

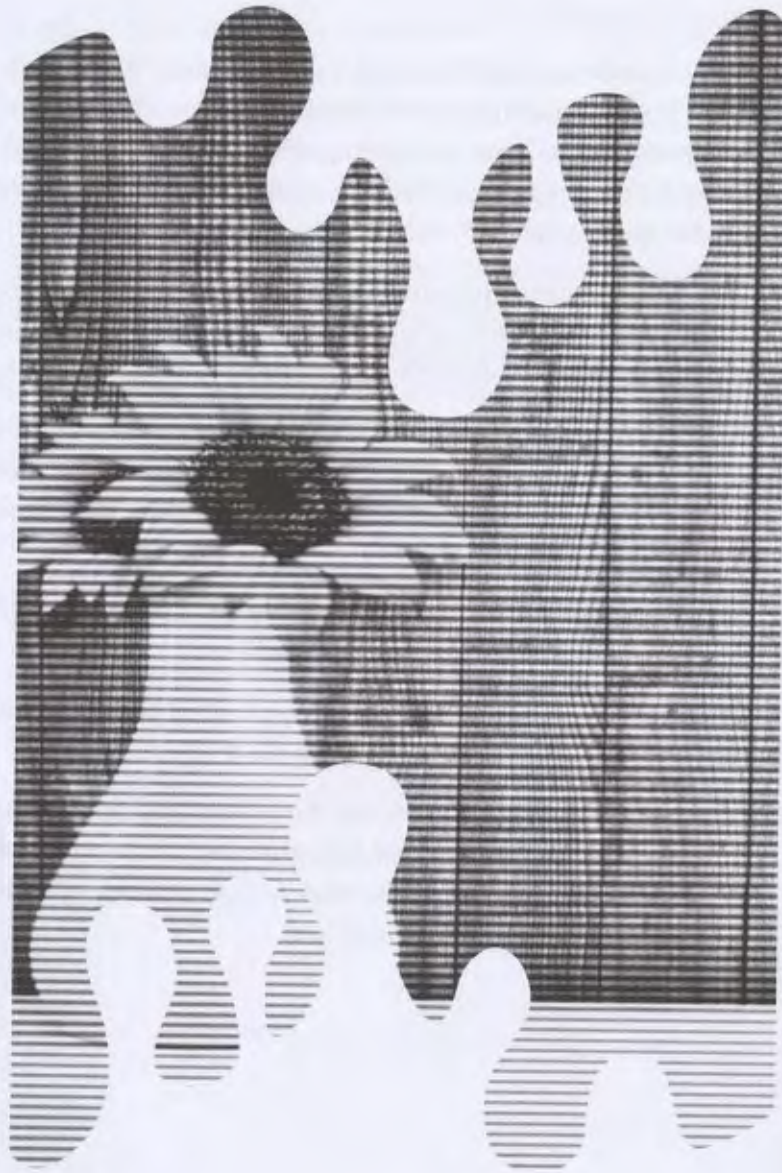
HUNTING GHOSTS IN HIGH HEELS?

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A Feminist Analysis of Gender-Swapped Film Reboots

On June 8, 1984, *Ghostbusters* starring Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, and Harold Ramis was released in theaters. Despite its quirky special effects and eccentric storyline, it quickly became a cult classic among sci-fi and paranormal fans. It spawned merchandise, video games, novels, a theme park, and many other tributes to the film. With the release and subsequent failure of *Ghostbusters 2*, it became clear that nothing, even a sequel, could live up to the hype of the first installment (“Ghostbusters”). Despite underwhelming response to the second film, fans remained loyal to the original, and one can still find those die-hard fanatics to this day, thirty-four years later. However, the original franchise lacked something: three-dimensional female characters. Sigourney Weaver plays the one female star in the film, and despite appearing to be an intellectual role-model in a sea of men, is inevitably reduced to the traditional female gender roles and stereotypes that are common when media resorts to tokenism, or the use of one person from a minority group to give the appearance of diversity (Nulman).

In 2016, it was announced that there would be a remedy to this scarcity of female representation: a third *Ghostbusters* film was planned, and it was set to have an all-female cast. While many fans were ecstatic to experience a new installment in this franchise after such a great amount of time, it became clear with the release of the trailer that not all fans would be rushing to the theater. The trailer quickly became the most disliked video in YouTube history, and the female cast members were bombarded with online trolling and harassment. These fans questioned why a reboot was necessary and even feminist writers claimed that movies like this do nothing



to help women in the media. They felt that only original narratives are useful in promoting equal representation (Faraone). However, despite suggestions that gender-swapped rebooted films like *Ghostbusters* are useless and redundant, they show viewers what popular films would have been like without gender stereotypes and tokenism. It creates a place for women in traditionally male spaces, forces men to be critical of the media they love, and allows women's narratives to flourish where they were once silenced.

One way that rebooted films like *Ghostbusters* show their value and importance is by offering better, less biased representations of women than audiences see in the original films. For example, Sigourney Weaver is the only woman in the franchise with a significant role. Because of this tokenism, she is expected to carry many of the gender roles and stereotypes associated with the lone woman in a science fiction film. Despite her character being described as an intellectual, she becomes overtly sexual toward a man that pursued and seemed to annoy her throughout the film. This same man also becomes her savior after she is possessed by a demon (Nulman). Weaver's character does not truly get to have her own character and storyline. Everything she does and everything that happens to her serves to advance the plot for the men and gives them motivation to do their work. Since she is the only woman in the film, the narrative implies that there is no place for women in science fiction unless a man is interested in her and she conforms to traditional gender roles. Not only does this reinforce men's negative misconceptions about women, it sets the example that women's aspirations and skills are second to a man's. In the introduction to "Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Queer, and Transgender Theories," Susan Archer Mann and Ashly Suzanne Patterson state, "In fact, since all of us inevitably fail to live up to the rigid gender ideals of our respective cultures, the gender binary has oppressive effects for everyone" (Mann and Patterson 307). It can be argued that the representation of these gender roles on screen can perpetuate oppression, as film and TV shows may influence how people act towards others in real life.

Because all of the major roles in the rebooted movie are female, it allows each character to dispose of these oppressive stereotypes and represent femininity in a different way. In this film, the women are no longer tokens and have goals and aspirations outside of seducing or being saved by a man. Kate McKinnon's character is described as a mad scientist and a jokester which are two roles that female actresses very rarely get to play. Leslie Jones's character, despite being a subway operator at the start of the film, becomes invaluable to the team. Melissa McCarthy and Kristen Wiig's characters play the intellectual roles ("Ghostbusters"). Instead of only getting one brand of womanhood, audiences get to see these women be unique individuals, and this may allow them to accept themselves and their gender expression through positive role models. The film even jokes about the inequality in the first film by flipping traditional gender roles. This is seen in the form of the male secretary Kevin, who is an active display of all of the stereotypes that are often forced onto female characters. He is ditsy, dumb, often useless to the plot, and must be saved by the female characters by the end of the film ("Ghostbusters"). This change in gender roles makes the issues with the first movie evident and may encourage filmmakers and fans to be more critical of female representations.

One could argue that instead of *Ghostbusters* creating space for women in the world of science fiction that it is reclaiming a space that began with women. While the question of who created science fiction has been debated frequently, it is fact that Mary Shelley wrote the earliest piece of what is considered to be science fiction in 1818 when *Frankenstein* was published (Kobal). Since this novel was written, women have been active in the genre but are frequently ignored by fans that insist that science fiction is a male space that should not and cannot be occupied by women. In fact, women have been all but erased from the genre. This sentiment is echoed by Michele Wallace in her article, "Black Female Spectatorship and the Dilemma of Tokenism." In it, she states, "What annoyed me... was that everybody in that room was talking about rock and roll in particular, and popular culture in general, as though black people

had never existed and never made any contribution to it" (Wallace 5). While her article discusses the erasure of black people from popular music and film, these same ideas can be applied to women in science fiction. Male fans have claimed this genre as their own and often gatekeep to make women feel unwelcome in it. For this reason, they have attacked the reboot of *Ghostbusters* in an effort to keep women out of a world that they created. This film is of dire importance for female fans, as it opens the door for them to reclaim science fiction and to feel like they belong. It has the ability to show them that they are capable of writing and starring in these kinds of films.

Even though this film is positive towards women, the importance of reboots in which the gender of the main characters is changed has been called into question even by feminist scholars. In her article "Beyond Ghostbusters: How Gender Reboots Perpetuate Hollywood's Sexism and What We Should Do About It," Juliette Faraone states, "When our understanding of gender reboots depends on the flawed interpretation of man as originator and woman as imitator, viewers are left with little more than a contemporary spin on the creation myth" (Faraone). However, this is not a fair assessment of the impact that these films have on female viewers. This statement assumes that by placing women in the same situations as men that women must imitate the way a man would react to the situation. However, because of the differences in the ways that women and men experience the world, it is likely that women would find completely different solutions to problems than men would. In the "Introduction to Third-Wave Feminism," Susan Archer Mann and Ashley Suzanne Patterson state, "Third-wave activism, as well as theory, draws its inspiration from the writings of second-wave women of color. The focus on multiple, interlocking oppressions led activists in the third wave to embrace broader notions of inequality and justice" (Mann and Patterson 355). The way that third-wave feminists found inspiration in second-wave black feminist writing in order to form their own new conclusions can be applied to this scenario. By rebooting male-led films and casting female actors, the film indus-

try has an opportunity to show that men's experiences are not universal and to not let men dominate the conversation. They use the original films as inspiration, but the final product is ultimately original because of the new perspectives that are now allowed to take the focus. Looking at this issue from a third-wave feminist lens, one can see that the polyvocality that the *Ghostbusters* film offers to the industry is valuable and necessary for men to take women's narratives seriously. Women's voices and perspectives should be valued in all situations if society wishes to prioritize polyvocality and intersectionality. Men should not have sole ownership over popular sci-fi franchises.

This act of labeling all-female reboots as unnecessary and as forcing women into roles of traditional masculinity could be seen as a strategy of dismissal, a term defined by Mann and Patterson in the introduction to "Third-Wave Feminisms." The authors state, "Some theorists have called this a strategy of dismissal- a strategy used to control and to ostracize the actions of group members that are found threatening" (Mann and Patterson 359). By stating that women are taking on the roles of men in any situation, one ignores the unique ways that women experience and move through the world and the impact this representation has on female fans. While *Ghostbusters* is certainly not the pinnacle of feminism, it would be incorrect to claim that it accomplishes nothing for women. At the very least, it has drawn the public's attention to issues of gender bias and inequality in media representation.

Not only does *Ghostbusters* make room for women in general in the sci-fi movie genre, it also drew attention to black women and their struggle to be respected in the media. Some of the most vicious attacks towards the movie's cast were directed at Leslie Jones, an actress of color who was a relative unknown until she got her starring role in the film. Her experiences with online harassment were showcased on Twitter when male fans of the original films repeatedly sent her racial slurs and comments to her account. This eventually led to her deleting her Twitter account in order to avoid the harassment until the website took action and banned the users

(Blodgett and Salter). While these online attacks are shocking and horrifying, they do provide valuable insight to the motivations behind male fans that are against reboots like *Ghostbusters*. These targeted remarks make it obvious that their concern does not lie with the integrity of the original films but rather with maintaining their original white male focus. Furthermore, they show the public that women, particularly women of color, do not enjoy the safety and comfort that society insists that women have achieved. Hollywood is generally thought of as a safe haven for all oppressed groups with its liberal views and casual activism. By witnessing this harassment, people are forced to see where society still needs to improve in its treatment of women. The subsequent ban of these Twitter users will most likely set an example, and perhaps future black female movie leads will not have to experience the same harassment that Jones did. It brings attention to intersectionality and how equal representation must be normalized in order to eliminate these online attacks.

In discussing the importance of reboot films like *Ghostbusters*, it is important to address this negative criticism it received and the views that breed this hostility. In B. Ruby Rich's article, "What Is at Stake: Gender, Race, Media, or How to Brexit Hollywood," the author details the fan reaction to the film. "The announcement that Sony's Columbia Pictures was extending its series through an all-female team of bad-ass ghostbusters set off an internet reaction: one million negative votes when its trailer debuted on the website and a nasty trolling campaign that was explicitly misogynist, vaguely disguised as a demand for fidelity to the original" (Rich 5). While many fans did claim that their concern was simply for the quality of the movie, the nature of their comments online made it clear that this was not the case. It is also unlikely that this stems from the star's acting credentials, as Melissa McCarthy and Kristen Wiig had impressive resumes before signing on to the film. The fact that these often-male fans chose to attack the cast based on their gender and, in the case of Leslie Jones, race, proves that this was an issue with

their capabilities and validity as women, not as actors. It also shows the need to educate men on the ramifications of gender-based online harassment and how to treat women that are occupying male spaces.

Some fans also claimed that their hatred for the reboot was because the film would ruin the childhood memories they had of the first movie. "I argue that it is not simply toxicity that drives these fans to defend the fan-object from being colonised by an invading text, but, rather, what I am terming as totemic nostalgia, a form of protectionism centred on an affective relationship with a text, usually forged in early childhood" (Proctor 1106). However, this is a thinly-veiled attempt to disguise internalized sexism and gender bias. After all, this same vitriol was not directed towards reboots where the male leads remained male, such as the many *Spider-Man* revivals, *Star Trek*, and the *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* films ("Best Remakes"). This makes it obvious that male fans' issue does not lie in the quality of the reboot but in the gender of the characters in said reboot. Perhaps if the attacks from fans were not so blatantly linked to gender and race this would be a valid argument. In addition, the source material is still available to watch whenever one chooses. The new *Ghostbusters* film does not alter the original or change the characters; it simply adds women to this beloved world. For this reason, the reboot is essential as it forces male fans to rethink their power and control in the traditionally-male sci-fi movie industry. Instead of creating a new narrative that can be dismissed as a "chick-flick," *Ghostbusters* shows men that women do belong in science fiction and the presence of women does not mean it is impossible for men to relate to the characters or enjoy the film. It also challenges men's view that a perfect nostalgic world is one in which women do not exist or have significant roles in these stories. These reboots make the lack of women and their narratives in older films glaringly obvious and may encourage men to critically evaluate more of the media they enjoy.

While original female narratives in Hollywood are invaluable, there is something to be said for the way reboots with female instead of male stars get fan's attention and show them where the original

films failed for women. These reboots do not let their sexist predecessors live on without feminist critique. This can also be seen in shows like *Fuller House* and *One Day at a Time* that swap the gender of the main characters. These shows did not receive the same backlash, however, because the original shows were not geared towards a male audience (Heigl). *Ghostbusters* in particular shows where the originals and the fan base for the films are lacking in quality female representation and shows us what it looks like when producers try harder to make movies and television more inclusive. Women become action stars instead of the damsel in distress. They become the savior instead of the love interest. It allows them to connect and identify with these classic films where it was difficult before. No matter the source material, the addition of female voices to existing media should not be considered a bad or derivative thing. Society should value women's input in an industry that they were left out of for decades.

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