

Marianne Kac-Vergne and Julie Assouly (Eds.), **From the Margins to the Mainstream: Women in Film and Television**, New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2021, 322 pp., \$103.50 (hardcover).

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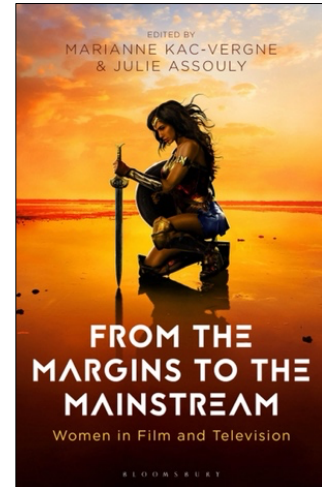
Published in 2021, **From the Margins to the Mainstream: Women in Film and Television** invites readers to reflect on the gender politics of Western cinema and the manifold roles that women creators and characters have occupied in it from the late 20th century to the present. In particular, this volume—edited by Marianne Kac-Vergne and Julie Assouly—considers the opportunities, challenges, and constraints that women have faced in marginal (e.g., independent) versus mainstream film and television. As Kac-Vergne and Assouly describe, this anthology asks:

Are blockbusters more likely to spread feminist messages than independent films or are they inherently constrained by conservative industry forces? What do women, as not only directors and actors but also spectators, have to gain (or lose) from going mainstream? (p. 9)

To address these core questions, *From the Margins to the Mainstream* is organized into three parts: the first focuses on women creators and critics “speaking from the margins” (p. 23); the second examines women creators and characters in semi-independent cinema, and the third explores representations of women in mainstream film and television.

Part 1 first presents readers with the transcript from an interview with feminist filmmaker Vivienne Dick. Dick discusses her involvement with the filmmaking movement No Wave Cinema and describes how her decision to work from the margins has allowed her to honor her distinct voice and vision in her woman-centered films. In the following chapter (chapter 1), Murillo analyzes Dick’s first film, *Guerillere Talks* (1978), and compares it to feminist filmmaker Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames* (1983). Murillo argues that these films challenged conventional Hollywood narratives by reappropriating the male gaze and centering women’s subjectivities.

Chapter 2, authored by Nicole Cloarec, analyzes three women filmmakers’ documentary and semidocumentary works: Michelle Citron’s *Daughter Rite* (1978), Su Friedrich’s *The Ties that Bind* (1986) and *Sink or Swim* (1990), and Sarah Polley’s *Stories We Tell* (2012). In each film, Citron, Friedrich, and Polley repurpose their families’ home video footage to craft revisionist works that interrogate their identities, their relationships with their families, and gender roles more broadly. According to Cloarec, each filmmaker uses disruption, discontinuity, and self-reflexivity to craft polyphonic, antipatriarchal narratives—a testament, Kac-Vergne and Assouly argue, to the value of “filming from the margins” (p. 10).



In chapter 3, Anne Hurault-Paupe discusses the role that film critic Molly Haskell played in the development of late 20th-century feminist film criticism and film studies. Hurault-Paupe describes Haskell's efforts to position herself as a mediator between feminist film scholars and women audiences, highlighting the strategies that Haskell used to develop a distinctive feminist writing persona in her work while striving to speak outside of academia.

Part 2 opens with two chapters that explore racialized femininity in semi-independent films. In chapter 4, H el ene Charlery compares portrayals of white¹ femininity and Black femininity in the film *Strange Days* (1995). Examining the original script (written by James Cameron and Jay Cock) and the film itself (directed by Kathryn Bigelow), Charlery analyzes the film's central women characters, Faith Justin, scripted to embody traditional conceptions of the desirability of the "naked white female body" (p. 116), and Lornette "Mace" Mason, scripted as a muscular Black action heroine. Charlery argues that Bigelow deviates from the original script to emphasize Faith and Lornette's distinctive subjectivities and to challenge the cinematic white male gaze and traditional constructions of white and Black womanhood.

Chapter 5, written by David Roche, also discusses cinematic depictions of Black femininity through an analysis of Quentin Tarantino's film, *Jackie Brown*, and its lead actress, Pam Grier. Roche reviews historical portrayals of Black women in Hollywood films, including those played by Pam Grier during the Blaxploitation period, and argues that *Jackie Brown* is about Grier's career, image, and the gendered and racialized conventions constraining her and other Black actresses' success.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on early 21st-century films that contend with neoliberalism, class, and gender. In chapter 6, Celestino Deleyto employs cosmopolitan theory to analyze the 2007 film, *It's a Free World*, and its portrayals of the gendered dimensions of globalization and borderwork—"ordinary people making, shifting or dismantling borders" (p. 150). Deleyto argues that through acting as an agent of borderwork who simultaneously supports and exploits migrants in London, the film's central character, a British working-class woman named Angie, portrays the complex and precarious position that women occupy in a global neoliberal economy.

In chapter 7, Sara Pesce discusses the relationship between neoliberal femininity, fame, and fashion as explored in Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006). Pesce analyzes the film's depictions of its central character and her efforts to attain prestige and power through strategic self-presentation via fashion. Pesce posits that these portrayals encourage audiences to critically reflect on contemporary celebrity culture while simultaneously propagating neoliberal ideals of femininity.

Part 3 brings television into the fold, first exploring gender representations in mainstream TV series. In chapter 8, Ana ıs Le F evre-Berthelot discusses the gender politics of voice-overs, analyzing changes in the representation and reception of men's and women's voices in U.S. television. According to Le F evre-Berthelot, TV series in the United States have historically (re)inscribed associations between

¹ Per Dumas (2016), I capitalize "Black" and not "white" when discussing race as the former, unlike the latter, refers to "a racialized social group that shares a specific set of histories, cultural processes, and imagined and performed kinships" (pp. 12–13).

masculine voices and rationality, wisdom, and authority; however, she argues that voice-overs have evolved, with contemporary men and women voice-overs subverting traditional gender norms.

Chapters 9 and 10 engage with depictions of the “monstrous feminine” (per Creed, 1993) in film and television. Chapter 9, authored by Anne Sweet, analyzes portrayals of pregnancy and parenthood in U.S. action-drama television series featuring heroic women lead characters. Sweet posits that while televisual representations of women action heroes can be empowering, portrayals of those heroes experiencing pregnancy and parenthood are often disempowering. Sweet supports this argument by discussing four narrative tropes tied to pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood found across action-drama series.

In chapter 10, Charles-Antoine Courcoux presents a psychoanalytic assessment of heroines in contemporary film and television, highlighting manifestations of a “vagina dentata” motif in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), *Evil Dead* (2013), *It* (2017), and *Stranger Things* (2016). According to Courcoux, each of these texts utilize the vagina dentata motif to “offer reassurance as to the female character’s ability to control/annihilate the sexual impulses that, in the patriarchal imagination, are potentially let loose by women’s increased agency” (p. 256).

In chapter 11, Yvonne Tasker explores the significance of the 2017 box office hit *Wonder Woman*. Tasker first discusses the history of Hollywood superhero films’ gender politics—highlighting how the genre has reproduced patriarchal gender conventions and relegated women characters to the margins—to illustrate the “exceptional” nature of *Wonder Woman*, its representational strategies, and its mainstream success. Tasker then presents comparative analyses of *Wonder Woman* and Marvel’s *Thor* film series to illustrate how the former uniquely utilizes and subverts conventional gender scripts in its portrayals of action heroine Diana Prince.

Overall, *From the Margins to the Mainstream* offers readers a range of research—spanning theoretical and methodological commitments—examining gender politics on screen and behind the scenes in film and television. This thoughtfully structured text encourages readers to answer its guiding questions about the opportunities and constraints of marginal versus mainstream storytelling for themselves. Simultaneously, each chapter stands strong on its own and could be assigned as individual resources in undergraduate and graduate courses.

However, this text has some notable limitations. In the Introduction, the editors repeatedly invoke the term intersectionality, claiming that the book “pays specific attention to long-neglected intersections, that of gender and race, of course” (p. 11). However, throughout the text—except in a few chapters (e.g., chapters 4, 6, 11)—engagement with and applications of intersectionality are absent, amiss, or underdeveloped.

Additionally, this work largely ignores the existence, distinctive experiences, and cinematic contributions of trans women. There is one brief reference to trans representation in the Introduction, and transphobic language is quoted in chapter 1. To develop a book centered on gender politics and women’s experiences and not only exclude trans women but also uncritically include transphobic rhetoric is

disappointing and harmful. The majority of contributors also conflate sex and gender, using the terms “female” (biological category) and “woman” (gender identity) interchangeably. This book would be significantly strengthened by acknowledging this distinction, using inclusive terminology, and discussing trans women’s distinctive contributions, opportunities, challenges, and constraints in film and television.

Engaging with and including the work of non-Western scholars would also strengthen this work. Including biographical information about each contributor in the text itself (e.g., at the end of each chapter) would aid readers’ understanding of whose voices are included in this volume, as well as its interdisciplinary range and scope.

References

- Creed, B. (1993). *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, and psychoanalysis*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Dumas, M. J. (2016). Against the dark: Antiblackness in education policy and discourse. *Theory Into Practice*, 55(1), 11–19. doi:10.1080/00405841.2016.1116852