

‘A Different Kind of Power’?: Identification, Stardom and Embodiments of the Military in

Wonder Woman

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Wonder Woman is a warrior, not a soldier. Those archetypes, so often fused in concepts such as ‘warrior masculinity’ (the traditional combat-oriented military masculinity that Claire Duncanson (2009: 65) has argued became complemented by peacekeeping and counter-insurgency masculinities after the Cold War), are opposed instead in *Wonder Woman* (2017), where the Amazon princess Diana confronts Ares, the kin-slaying god of war, across a Belgian battlefield during World War I. The film constructs its gendered binary of ‘virtuous’ (Der Derian 2009) and ‘excessive’ violence by contrasting two homosocial spaces: Themyscira, where the all-female Amazons train to protect humanity against Ares’s rage, and the 20th century’s emblematic zone of total war, the Western Front, the symbol of the exclusively masculine, industrialised, endless warfare that Ares has imposed on the world and that Diana fights to overcome. Ares, Diana and her US pilot sidekick Steve Trevor suspect, has embodied himself as General Erich Ludendorff, historically Germany’s strategist of ‘total war’ (Strachan 2000: 348), who has recruited the masked and ethnically-ambiguous female chemist ‘Doctor Poison’ to create a terrible new weapon: to stop Ares and stop Ludendorff, Diana and Trevor believe, will end the war. *Wonder Woman*’s constructions of gender, violence and legitimacy, and its silences of coloniality, are irresistible to feminist scholars of security: but why, besides giving feminists something to do, would the producers of a film about a superhero whose character has so much to say about today’s gender politics choose to set the narrative in World War I?

Partly because the rival Marvel Cinematic Universe has World War II. In 2011, *Captain America: the First Avenger* merged superhero cinema and the historical war film: heroic but once-frail Steve Rogers, transformed through ‘super-soldier serum’ into the finest physical specimen of the USA’s ‘greatest generation’ and its imagined military masculinity, leads a squad of Allied commandos to defeat the alliance of a Nazi officer (the disfigured ‘Red Skull’) and another rogue chemist, only to sacrificially crash-land, where his body is cryogenically preserved in Arctic ice. His discovery in 2011 binds popular geopolitics’ paradigmatic ‘nationalist superhero’ (Dittmer 2012), nostalgia for Rogers’s ‘moral purity’ (Brown 2017: 105) and the myth of America’s ‘good war’ into Marvel’s cinematic present (Vernon 2016), as it did in comics when the character, first published in December 1940, was revived in 1964. The masculinities of *Captain America* divide along axes of civilian–military and of perfection–monstrosity: the same transformation that aligns Rogers’s physicality with his democratically heroic values – just as military training itself disciplines the soldier’s body into resemblance to certain idealised military masculinities (see Crane-Seeber 2016) – has turned the Nazi who tested an earlier, corrupted version into the Red Skull. Its representations of the militarisation of the body, inflected by opposed national militarisms, might have created uncomfortably close comparisons if DC had projected Diana into the same war.

Moreover, World War I provides its own deep reservoir of cultural mythology, renowned as the crucible of modern war memory (see Winter 2006) and creating a ‘centenary moment’ (Phipps 2017) in which *Wonder Woman* would appear almost at the *very* centenary of the USA joining the war. Western literary and visual culture between the World Wars made the Western Front a Molochian miasma of industrial-technology-turned-monstrous that spans the most ‘canonical’ war poetry (Einhaus 2016: 197), the art of Otto Dix (Bleiker 2003: 395), and even the hellscape of J. R. R. Tolkien’s Mordor (Darby 2002: 310). Fresh national and transnational political configurations generate new and renewed myths of World War I.

Widespread pacifist sympathies among the 1960s British public remembered the war as one of ‘lions led by donkeys’, or brave young British conscripts commanded by incompetent generals (Ramsden 2002: 7); the reappropriation of Remembrance to also commemorate British military losses and heroism in Iraq/Afghanistan enabled this performative ‘poppy culture’ to converge with the centenary moment and reinscribe World War I as a myth of patriotic sacrifice (Basham 2016). The World War I of *Wonder Woman* is the directly Wilsonian ‘war to end all wars’ (Barkin and Cronin 1994: 120) – the virtuous outcome for which, within Diana’s warrior honour, it is permissible and necessary to fight and kill. Ares, that existential threat to Themyscira and humanity alike, is not in fact embodied as Ludendorff (the villain already hypermilitarised to the point of monstrosity, ready to deploy internationally ‘illegitimate’ weapons in pursuing victory), but as Sir Patrick Morgan, the apparently meek and pacifist British diplomat who sends Trevor and Diana to hunt down Ludendorff and ‘Doctor Poison’ on the Western Front. Woodrow Wilson himself was no friend of traditional European diplomacy: Ares’s true disguise, against Trevor’s youthful idealism, combine to hint at the international order Wilson professed to desire.

As a visual representation of war and violence, *Wonder Woman* employs the worldbuilding device of characterising two sides and their moral values through contrasting modes of gendered and militarised embodiment which viewers interpret by recognising the militarised aesthetics of past and present wars (see Baker 2016), both *applying* a geopolitical imagination and potentially creating an imaginative circuit by projecting meanings from the text *back into* it. Here, the contrast is between the military masculinities of Total War, further inflected and stratified by nationality, and Themyscira’s ‘militarized femininity’ (see Sjoberg 2007). Notably, *Wonder Woman*’s director Patty Jenkins cast practising athletes and MMA fighters as Themyscira’s background Amazons, and held weeks of strength, swordfighting and equestrian training to make the cast ‘look properly Amazonian’ (Coggan 2017) and blur

the boundaries between the embodied labour of performance and the militarised–feminine cohesion they would perform. ‘It really is cool to see this whole training area, and there’s not one male figure in sight,’ the US Crossfit athlete Brooke Ence told *Entertainment Weekly*, ‘[i]t’s just women wrestling other women, kickboxing, doing pull-ups and practicing with spears [...] The first day we were on-set with all of our swords and shields, it felt like a different kind of power’ (Coggan 2017). Her fellow Amazon, Swedish kickboxer Madeline Vall Beijner, added that the trainers ‘wanted us to look like the female version of *300*’, the 2006 Zack Snyder film that offered its male Spartan warriors as objects of a spectatorial gaze that participants in fitness culture could then strive to embody themselves (Forth 2012). What sets the Amazon way of war above the Western Front’s in *Wonder Woman*’s moral hierarchy is not just that it is embodied by women, but that it is embodied by women who fight one-to-one: with shortswords and spears and lariats or at the very most a bow and arrow, without gunpowder or mechanisation or long-range targeted killing. Diana is our point of identification in their honourable war.

While studies of visual representation in international politics rarely consider the aesthetics of embodiment this closely, it is precisely through contrasting gendered *and embodied* imaginaries of war and violence that *Wonder Woman* constructs its moral geopolitics. And yet even taking more account of embodiment and embodied performance would not explain the full affects of spectatorship without perspectives from feminist media studies which remind us: visual representation in popular culture consists not only of *characters*’ bodies but also of the bodies of performers/stars, and of spectators’ affective relationships towards the performers on screen (Stacey 1994). This key contribution from feminist and queer *media* studies has not yet informed narrative and aesthetic approaches in feminist *security* studies (see Wibben 2011; Shepherd 2013) – and yet it reveals spectatorship and stardom as part of the fabric of everyday and intimate international politics.

Feminist and queer lenses on stardom and spectatorship frequently involve ‘the gaze’, the complex of ideologically-conditioned (yet not wholly ideologically-*determined*) expectations, desires and pleasures through which spectators perceive and experience still and moving images. Spectatorship’s underlying pleasure, gaze theory suggests, is identification, with the hegemonic gazes of narrative cinema following the aesthetics of whiteness, cis/heteronormativity and patriarchy most faithfully. For the camera and costuming to offer Diana and the Amazons as a spectacle of athleticism, strength and agility rather than lingering on the sexualised characteristics that a heterosexual male viewer would be expected to desire stood in contrast to many representations of women warriors in US cinema and comics, and critics widely suggested that Jenkins as a female director had sought to counteract such hypersexualised conventions (Cipriani 2017).¹ Many women have described – and some may be remembering as they read this text – the empowering pleasure of identifying with, and desiring to be able to perform, Diana’s skilful combat moves against her enemies, her shield-first bullet-deflecting charge through no man’s land, or her more ‘desirable’ and virtuous performance of war and diplomacy compared to those embodied by almost all the film’s men, or indeed the film’s subsidiary antagonist, a woman marked as other through her disfigured appearance and her ambiguous ‘white but not quite’ (Agathangelou 2013: 431) identity (often wearing a leather cowl which from tight angles seems to resemble a hijab).

The affective experience of spectatorship also depends, however, on spectators’ knowledge of and relationship towards ‘star texts’ (McDonald 2001: 6; see Dyer 1998) – their public personas built up through publicity and other media representation that carry over between, and are informed by, successive films. The actor playing Diana, Gal Gadot, is

¹ Reiterating the point in November 2017 were hostile reactions to the ‘skimpier and less military’ leather bodices seen in publicity for the next film featuring the Amazons, Snyder’s *Justice League* (Saunders and Youngs 2017)).

widely known to have served as a fitness instructor in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), bringing the authenticity of her physical conditioning and military training into her credibility to embody the Amazons' elite warrior. Gadot's attachment to the IDF and Israeli militarism has extended beyond obligatory military service, firstly into her participation in Israeli *Maxim* magazine's 2007 feature on 'Women of the Israeli Defence Forces' – which Omna Berick-Aharony (2013: 398) described as 'a "G.I. Jane fantasy", where actual military service is represented by little more than a flak jacket and air-force style cap'² – and secondly into the controversial exemplar of so-called 'digital militarism' (Kuntsman and Stein 2015) that Gadot posted on Instagram in August 2014 to wish 'love and prayers' to 'all the boys and girls who are risking their lives protecting my country against the horrific acts conducted by Hamas, who are hiding behind cowards behind women and children... We shall overcome!!' (Boast 2017). The post appeared shortly after the announcement of Gadot as Wonder Woman and 'days before' the first photograph of Gadot as Diana, permitting a reading that one British journalist made explicit in commenting that 'Wonder Woman is officially pro-IDF' (Selby 2014). Far fewer viewers outside Israel than inside would know these details. The sense of authenticity that *Wonder Woman*'s publicity fomented via Gadot's ex-Israeli-military status nevertheless allowed Israeli public diplomacy's messages about the toughness and professionalism of its military and the righteousness of its treatment of terrorists (and Palestine) to translate more diffusely on to the assemblage of Diana-the-character and Gadot-the-star – with perhaps some of the empowering identificatory pleasure with which many women experienced *Wonder Woman* translating back into their perceptions of Israel.

These very associations, however, foreclosed the pleasures of identification with Diana/Gadot for many other viewers who understood Israel's warfare in Gaza as aggression

² Gadot is photographed in a bikini atop a high building, where 'the views of the city of Tel Aviv appear between her spread legs' (Berick-Aharony 2013: 398).

or identified with Palestinian struggle (Abirafeh 2017). Indeed, in June 2017 the Lebanese government took the decision whether or not to watch *Wonder Woman* out of its citizens' hands when it applied its boycott law to ban the film because of the presence of Gadot (Shebaya 2017). At this point if not long before, not only the film but more specifically Gadot's stardom and meta-text had become the stuff of international politics. Hamid Dabashi's essay 'Watching "Wonder Woman" in Gaza' made explicit the discomfort of being invited to identify with 'the metaphoric resemblance of the chief protagonist of the film to an Israeli warrior princess' (allied with a US fighter pilot!) 'born and raised on a sheltered island paradise, just like Israel' (Dabashi 2017). Such differential experiences of watching *Wonder Woman* and Diana/Gadot, mediated through viewers' own positionality, not only show why this particular visual representation of war and violence was significant politically. They remind us that embodied representations of combatants and other participants in war are enacted by bodies, very often by star bodies or bodies that exist within a system structured around spectators' gazes towards stars. Such representations, the more they claim authenticity in depicting the embodied experiences of war, are among the multiple everyday, often overlooked ways in which even civilians in 'peacetime' experience it (see Sylvester 2013); as such, they show that the affects and even erotics of identification and spectatorship form part of individuals' understandings of virtuous and less virtuous war.

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