

Women in Action

Exceptional heroines in the films of James Cameron

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Introduction

James Cameron is one of the most successful directors of the last decades. Especially his last two films, *Titanic* (1997) and *Avatar* (2009), are among the biggest box office hits ever. This is partly due to the fact that these and also his earlier films are the result of his huge ambition to enhance the possibilities of cinema and to create new worlds. Another reason is that like no other director he is able to combine the epic with the dramatic. His films never lose their emotional centre, not even among the biggest technical innovations. But despite reaching a large mainstream audience it can be argued that the films contain progressive elements. Kendrick (1999, p.39), who discusses the Marxist undertones in Cameron's films, for example, notes that "Cameron has shown early in his career a tendency to create films that are more structurally and thematically complicated than they appear when first examined". In the centre of two of Cameron's earlier blockbusters, *Aliens* (1986) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), there is a strong female figure, contradicting the conventions of the representation of women in action films. As a result, some critics have referred to these films as feminist. The aim of my analysis is to illustrate the different and often contradictory facets of the characterisation of the central female characters in order to show that the films' classification as feminist films is more problematic than it might seem at first.

I. Female Representation in Hollywood

In the last three or four decades feminist film studies have analysed how women are represented in a filmic context. According to White (2000, p.115), in focusing on the woman as image this field aims to make the category of gender and gender hierarchy apparent. In this context, White presents the work of Claire Johnston, who employs Roland Barthes's concept of myth, where ideology is disguised as 'the natural', to claim that "film must be seen as a language and woman as a sign - not simply a transparent rendering of the real" (2000, p.116). According to White (ibid.), feminist studies following Johnston "showed how woman as signifier performed precise iconographic and ideological functions, either constituting a genre's structural dimensions (woman = home in the western) or exposing its ideological contradictions (the femme fatale figure in film noir)". Jean-Luis Baudry and Christian Metz developed the complex concept of the cinematic apparatus to explain how the female is constructed as the signifying other to the dominating male in patriarchal society. They explain the institution of cinema as an apparatus operating on the level of the industrial as well as the

mental or psychic. As there are codes and conventions embedded in the apparatus it is ideological which necessarily makes the films it generates ideological as well.

In her seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Laura Mulvey shows that woman is turned into an erotic spectacle and thus objectified.

Mulvey argued that the institution of cinema is characterized by a sexual imbalance of power, and psychoanalysis may be used to explain this. Because psychoanalysis makes sexual difference its central category, feminist thinking can use it to understand women's exclusion from the realms of language, law, and desire – from, in short, what Jacques Lacan called the symbolic register (White, 2000, p.117)

In our patriarchal society, the division of gender roles works according to the lines of "woman as image and man as bearer of the look" (1992, p.841). As opposed to the active male character that controls the look, the role of woman in filmic representation is passive. The female image serves as spectacle, as erotic object for both the characters within the diegetic world as well as for the audience of a movie. It is important to note, however, that the division between the active male and the passive female is not natural but a cultural construction, which is further perpetuated by the cinematic apparatus.

It does not happen often that in the context of a film a woman adopts a male position and thus undermines the opposition between the traditional gender roles. If a film happens to portray a woman which transgresses these boundaries, especially in a 'male' genre such as the action film, it may get attention for it and even be called a feminist film. Both, *Aliens* and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day (T2)* have been claimed to be progressive in their gender politics and at the same time they have been criticised for championing conservative patriarchal values. The fact that the reception of the films is in such a manner polarized suggests a high ambiguity as far as gender is concerned. Therefore, it might prove worthwhile to consider both films in greater detail.

II. Image Analysis: Ripley and Sarah as Female Action Characters

Ripley is the female protagonist of *Aliens*, which constitutes a mixture of the science fiction, the horror and the action film genre. Having survived as the only character in *Alien*, the first part of the series, she has to again confront the eponymous alien, a highly dangerous predatory creature which can be described as a metallic-organic hybrid with acid for blood. Together with a special military unit, which would also not seem misplaced in one of the typical Vietnam War films of the 80s, she investigates the communication break-down of a

colony on an otherwise empty planet. Her worst suspicion is confirmed as they encounter the aliens which have wiped out the colony and for which the soldiers are no match.

One central image shows Ripley before the last showdown with the aliens. She wants to rescue Newt, a little girl abducted by the aliens to serve as host for their offspring. The background composition shows her in a problematic situation. With her back literally to the wall she is also contained by the crossing beams in the right half of the image. The blue colour comes from the typical artificial light that illuminates most of the film's action. The red light behind her comes from the alarm lights, which indicate that the whole place will soon be destroyed, so she has very little time to fulfil her task.

There are several things that are noticeably about her. First, there is the determined expression on her face and the unyielding posture. The film has characterized her as strong-willed, down-to-earth and resilient, but still, knowing the deadly danger the aliens present, her composure is impressive and unorthodox for a female in a Hollywood film. The most prominent element, however, is the massive gun she carries, which, being almost ridiculously big, is in fact the combination of a machine gun and a flamethrower, the most effective weapon against the aliens. Given the obvious phallic connotations a weapon like this possesses she can be claimed to have assumed a masculine position. Her clothes, army pants, and a plain white shirt as well as her short hair contribute to the idea that she has abandoned her femininity. Her possession of the phallus has high symbolic value, because the phallus can be seen as a signifier of power and a place in the realm of language, a place usually taken up by men. In psychoanalytic terms, the woman can give up her status as sign by claiming the phallus and appear as a subject within language. But this act is dangerous for her because to the male it connotes castration and might provoke retribution. Here, nevertheless, she is the last of the crew to be alive, which means that all the males that could subdue her are dead. Significantly, she is also not punished through the narrative because she survives the finale. Taken these elements together, this image is highly ambiguous about the gender of the person at its centre. If the spectator were lacking the background information they could just as well believe Ripley to be a male, if with somewhat feminine facial features. This impression is increased by the fact that she is only addressed with her gender neutral surname and that throughout the film she is wearing neutral clothes, such as a leather jacket and army pants.

Sarah Connor is Ripley's equivalent in Cameron's *T2*, which was made five years after *Aliens*. She is the mother of John Connor, who in the near future, when the machines will have taken over after a nuclear catastrophe, will be the only hope for the survival of

humanity. The computers aim to annihilate the humans and John is their worst enemy. To get rid of him, they send a Terminator T-1000, a highly efficient killer machine, back in time to kill John as a child. To protect his child self, John also sends back a Terminator, which is however a somewhat older prototype. On the flight from the T-1000 Sarah and John find out that the work of a software engineer, Miles Dyson, is the starting point for the catastrophe which will cause the near extinction of humanity. In order to change this fate, Sarah decides to kill this man. The picture shows her at the outset of this mission. In the warm reddish light of the setting sun she is about to leave the temporary camp, where they equipped themselves with weapons. She is moving which emphasises her role as a decision maker. Despite, or maybe because, the importance of her task, she appears determined and resolute. Her movement accentuates her muscular, resilient body but unlike Ripley there is no doubt about her gender. She is dressed in paramilitary gear, complete with army cap and sunglasses. She is heavily armed but the most central object is the gun she is carrying in her right hand. Like Ripley she is in possession of the phallus and has assumed a powerful position.

Both images show the female characters just before the showdown of the film. They present them as exactly the tough and powerful women they have been characterized throughout the films. Hollywood mainstream cinema often introduces strong female characters only to then reduce them to accessories for the male struggle in the central scenes. But this is not the case here. Ripley and Sarah prove that they are not such alibi figures but that they actually live up to the expectations raised by the film. But since, of course, a single picture can never completely account for the representation of a character in a film a more detailed analysis is necessary.

III. Intertextuality: the Similarities between Sarah and Ripley

As the images discussed have shown both female characters are represented in a very similar way. But also in terms of narrative and plot both films cover common ground. Both women are singled out for a big fight, an important task, and both are initially very reluctant to accept it. When they finally do accept it, they have to face powerful, inhuman enemies which are literally not 'out of this world'. They do not remain passive, however, but take action tackling the problem directly to get rid of it forever. In the beginning of both films the female protagonist is in some kind of hospital. Ripley, having just woken up from fifty-seven years of 'hypersleep' is there for some basic treatment while Sarah is locked up in a mental facility.

Both are being questioned by a group of men –who are obviously those in power – but have to experience their disbelief. Thus, Ripley and Sarah have the thankless task of having to unsuccessfully warn the self-centred, ignorant and arrogant male society about its destruction. Similarly, in *Titanic*, Rose, another of Cameron's central female characters, is the only one to question the low number of life boats on deck but is ignored by her male companions. What is worse, Ripley and Sarah have to realize that it was the greed of the males that brought about the situation in the first place and that a dubious company is responsible for perpetuating and aggravating the situation.

On an intertextual level it is necessary to note that both films are already second instalment of a series. Ripley is a character from the first film, *Alien*, directed by Ridley Scott, which combines the science fiction genre with the horror film. In the first half of the film she is only part of the crew, equal to the others and without being singled out as the protagonist. It is only in Cameron's film that Ripley is really the central character after she is the only crew member to survive the alien in the first film. When *Alien* was shown in 1980, the fact that a woman is the only one to survive and kill the mighty opponent at the end came as a surprise to many in the audience. By letting her survive it is one of the first mainstream films to put an emphasis on a female action hero, but in the underground cinema, notably in the so-called Blaxploitation genre, this had in fact been quite usual already before the 1980s.

The relationship between the first and the second Terminator film is a different one. In the first film, the Terminator is sent to kill her in order to prevent the birth of John. At first, Sarah is just a normal girl who is suddenly confronted with visitors from the future. Reluctantly, she has to accept her fate presented to her by Reese, who came from the future to protect her from the Terminator. Only then her transformation to the person able to fulfil her important role begins. Sarah has to acquire the skills to survive in hard training which takes place between Part 1 and 2. Unlike her, Ripley being asleep undergoes no development between the two films. She already possesses the abilities she needs. While Ripley in *Aliens* is thus more or less the same person she was in *Alien*, the Sarah of *T2* is a completely different person from the Sarah of *The Terminator*, even though the rudiments of her new character are already visible at the end of the first film.

There have been some controversies in the discussion of Sarah's role in *The Terminator* which invite a closer inspection. Some critics, such as Palumbo or Necakov, have celebrated it as a feminist film. Palumbo (2008) argues that as Sarah, together with Reese, fulfils all the stages of the typical male trajectory in a narrative she can be regarded a

monomythic heroine. Monomyth refers to a pattern that forms the basis of a large number of narratives around the world. He claims that Sarah is clearly the film's protagonist because she changes and develops while Reese's character remains static. According to Goscilo (1988) Necakov even goes a step further and hails Sarah for killing Arnold Schwarzenegger. But these claims of *The Terminator* as a feminist film have been heavily refuted. Goscilo (1988) argues that it may be true that Sarah defeats the Terminator, but being merely a metallic skeleton in the end, this robot has no resemblance to Schwarzenegger's star persona. As a result, Sarah is nowhere close to killing Schwarzenegger. Furthermore, Goscilo points out that Sarah is represented as the typical female victim of the monster who needs the protection of the male. She is portrayed as an incompetent and helpless girl, who grows more and more dependent on Reese, emotionally as well as practically. She is subordinated to him, who unlike her is afforded some inner portrayal. As he tells Sarah about her future, he also "takes on the stature of a bearer of Truth" (ibid. p.44). For these reasons she claims (ibid. p.39) that *The Terminator* is not a feminist film but one that employs "conservative if not regressive gender portrayals". She concludes (ibid. p.50) that "the few innovations are safely assimilated into patriarchal ideology and its attendant narrative formulas."

IV. Ripley and Sarah: Subject or Object?

The beginnings of *Aliens* and *T2* at the same time establish and question the centrality of Ripley and Sarah. In the former, Ripley is the first person we see, which is usually an indicator for the protagonist. However, she is asleep and therefore a passive object. One of Mulvey's main charges about the representation of women in film is the dichotomy of "active/male and passive/female" (1992, p.841) which creates the woman as a spectacle. Contradicting the film's later representation of Ripley as an active character, she is here introduced as a passive object. A further indicator for the womanliness she here possesses is her hair, which, later cut short, is still long. That her image triggers associations of the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty, which transports traditional gender values, is also significant in this context.

Sarah's voice is the first human sign in *T2*. Her voice-over establishes the background information of the story. However, she is only the last of the four main characters actually appearing on the screen. The two Terminators and her son John, all male characters, are introduced before her. In the title sequence actress Linda Hamilton's name, on the other hand,

is second only to Schwarzenegger, whose star persona dominates the film. When Sarah appears on screen in person for the first time, locked up in a mental asylum, she is doing pull-ups, not the most female activity one could think of. She appears muscular and resilient; her hair looks sweaty and greasy; the expression on her face is grim. In terms of Joan Riviere's notion about womanliness as a mask, she has certainly relinquished this mask. The retribution, which according to Riviere frightens the woman into wearing the mask, comes only a few moments later. Sarah is brutally beaten up by two wardens, who use clubs and an electro shocker, and who force her to take her medication.

One could already read her imprisonment as punishment for transgressing the boundaries of male and female gender roles. Officially, she has been declared insane because of her talking about robots coming from the future and because she had tried to blow up a computer factory. The spectator is presented with a video from one of her first therapy sessions which shows her as a raging lunatic. Thus provided with the perspective of her doctors the audience gets almost convinced of the craziness of Sarah, despite the knowledge about the true nature of her excitement. The way she behaves could be described as hysteric, commonly considered to be a female problem and a convenient way of disposing of bothersome women. Ripley is also punished to some extent; she is in a hospital facility as well and has to endure interrogations. She is also not believed her stories about an alien being responsible for the death of her crew and the destruction of the ship and consequently she is reduced in rank and denied her pilot licence.

V. Ripley and Sarah as Subjects

In a way, both women are punished for being the sole survivors in the first film, or, looking at it from another perspective, for giving up their femininity. However, both get ample opportunity in the course of the film to redeem themselves. In one scene in the mental facility, Sarah is tied to her bed, because she attacked her doctor. The same warden who has beaten her up before now takes advantage of her inability to move and licks over her face. But when he leaves after thus humiliating her she manages to free herself. She brutally beats up the warden – regarding the treatment she had to undergo before this brutality can be seen as justified – and takes his club. She symbolically castrates him and punishes him for abusing her. Then she tries to escape from the facility. It is questionable whether she would have been

successful without the help of the Terminator and her son but getting as far as she does on her own is already a remarkable achievement for a female film character.

The impression of her physical fitness is heightened when the audience sees her athletically running down the corridor. The way she is represented here stands in stark contrast to her character in the first Terminator movie, where she was the helpless vulnerable girl. Besides the images described above, there are several other instances where the filmic representation depicts her as a tough and capable character. In the elevator, for example, they are attacked by the T-1000 but Sarah does not rely on the Terminator to help her. Instead, she grabs his gun and fires herself, albeit without effect. Another instance is when she is pictured carving letters into a wooden table with a big army knife. Her posture and her having a cigarette in the corner of her mouth are strongly alluding to the typical silent western hero.

In this scene the film takes a decisive turn because she decides that instead of reacting – running away from the T-1000 – she wants to actively change the course of history. Although she at first fails to kill Dyson, the software engineer who started everything, which can be seen as a sign of her moral strength, she goes on to destroy everything he has built up. This is noticeable, since the role of the decision maker, especially in a crucial situation like this, is in most films certainly not that of the female character. Goscilo (1988, p.44) remarks about *The Terminator* that “Reese typifies the strong, silent hero from beginning to end, while the plot easily accords him the kind of monopoly on physical ability, superior wisdom and moral fibre reserved for male protagonists across all genres”. Taken everything together, the same can be argued to be to a large extent true for Sarah in the sequel.

Ripley is similarly represented as an active character. She is asked to join the military expedition to the colony the base has lost control with. Although her accounts were not believed before, she is still has enough credibility to be seen as a useful support. She is not really taken seriously, though, which is obvious in the behaviour of the company’s representative Burke, who repeatedly uses the diminutive “kiddo” to address her. Likewise, the soldiers of the unit do not take her seriously before their first encounter with the aliens. When it becomes clear that the soldiers have no real chance against the aliens, Ripley takes control. First she rescues the soldiers from an attack of the alien. With the leader of the group unable to make decisions she takes the lead, profiting from the experience of having survived the alien already once. Remaining calm and focused she then sets up a plan for their survival. She is also one of the last to be alive and finally kills the alien queen, the most dangerous of these creatures. She does so with the help of something that can be described as a transporter

robot. She takes advantage of her skills to navigate it, skills one would expect to be male. Significantly, the male soldiers found it hilarious when she first proved them that she was able to navigate the machine. In the end she has survived the encounter with the alien a second time, while many of her male companions are dead.

Sarah also survives her second fight with a Terminator. But unlike Ripley she is not able to do it on her own. First, she suffers a wound in her thigh which mirrors a similar wound in the first film, inflicted by a part of the exploding Terminator. Goscilo (p.43) remarks that, “leaving aside the rich history of sexual connotations of wounding in the thigh, part of a machine is here literally incorporated into Sarah's body “. The sexual connotations are there in this film as well, only that this time it is a bullet that enters her body and not a piece of the robot. But when, moments later, the T-1000 stabs his hand, which is transformed into a long blade, into her shoulder and threatens her with a second blade, she has again been penetrated by a machine. Her death is prevented in the last moment by the other Terminator. Later, she is about to defeat the T-1000 but is out of ammunition in the crucial moment. It is eventually the Terminator, who destroys his counterpart and saves her a second time. Thus, plainly spoken, it is not the woman but Schwarzenegger, the bad guy from the first movie, who saves the day.

VI. Ripley and Sarah as Objects

The scene just described serves as a first hint that the female representation in these films is not as clear as it might seem at the first look. In fact, there are several aspects that undermine the representation of Ripley and Sarah as subjects. These instances are the reason why neither *Aliens* nor *T2* can be called feminist texts. In the very first shot Ripley is shown in deep sleep. Her passivity and the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ allusions allow the spectator a controlling gaze. There is a second instance where she is even more sexually objectified. When she awakes from her sleep on the trip to the colony a few scenes later, she sleepily stretches her barely clad body. This emphasises her feminine features and gives the spectator in the audience ample opportunity to consider her shape. While in most parts of the film she is represented in a gender-neutral way, here Mulvey’s finding about the construction of the female as a spectacle in Hollywood films is confirmed.

There is no similar instance in the diegetic reality of *T2*, where Sarah’s independence and strength make it difficult to objectify her. There is however a fantasy sequence where the audience gets insight into her perception. In this scene, the room is lit in a soft, bright and

slightly unreal light, which clearly marks it as a dream. She is sitting on her bed, wearing a short white nightdress – the only time she wears a dress in the film – which reveals her legs. Her posture, with her head on her knees, indicates desperation. She imagines Reese, the dead father of her son to come to support her. Her clinging to him and running after him when he vanishes shows the uncertainty and insecurity she feels. She needs a male to guide and encourage her. Similarly, in the scene where she decides to kill the software engineer Dyson, the decision happens when she thinks of Reese and his words. These two scenes show how a male, albeit dead, still has influence on her, which considerably reduces the independence she appears to have. After all, this is a good example of the classical distribution of gender roles Mulvey has identified as active-male and passive-female.

VII. The Role of Motherhood

But the one aspect which in the filmic representation most emphasises Ripley's and Sarah's femininity is their motherhood. Sarah is the mother of John, who will be the leader of the few humans remaining after the apocalypse. As a result, she is not simply a mother as her role also includes mythical connotations of the mother of humanity. When she discusses the first Terminator film, Goscilo (1988, p.47) criticises this role: "the narrative [...] so completely subordinates Sarah's sexuality to her reproductive function that she poses minimal threat to the norms of heterosexual romantic dynamics". However, while Goscilo is certainly right about Sarah's role in *The Terminator* the situation is different in *T2*; a film she could not take into account for her text predates it by three years. While in the first film Sarah's role is to be the future mother of John, she has already given birth to him before the second movie, so she is no longer needed for this function. Obviously, Sarah's main motivation to escape from prison is the protection of her son. But as it turns out he is already provided with the best protection possible, namely that of the Terminator. Two main tasks of mothers are procreation and the protection of their children. As she is no longer needed for either of these tasks it is possible to claim that the film does not reduce her to her role of the mother. Additionally, Sarah is not shown as a good, caring mother. She treats her son in an abrasive and brusque way. She harshly attacks him for getting himself in danger in order to rescue her, which, on the other hand, clearly shows how she regards his security more important than hers. Despite all this, however, the final image still shows them hugging – the family is happily reunited.

The case of Ripley is much less equivocal. She quickly abandons her original motivation to fight against the aliens, namely overcoming the trauma from their first encounter, when they find Newt, a little girl who is the only survivor from the alien attack on the colony. From this moment on, all her actions are directed at protecting the little girl and bringing her home alive. Although not being directly related to her, she assumes the role of the mother and manages to win her full trust. When they hug after the alien is finally defeated, an image resembling the last hug in *T2*, Newt even calls her “Mummy”. The Director’s Cut of *Aliens* includes a scene which reveals that Ripley had a daughter back on Earth, who grew old and died while Ripley was asleep for fifty-seven years. This makes her relationship with the girl, who could be about her daughter’s age when she left her, all the more significant. As Goscilo (1988, p.50) argues, this role of the mother reduces Ripley’s strong characterization:

“Protective attachment to a child impels much of her courage and stamina in the film, as though motherhood alone could evoke and account for a woman's exceptional achievement. Moreover, while Sarah's child who will save humanity can only be a boy, here the vulnerable child to be saved is a girl, in reinforcement of active/passive denomination of the sexes”

Goscilo (ibid. p.51) further quotes Penley who remarks about *Aliens* that “what we finally get is a conservative moral lesson about maternity, futuristic and otherwise: mothers will be mothers, and they will always be women”. She also notices that the queen of the aliens is the most dangerous of the creatures. While some have seen this representation as a possibility to empathize with the aliens – they are after all just protecting their offspring – she reads it in a much more negative way; “as if the constant equating of women with their reproductive and mothering function were not limited enough, Cameron makes the breeding monster of *Aliens* a gruesome double of the surrogate mother, Ripley, thus inscribing pregnancy with threat and repulsiveness” (ibid.).

VIII. Family as a Marker of Traditional Gender Roles

Hollywood cinema traditionally holds the family, especially the classical constellation of father-mother-child, as its ideal. Even in the aggressive and antagonistic worlds of *T2* and *Aliens* they can be found. On her trip, Sarah encounters two families, first the Mexican family in the desert, where she provides herself with weapons and then the family of the software engineer. Both are families, which, despite the circumstances, could not be more prototypical for the happy family. But even in her own life she experiences family membership to a certain

extend. She comes to the conclusion that the Terminator represents the best possible father for her son John. Thus, she enters a kind of symbolic relationship with him. In this relationship the division of gender roles is clear because being *the* embodiment of masculinity nobody could dispute Schwarzenegger's place as the father.

Towards the end of *Aliens* Ripley also forms some kind of family, with Newt as daughter and Corporal Hicks as father. With the latter she has built up some kind of relationship, albeit not a romantic one. He teaches her how to use the big army guns and thus symbolically delivers her the phallus. This incident is also of intertextual significance because the same actor, Michael Biehn, plays Reese in *The Terminator*, who teaches Sarah how to survive. What Goscilo (p.38) remarks about that film can also be seen as true for *Alien* and *T2*: "The family romance proves to be only one of several cultural paradigms responsible for *The Terminator's* conservative if not regressive gender portrayals". But as the women abandon them, both 'families' do not keep together for long. However, the reasons for leaving are significantly different. While Ripley abandons the wounded Hicks to rescue Newt from the clutches of the alien to fulfil her role as mother, Sarah leaves her son with the Terminator, which marks a reversal of the traditional gender roles. Normally it is the male, who leaves the family, here it is the female.

Although the gender roles in regard to family are distributed in a traditional way, Ripley transgresses them repeatedly. But *Aliens* provides an instance of a reversal of gender roles even beyond her character, namely in the characters of Private Vasquez and Private Hudson, both part of the military unit. Vasquez is female but she is represented as one of the toughest, one could almost say most masculine, soldiers. Like Sarah in *T2* she is introduced doing pull-ups, she has her hair cut short and she is equipped with the biggest gun of all. On the other hand, there is Hudson. Miming the strong male he tells Ripley that she needs not to be afraid because they will protect her and then he brags about all the weapons they have on board. However, his display of masculinity seems like a mask, his acting tough a way of ascertaining himself of his masculinity. In fact, facing the threat of the alien he is the one who repeatedly loses his nerves. It is Ripley who has to tell him to control himself, when his hysteria – commonly connected to women – gets too strong. This reversal of gender roles is made explicit in a short exchange between him and Vasquez. When he mocks her: "Hey Vasquez, have you ever been mistaken for a man?" she just replies: "No. Have you?"

Conclusion

While it is comprehensible that some critics might, at first glance, consider James Cameron's films as feminist, it is clear that they are not. Because even though the woman is in the centre of the action she is still operating in a patriarchal context, which she cannot escape. As Goscilo (1988, p.46) points out, it is "the very prominence of phallicism in the text – guns, car mastery, and the toughing out of pain – that betrays an extreme bias toward patriarchal values, subsuming Sarah's heroism". However, it would be unfair to criticize Cameron for reactionary gender politics, because his films remain ambiguous enough to successfully undermine traditional gender roles. Much more than most action films, his films present women in central roles and do not reduce them to merely decoration or some kind of half-hearted motivation for the male hero. Ripley and Sarah, despite their role as mothers, which is an exclusively female field, still maintain to be powerful women. That women like them are rare in the history of the action film is a deplorable fact that needs to be criticized. But not Cameron should be accused of this deficiency, since it was him who introduced two female characters, who still, after more than 20 years, belong to the very few female rays of light in a largely male dominated genre.

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