

# ‘Killing Me Softly’.

## Introduction

*"We are made numb in pop culture to female bodies remaining background to male-centred action."*<sup>1</sup>

The feminine, which can be defined as “characteristics encompassing traits, appearances, interests, and behaviours that have traditionally been considered relatively more typical of women,”<sup>2</sup> have been continually distorted and associated with complacency in western society, due to macro agents of socialisation. The recent controversy over sexual harassment evident in the #MeToo campaign highlights the “toxic environment for women”<sup>3</sup> in media, as females struggle to gain a sense of control amidst damaging gender norms. One prominent agent of socialisation is film, which “represents and reproduces”<sup>4</sup> cultural beliefs and values relating to the feminine. This particular facet of media has proven damaging in its tokenistic portrayals of women, as passive figures who simply “react to the men around them,”<sup>5</sup> as they are often subjected to “brutalisation” and “sexualised violence”<sup>6</sup>. Such representation is therefore an example of how femininity is punished in this macro agent of society.

Thus, my hypothesis states, “*Western filmic discourse increasingly punishes femininity and represents the feminine as passive and tokenistic.*” The aim of this study will be to investigate feminine representation in contemporary film, discerning negative depictions of “somewhat disposable”<sup>7</sup> females. This topic will also examine the lack of developed female characters. Such depictions feed into harmful social constructs which limit realistic depictions

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<sup>1</sup> Malik, S. (2018). *'Headless women' project highlights gross sexism in movie posters.* [online] Topics. Available at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/life/culture/article/2018/03/15/headless-women-project-highlights-gross-sexism-movie-posters> [Accessed 28 Apr. 2018].

<sup>2</sup> Kachel, S., Steffens, M. and Niedlich, C. (2016). *Traditional Masculinity and Femininity: Validation of a New Scale Assessing Gender Roles.* *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, pp. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Twohey, J. (2017). *Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades.* [online] *Nytimes.com.* Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2018].

<sup>4</sup> Smelik, A. (2016). “*Feminist Film Theory*” in: *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies* 2017/071 Volume 5, pg. 1-2. [Accessed 12 March 2018].

<sup>5</sup> Mumford, G. (2017). *Jessica Chastain: the portrayal of women in films is disturbing.* [online] *the Guardian.* Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/may/30/jessica-chastain-women-cannes-disturbing-palme-dor> [Accessed 24 Apr. 2018].

<sup>6</sup> Rickey, C. and (2013). *Brutalization of women is a constant in popular film.* [online] *Variety.* Available at: <http://variety.com/2013/voices/opinion/brutalization-of-women-is-a-constant-in-popular-film-2654/> [Accessed 24 Apr. 2018].

<sup>7</sup> Neuendorf, K., Gore, T., Dalessandro, A., Janstova, P. and Snyder-Suhy, S. (2009). *Shaken and Stirred: A Content Analysis of Women's Portrayals in James Bond Films.* *Sex Roles*, 62(11-12), pp.747-761.3

of female identity, through “reinforcing and illustrating the systemic problems faced by women”<sup>8</sup>.

Secondary research was employed to investigate the representation of femininity in film, for example the punishment women of the *James Bond* series are exposed to, as explored in Kimberly A. Neuendorf’s 2009 article *Shaken and stirred: A content analysis of women's portrayals in James Bond films*<sup>9</sup>. Additional articles explored the erasure of female characters in films, as in Marianne Kac-Vergne’s 2016 article on recent science fiction blockbusters, *Sidelining Women in Contemporary Science-Fiction Film*, exploring how “women play minor characters who never appear onscreen without their male companions”<sup>10</sup>.

Primary research included an online questionnaire<sup>11</sup>, completed by 102 participants. Further data was collected through a content analysis<sup>12</sup>, deconstructing and comparing Ridley Scott’s 1982 film, *Blade Runner* and its current sequel, Denis Villeneuve’s *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). This method, however, only reflected a narrow sample space. Additionally, an interview conducted via email with British journalist, filmmaker and broadcaster Bidisha SK Mamata,<sup>13</sup> professionally known as Bidisha, provided greater insight into femininity in media. A second interview conducted with animator John Henderson,<sup>14</sup> provided thoughtful insight and perspectives from someone employed in the film industry.

The cross cultural component of gender will be examined through deconstructing how the macro socialisation agency of media has seen an increase in toxic portrayals of femininity over time, perpetuating narrow gender norms. This topic is relevant to the course as it explores how femininity is punished within patriarchal western societies, and how women often experience social exclusion due to cultural beliefs viewing the feminine as passive, which are reflected and perpetuated through the technology of film.

“The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Johnston, J. (2010). *Girls on screen: How film and television depict women in public relations*. PRISM 7(4), pp. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Neuendorf, K., Gore, T., Dalessandro, A., Janstova, P. and Snyder-Suhy, S. (2009). *Shaken and Stirred: A Content Analysis of Women’s Portrayals in James Bond Films*. *Sex Roles*, 62(11-12), pp.747-761. [Accessed 23 Apr. 2018].

<sup>10</sup> Kac-Vergne, M. (2016). *Sidelining Women in Contemporary Science-Fiction Film*. *Miranda*, (12).

<sup>11</sup> Questionnaire, See Appendix A

<sup>12</sup> Content Analysis, See Appendix B

<sup>13</sup> Interview 1, See Appendix C

<sup>14</sup> Interview 2, See Appendix D.

<sup>15</sup> Mulvey, L. (1989). *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.14-26.