
Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema: Cyborgs, Troopers and Other Men of the Future

By Marianne Kac-Vergne

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Marianne Kac-Vergne investigates the equation of man and humankind in Hollywood science fiction films from the 1980s to the present day. In analysing this bias, her work unpicks how such films construct a cinematic masculinity, as well as how they respond to contextual notions of masculinity and broader gender roles. Specifically focusing on hegemonic masculinity as a set normative system that the films maintain, trouble or threaten to upheave, the author's historical approach guides the reader through evolving and reproduced notions of masculinity in Hollywood science fiction films. Each of the historicised case studies is supported effectively by close textual analysis. Reflecting the broader aim to "deuniversalise white men" because "hegemonic masculinity is not monolithic", the included chapters are structured around examining the topic through and alongside other aspects of identity, such as class, race, age and femininity (5). Kac-Vergne questions if Hollywood can offer an alternative model of masculinity, a new system altogether, or whether it ultimately perpetuates hegemonic masculinity through its science fictions.

The first two chapters examine Hollywood films from the 1980s, with vulnerable masculinity being the focus of Chapter One. It opens with an outline of the relevant historical context. Highlighting the election of Ronald Reagan in the 80s, Kac-Vergne argues that "Hollywood responded to, and participated in, this drive to reassert the central and dominant position of white men in a revalidated patriarchal system" (11). She pinpoints the science fiction genre as one that specifically endorses hypermasculinity in men, via the filmic display of muscular "hard" bodies and aggressive behaviour. She also identifies a complexity in these films by drawing attention to men as needing to transform and thus appearing vulnerable, a feature seemingly at odds with the hypermasculine science fiction ideal embodied by muscular male leads such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jeff Goldblum. Chapter One ends with a detailed reading of the tension between vulnerability and invulnerability in *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1980), including a discussion of the cyborgs therein, along with broader reflection on how critical the decade's Hollywood science fictions are of hypermasculinity.

Chapter Two analyses the darker side of the escapist releases of the 1980s. Arguing for the existence of visibly dystopian films as well as the presence of a dystopian streak in science fiction more generally, Kac-Vergne identifies the issue of class as a hierarchy within the system of masculinity. She argues that these works highlight “the alienating nature of (American) capitalist society and revalidat[e] working-class masculine identity against decadent elites”, pinpointing a particular “rebellion against the perverted type of masculinity embodied by the elite” (45). In case studies of *Escape from New York* (John Carpenter, 1981) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), Kac-Vergne pays close attention to the films’ use of marginalisation, before returning to *Robocop* to further analyse the role of technology and technophobia within class tensions. Overall, she claims that these films strive to re-celebrate the “hard” body of the working-class man but ultimately come to focus too closely upon ontological issues and ignore the deeper issue of class tensions.

Chapter Three discusses the role of women in Hollywood science fiction films from the 1980s through to the 2010s. Kac-Vergne observes that women are generally sidelined and predominantly exist to observe, provide a love interest, or validate the hero’s masculinity. She does, however, also highlight the emergence of active female sidekicks, and then develops this by comparing Sarah Connor from *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) and Ripley from *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986) in terms of masculinity and motherhood. The author notes minimal legacy following Connor and Ripley beyond the 2000s, while highlighting a number of female antagonists in late 2000s science fiction films. She concludes that “female supporting characters therefore contribute to recasting hypermasculinity as an acceptable model of masculinity” (118).

Chapter Four focuses on race and deals predominantly with films from the 1990s and 2000s, examining “how the science fiction genre has responded both to the growing integration of blacks in American society and to the persisting stereotypes that continue to plague the community and especially black men” (123). This chapter ultimately questions whether if “the black man becomes the norm” he can “challenge white order by offering an alternative model of masculinity”, or if hegemonic masculinity will continue to reign supreme (124). The author’s two primary case studies examine *Predator 2* (Stephen Hopkins, 1990) and *Demolition Man* (Marco Brambilla, 1993) and deal with exoticism, exploitation by whites and whether a range of black masculinities are offered. She closes the chapter with an in-depth analysis of Will Smith as the hero in a number of science fiction films before contending that “the black body tends to be used as a remasculinising force” (154).

The final chapter observes a move away from hypermasculinity towards a

more emotive and psychologically vulnerable male lead post 2000. Characterising this time as one of “crisis”, Kac-Vergne observes that 1990s Hollywood science fiction focused more on the mind than the body, a clear move away from the 1980s tradition of the “hard”-bodied leads, and featured the heroes as victims of patriarchal figures or systems. She questions if this move can “challenge hegemonic masculinity, or at least redefine it” (159), drawing attention to the passive hero with the slimmer frame played by Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix* and *Johnny Mnemonic*. It is shown that a number of films present hegemonic masculinity as dangerous, with the male lead seeking to escape its influence or even rejecting it altogether. Kac-Vergne further examines the blurring of masculinity and femininity via the reliance of the male lead on strong female characters. She ends her chapter by examining the role of fatherhood, looking in particular at the transmission of masculine hegemony from father to sons as failing, and from father to daughters as successful.