



# Introduction: 'As if': women in genres of the fantastic, cross-platform entertainments and transmedial engagements

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EDITORIAL



## Introduction: 'As if': women in genres of the fantastic, cross-platform entertainments and transmedial engagements

The list of top-grossing films since the turn of the millennium is almost entirely dominated by genres of the fantastic – including fantasy, horror, speculative fictions, fairy-tales, sci-fi and superhero franchises. This is not entirely surprising in the world of blockbuster filmmaking, where fantasy genres have recurrently featured in the top 10 box office worldwide since the 1970s. The reach of such genres, however, currently goes well beyond the big screen. The genres of the fantastic are, increasingly, a favourite of so-called 'Peak TV' (Goldberg 2016), those high-cost, high-impact television programmes like *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011-present) which are among the most visible productions of the recent boom in scripted originals, most hailing from premium cable and streaming companies like HBO, Netflix, HULU, and Amazon (Goldberg 2016; Ryan and Littleton 2017). Whether focused on superheroes, mythical dynasties, or heroic resistance to dystopian tyrannies, what fantastic films and programming have in common is a cognitive meta-thinking unique to humans, the quality of 'as if' imagining, which is said to generate 'self-awareness and self-reflexivity' (Bould 2002, 81), leading to 'transformation and reflection' (Feldt 2014, 2) and thus potentially to the creation of new cultural insights and formations and alternative social value frameworks.

Inevitably, these fantastic story-worlds have spread beyond cinema and television via the convergence of the twenty-first-century mediascape, pursued, as Henry Jenkins, has pointed out, by consumers actively seeking narrative pleasure (2006). They can now be found in established or evolving and hybridized narrative forms, such as comics and graphic novels, games and toys, webisodes and music videos, likewise in various fan creations, engagements, and performances. These once distinctive, standalone narrative modes are now linked across platforms enabling a multi-layered, multi-faceted viewer immersion of unprecedented immediacy and complexity (Reinhard and Olson 2018, 134). As Jens Eder sums it up, most 'media practice today is actually transmedia practice' (2015, 66). In this new transmedia environment, the roles of women in the creation of narratives of the fantastic – production, performance writing, design, etc. – are now flourishing and transforming.

A central aim of this Special Issue is to explore the (aspirational) hypothesis that, because they encapsulate imaginative acts and creativity, the genres of the fantastic open up spaces of possibility, offering new affordances, new perceptions of what might be possible. In relation to this, we are particularly interested in the roles played by women in the production of new female-focused fictions, the evolving representations of female characters, and the experiences of audiences, especially the often undervalued female audience, in this now-familiar but increasingly complex media environment.

The work of advancing women's participation and leadership in the many facets of screen industry enterprise inevitably resonates with the recent public efforts towards a collective critique of gendered aggression in mainstream popular culture. On October 24 2017, the #MeToo hashtag began trending when Alyssa Milano now famously adopted Tarana Burke's

2006 Twitter hashtag in response to allegations of sexual assault by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (Mendes et al. 2018). And in response to the outrage generated by this movement, Time's Up was unveiled January 1 2018, an action plan by '300 prominent actresses and female agents, writers, director, producers, and entertainment executives', which pledged support for working-class women to act against sexual misconduct in their industries with its Legal Defence Fund (Buckley 2018). Relevant to the concerns of this special issue, the Time's UP manifesto, an open letter addressed to 'Dear Sisters', draws explicit connections between systemic sexual aggression in Hollywood and the lack of gender parity in that industry (<https://www.timesupnow.com/home>).

At a time when victims are speaking out and telling their stories on a global scale, the issue of rape and sexualised violence is being frankly addressed through female-focused television drama and fantasy series such as *Big Little Lies* (Warner Bros/HBO 2017), *Jessica Jones* (MCU/Netflix 2015: 2018) and *The Handmaids Tale* (HULU 2017-present). Such programming confirms that the #MeToo campaign highlights 'a growing trend of the public's willingness to engage with *resistance* and *challenges to sexism*, patriarchy and other forms of oppression via feminist uptake of digital communication' (Mendes et al. 2018) The voicing of women's concerns both within and beyond screen industries and cultures can perhaps be understood in relation to a now-established trend in fantasy narrative of depicting powerful heroic female leads whose crusades against wrongdoing are inflected or framed by their struggles within limited ideological precepts of gender and genre. From the dauntless teen slayer in *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997–2003), to the women survivors of *Dollhouse* (Fox 2009–2010), to the female contenders of the supernatural in *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime/Sky, 2014–16), the super heroes of *Supergirl* (The CW, 2015–2018) and *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins/DC Entertainment 2017), we see female leads of fantasy entertainment struggle to realise their heroic potential against compromise by problematic representational tropes, whether that occurs through horror's gendered regimes of victimage, the cultural repressions of teen femininity, or the mixed messages and historical containments of the female superbody. As recent productions show, however, series such as *Jessica Jones* (MCU/Netflix 2015), reflect a development towards new possibilities for women in the realm of the fantastic as fictional characters, actors, writers and producers.

The articles in this Special Issue reflect critically on the shifting shapes of screen femininity and female heroism, also the roles of female stars, creators, audiences and fans in relation to fantastic fictions. Some of the discussions engage with clear examples of what Jenkins calls 'transmedia storytelling', for instance dealing with characters developed within the ever-expanding diegesis of the Marvel Comics Universe (MCU), which began with the creations of Stan Lee in 1961 – or that of Mattel's smaller-scale but likewise burgeoning tween-focused transmedia property, *Monster High* (2010-present). But it also concerns itself with those transmedial practices and productions that fall outside this definition and its carefully designed story-worlds, such as the multi-texts of adaptations and fan performance and creations. A key interest shared across these articles is the work of the 'transmedial imagination', particularly in the way that 'information... sensory and emotional experience' transfers from one medium to another (Eder 2015, 72), sparking critical or emotional or political or creative responses. These articles demonstrate the multiple and sometimes contradictory character of entertainments in genres of the fantastic as they play out across and between different media in an environment where, at the same time that multi-national conglomerates clearly dominate, multiple points of entry are possible into their imagined universes.

While a good deal of work on transmedia deals with fantastic worlds like those of *Dr Who* (1963–present), *Star Wars* (1977–present), *Harry Potter* (1997–present), *the Matrix* (1999–present), until recently the topic of gender has not often been a specific focus.<sup>1</sup> More immediately, the emphasis here on women, on productions, constructions, consumptions, and contestations of femininity, is prompted by the fact that women continue to be positioned in somewhat ambiguous and problematic ways in mainstream screen media. They are at once highly visible, in some respects, yet have been numerically under-represented both in front of and behind the camera, especially in the context of big budget Hollywood film. Although women make up a significant proportion of movie-going audiences worldwide (BFI 2017; MPAA 2017; Screen Australia 2017), they are often undervalued or perceived as a niche market. In the U.S. production sectors for the 250 top-grossing films of 2016, only 17 percent of executive producers, 13 percent of writers and 7 percent of directors were women. By contrast, the television industry of the same period – a boom period in U.S. TV production – has been ‘more welcoming’, with women accounting for 28 percent of executive producers, 33 percent of writers and 17 percent of directors 2016–17 (Lauzen 2017b). The number of speaking roles for women in the top 100 films of 2016 was 31.4 percent – an improvement over previous years but lower than in 2009. Likewise, in the top 100 films only 34 percent included a female lead or co-lead. (Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper 2017, 1). Recent television offers, by contrast, greater representation of women in front of the camera, with women making up 42 percent of all speaking roles, also 42 percent of all lead and co-leading roles, which is an increase over previous years.

The equation between women in production roles and how women are shown on screen is to be approached with caution, however. In what might be regarded as an easy essentialism, there is a temptation to underestimate the significance and durability of institutionalized gender bias (Jowett 2017). Nevertheless, studies show that in U.S. television shows which have at least one woman creator, women in lead roles have reached 51 percent – giving on-screen women parity with the U.S. population as a whole (Lauzen 2017a, 2–3).

In the present context, where public narratives and ontologies of gender are highly contested, this Special Issue will explore the multifaceted roles of women in the screen fantasy industry, on and off screen, as a means of interrogating the ways in which women are able to shape, create and perform new narratives of identity and to navigate new modes of social and creative engagement. The nine articles on women in transmedial fantasy fiction that make up the Special Issue work to produce a substantive dialogue that coalesces around themes, narratives and experiences of immediate cultural relevance.

## Introducing the articles

Blockbuster action cinema, including superhero franchises, persistently has the lowest percentage of speaking parts for women (Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper 2017, 1), yet the superhero genre is an important, high profile site where female heroism is currently being explored and renegotiated across film, television and other media, for instance as Marvel Studios and Warner Brothers continue their ongoing projects of growing the MCU and the DC Comics Universes (DCU) through interconnected film and television releases, tie in comics, toys, animations, games.

Rikke Schubart's article 'Breast Size, Bulk, and Beauty: Negotiating the Superhero Body in Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman' looks at the first live-action, big screen representations of the female superhero DC Comics first introduced in 1941, as she appears in *Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Snyder 2016) and especially *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins/DC Entertainment 2017). Focused on the casting and performance by Israeli model and army combat instructor, Gal Gadot, Schubart frames her discussion through Wonder Woman's historical representations across comic books and live action television. Schubart views Godot's performances specifically through the lenses of body-focused critiques by Wonder Woman fans and applied sports psychology's notion of 'edgework', in order to explore how Godot's body and costume become a battleground over flesh and abilities, aesthetics and appearances, gender stereotype and gendered scripts.

Other articles explore fictions that exemplify the possibilities for revisioning female superheroism in ways that resist or refuse clichéd and outdated constructions of gender. In 'Fantasy, Gender, and Power in *Jessica Jones*', Stephanie Green examines the first television series in the MCU both to feature a female superhero as a lead character and to be made specifically for an adult audience. Green's article focuses on how Season One of the ABC/Marvel production (2015, 2018) engages feminist approaches to television narrative by challenging conventional representations of the female superhero in the lead-up to the #MeToo era and opening up possibilities for women in the realm of the fantastic as actors, writers and producers. As it draws upon and transforms material from graphic novels, Green shows how the series uses its fantastic premise to explore gendered abuses of power and romanticized domination through a blended genre of noir crime thriller and superhero narrative. Exploring different types of transformational fictions, in '*Ms. Marvel, Qahera, and superheroism in the Muslim diaspora*', Winona Landis analyses two texts featuring Muslim female superheroes, *Ms. Marvel* (2014-present) and the independent webcomic *Qahera the Superhero* (2013) with a special focus on how they 'intervene in the realm of diverse comics via race, ethnicity, and religion'. In doing so, she reflects on how they reach and engage with issues relevant to readers and fan communities within the global spaces of the Muslim diaspora. Her discussion compares *Ms. Marvel* and *Qahera* as artefacts of visual, digital culture whose significance is particularly salient when read against the current political era, where racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia remain concerning issues of magnitude for the social and cultural representation of women.

*The Hunger Games* franchise is based on a dystopian cycle of young adult novels by Suzanne Collins, its films top box office attractions for 2012–15, which made Jennifer Lawrence a star and favourite action hero for her role as Katniss Everdene. In '*The Hunger Games: transmedia, gender and possibility*', David Baker and Elena Schak engage with critical debates over the representation of heroism in the popular book series and consider how it has been expanded into a transmedia property with the aim of assessing its potential to effect positive change. Amanda Howell explores a different sort of female heroism based in dystopian fantasy in her article, 'Breaking silence, bearing witness, and voicing defiance: the resistant female voice in the transmedia storyworld of *The Handmaid's Tale*'. It considers how, with the recent success of HULU's video-on-demand adaptation for television and widespread use of its imagery by political action groups like the Handmaid Coalition, *The Handmaid's Tale* has become a transmedia property whose dystopian storyworld spans old and new media, the fictional and real, extended beyond the bounds of any single text. Surveying the

transmedia shape of the Gileadverse, it focuses on how this storyworld is unified by a thematic concern with how silenced and oppressed women bear witness, speak up, and talk back.

Also based on the widely-read work of a contemporary female novelist is the character Sookie Stackhouse, creation of Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries* series which inspired in turn Allan Ball's production for HBO, *True Blood* (2008–14). In her article 'Lustful ladies, she-demons and good little girls: female agency and desire in the universes of Sookie Stackhouse', Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska focuses specifically on the problematic sexual identity constructed for Sookie Stackhouse in the books, a virgin pursued by sexually experienced vampires and were-men, and how this identity is renegotiated, challenged – but also sometimes reinforced – in HBO's television show. Of particular interest is how *True Blood* complicates and re-configures the gendered scripts of sexual freedom and constraint, agency and (dis)empowerment, produced by the novels, reflecting on how the series' tropes of polygyny and polyandry engage and contest gendered standards of sexual autonomy and morality.

While several screen fictions explored in this special issue originate in the work of contemporary female novelists, Anita Nell Bech Albertsen's essay addresses the transmedia transformations of *Penny Dreadful* the 2014–16 SHOWTIME television series based on/created as a 'mash-up' of an array of Victorian popular fiction. In 'Palimpsest characters in transfictional storytelling: on migrating *Penny Dreadful* characters from television to comic books' addresses the relationship between *Penny Dreadful* and the prequel and sequel narratives of the graphic novel series produced by Titan Comics. Her particular interest is gender and character, focusing on how the monstrous and heroic women formed for television from various gothic pretexts and re-formulated in the graphic novels, are the products of conflict and congruency between old and new media. Rather like the television series *Penny Dreadful*, *Monster High* is inspired by a mash up of familiar sci fi and horror narratives and monsters that originated in Victorian popular narrative and horror film of the past, its characters and stories developed through an ever-expanding matrix of online webisodes, live action music videos on YouTube, video games, a book series, TV specials, direct-to-DVD – and now streamed – films. Lucy Baker in '*Monster High*'s Draculaura: dealing with daddies and fuckboys' focuses on how the doll/character Draculaura's monstrous tween girl persona, composited and developed across multiple media of the ever-expanding franchise, appears deliberately aimed against patriarchal control by the male monsters that populate her storyworld.

While a number of the articles in this special issue engage with international fandoms and fan productions, this is the entire focus of Elizabeth Gackstetter Nichol's 'Playing with identity: gender, performance and feminine agency in cosplay'. Nichols explores how women participate in trans-media produsage with a special focus on cultures and experiences of costumed play or 'cosplay'. Focusing specifically on aspirational fantasy-character identity construction from the perspective of female cosplayers, in gender crossed and gender bending or blending cosplay, this article uses personal interviews to interrogate how such fan interaction fictional properties creates an opportunity for feminine agency.

## Note

1. Exceptions include Carolyn Cocca's (2016) *Superwomen: Gender Power and Representation*, Gjelsvik and Schubart's edited collection on women in *Game of Thrones*, and Lorna Jowett's 2017 *Dancing with the Doctor: Dimensions of Gender in the Doctor Who Universe*, also scholarly coverage of the #wheresRey consumer protests when Disney excluded the main protagonist of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) from Disney's merchandise line (Brown 2017; Scott 2017).

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