditional gender norms.

### Emotional Presentation

With the influx of physically masculine female characters in science fiction in the late 20th century, these characters would often also present themselves as emotionally unavailable or generally masculine rather than feminine or maternal. Ripley from *Alien* conforms to this idea in the *Alien* films, as well as Linda Hamilton's character Sarah Connor from the *Terminator* franchise. Writer Marianne Kac-Vergne touches more on this in her article "Sidelining Women in Contemporary Science-Fiction Film", where she explains that many feminist critics at the time were not pleased with the presentation of these characters, as they felt they were simply recreating male attitudes with female characters without adding much nuance or refinement. In reference to the *Terminator* films, Kac-Vergne writes:

Sarah's portrayal as a brutal and unfeeling mother disconnected from femininity and unproductively hateful towards men thus echoes the criticism directed against Second Wave feminism by the mass media and some postfeminist writers such as Naomi Wolf in *Fire with Fire* or Rene Denfeld in *The New Victorians*, who rejected the previous generation's feminism as an outdated sexually repressive "victim feminism" which denigrated female (hetero)sexual pleasure, feminine glamor and any other form of overtures to men. (par. 19)

Clearly male writers were often unable to accurately depict a strong complex woman without reducing her to a "post-feminist" stereotype. The idea that in order to be in positions of power in science or war you must be emotionally lacking contributes to the traditionally masculine gender roles given to these positions, while simultaneously discrediting both emotionally mature women

and men. Lisa Purse's previously mentioned article also references these issues, and compares these masculine heroines to the "final girl" trope often found in early horror and slasher films. The final girl is traditionally the last surviving character in a slasher film, whose combination of active and passive behavior, along with the buildup of emotion throughout the story, allows her to become the hero and build the strength to defeat the monstrous villain:

On the one hand, the female astronaut as Final Girl can embody an impressive capacity for physical action that can exceed the bounds of traditional narrative containment and expand the confines of cultural representations of women. On the other hand, the fact that filmmakers working in the 1990s and beyond again and again fall back on elements of this archetype to achieve the representation of a heroic woman shows how little progress has been made in gendered representation since the 1970s, or indeed since the scientist women of 1950s sf. (par. 21)

While Purse does admit that these characters can still be unique, complex and emotionally and physically strong in their own way, the continued reliance on these types of characters illustrates the lack of understanding that these male writers have about feminine emotion and strength.

### The Female Gaze

Films like *Alien* and *Terminator* that were released in the late 1970s and early 1980s are still some of the most important and well known films with female leads in science fiction. Since then, there has been a noticeable drop in starring roles for women in science fiction media, often to make room for more hyper-masculine male leading characters. This has largely caused female characters to be sidelined and used as either love interests for the male lead, or in some cases, the female point of view. It has become commonplace for the female characters in science fiction to simply be admirers or supporters of the male leads, further contributing to the heteronormative

and overly masculine stereotypes that plague the entertainment industry. Marianne Kac-Vergne's previously mentioned article also details how the female gaze is often taken advantage of by male storytellers:

Female supporting characters are thus included not so much for what they have to say about *women* (in our postfeminist world, women are no longer the issue), but for what they have to say about *men*, providing a locus of difference from which hegemonic masculinity can be remodeled and validated. Furthermore, the inclusion of women tends to erase male violence and domination, as well as the persistence of unequal gender relations, as if Hollywood was unable to imagine a future with a different gender order. (par. 30)

The use of female supporting characters whose sole purpose is to view the leading man in a positive light arguably eliminates any realistic feminine perspective. The over-validation of masculine traits and the deconstruction of femininity in science fiction only proves to further the gap between how men and women are represented in this medium. In Jackielee Derk's review of Dean Conrad's book *Space Sirens, Scientists and Princesses: The Portrayal of Women in Science Fiction Cinema*, Derk deepens the discussion on how women are written and perceived in science fiction media by discussing how Dean Conrad feels women are viewed by male writers and how this has contributed to a lack of complex female characters: "According to Conrad, the main challenge faced by women in sf film is not so much the types of representation but the fact that the genre has never been about women's stories. Women have always been plot devices that help narratives about men succeed, whether as objectified sexual fantasies or expressions of deeply rooted anxieties about female power." (lines 98-102) Women are very rarely the center of the story, even if they are the leading character. Even in prominent female driven films like *Alien*

and *Terminator*, the focus is often stolen from the leading lady and given to the alien creature or futuristic robot that the film derives its title from. If these movies are not telling female stories, there is only so much emotional complexity we can expect from our female characters.

## Discussion & Conclusion

All three of the writers I have referenced made very similar points about how masculinity and femininity are represented in science fiction media. Since the 1970's many of the most prominent female characters in science fiction have been portrayed as overtly physically and emotionally masculine, creating this idea that being an astronaut, soldier, or scientist is an inherently masculine job, and therefore can only be properly performed by men or uniquely hyper-masculine women. While there has been an increase of women in all of these fields in the last 50 years, these theatrical recreations reflect poorly on how women are viewed in our society. In addition, there continues to be an issue with how female characters are treated in science fiction cinema, and more specifically how their characters are often used to reinforce and encourage hyper-masculine attitudes in the male leads. Media and cinema have always had an intense influence on our society and how we view our fellow citizens, and this is a clear sign that there has not been nearly enough progression in how our society (and specifically science fiction writers) view women and their place in society. There seems to be a disconnect between how male writers view women and men and their positions in high level science or battle scenarios, and Marianne Kac-Vergne's article argues this is largely due to "post-feminist" ideas of male inequality and the need to redefine masculinity from the male perspective. There is a clear need for both male writers to update their ideas of feminism in the modern era, as well as female writers writing female stories. The most effective solution to the misrepresentation of women in science fiction is an increase in female writers creating stories from an accurate female

perspective, as well as an influx of producers and executives that are willing to share these stories with a global audience.



## Works Cited

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