

Ceci N'est Pas Une Femme: The Negation of the Male Gaze in Gail Simone's Red Sonja and Alex de Campi's Grindhouse: Doors Open at Midnight

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Introduction

In this essay, I propose that Gail Simone's *Red Sonja* and Alex de Campi's *Grindhouse: Doors Open at Midnight* comics are two primary examples of how the American comic industry is slowly attempting to invert and negate the male gaze. Both comics use characters, genres, and plots that have traditionally been written and drawn by men for men and find new methods to present them in a way that is more inclusive of other gazes. The character Red Sonja is a beautiful warrior woman traditionally outfitted in a scale-mail bikini, and the anthology *Grindhouse* takes the B-Movie genre, which is historically characterized by its focus on violence, gore, and nudity all centered on the female body. What Simone and de Campi do is take these often sexist characters and genres and use them as a means to celebrate what makes them so enjoyable to read/view while at the same time explore the gender politics behind them. In doing so, they create titles that can be read and enjoyed by readers other than just heterosexual men and to this extent they could be interpreted as empowering narratives.

However, there are some problems with their approach. In many ways the male gaze is so entrenched in American society that it becomes almost ubiquitous. There exists the issue that what these writers replace it with is just a female version of the gaze, which would keep this in a binary and, therefore, define the female gaze as being *not-male*, much in the same way that females are sometimes defined linguistically as *not-male*, marking it and keeping the supremacy on the male gaze. As Daniel Chandler writes in *Semiotics: The Basics* (2005), "In English, the female category is generally marked in relation to the male, a point not lost on feminist theorists" (95). *Fe-male* would constitute a formal marking where *male* is the unmarked, generic term that requires the prefix "fe" to denote something other than male. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), refers to this when writing about the subjectivity of sex and gender, saying that

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some feminists, such as Simone de Beauvoir, “would argue that only the female gender is marked, that the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated, thereby defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body-transcendental universal personhood” (13). The female gaze in this case would function as little more than a sideshow attraction—an oddity whose value is in its freakishness, not in what it has to say about the way we view sequential art today or what it proposes we can do to change a viewpoint that objectifies the female body and promotes the supremacy of heteronormative gender roles. As a medium, comic books and, more broadly, sequential art have predominantly reinforced and even inculcated heteronormative gender roles in its readers. Taber and Woloshyn identify this in diary cartoon novels (“Dumb Dorky Girls and Wimpy Boys”). Nathan Tipton views the character Carrie Kelly in Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* as a way to connect Bruce Wayne/Batman to heteronormality and combat the accusation of homoeroticism that has plagued the character since Frederick Wertham’s book *The Seduction of the Innocent* (331). Erin Keating views the character Laurie Jupiter and her relation to men in Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* as a means “through repetition” to maintain “heterosexuality based gender roles primarily through its construction of female identity” (1286). Kelli E. Stanley writes that Wonder Woman has “always been a slave to heterosexual male fantasy” and that “[h]er heterosexuality is one of her strongest impulses and has always been presented as fundamentally natural to her identity, even though in an exclusively homosocial environment it is arguably quite the opposite” (166). This is the context against which this work places *Red Sonja* and *Grindhouse: Doors Open at Midnight*.

The value in examining these two series comes not just from how Simone and de Campi deal with the male gaze, but the problems they illustrate in trying to divert from it. They illustrate the depth that the male gaze has penetrated comic culture (and North American culture overall), and their worth may come more from what they expose than what they propose in alleviating the problem.

However, before we can properly dive into the theoretical concerns these series raise, we must first discuss what these series are and the genre history from which they spring.

Red Sonja: She-Devil with a Sword

Red Sonja is popularly credited as being created by Robert E. Howard, the fantasy author who created (among others) Conan the Barbarian, Kull of Atlantis, and Solomon Kane. While Howard did have a character named Red Sonya of Rogatino, she was not a swordswoman living in Hyboria. She was, instead, a gun-slinging warrior of Polish-Ukrainian origin in a historical adventure story called “The Shadow of the Vulture” (*Sword Woman and Other Historical Adventures*). Sonja’s true creators were writer Roy Thomas and artist Barry Windsor-Smith. The two had scored a hit at Marvel Comics with their adaptations of Howard’s Conan stories and decided to branch out and further capitalize on their success with a



Fig. 1: Red Sonja Cosplayer 1

new character. The only aspects that Thomas and Winsor-Smith's Sonja shares with Howard's Sonya are the appellation "Red" and the color of their hair.

Thomas introduced Sonja in issue 23 of *Conan the Barbarian*. Called the "She-Devil with a Sword," Sonja could outfight, outdrink, and generally out-everything any man, all the while wearing armor that consisted only of a scale-mail bikini, thigh-high boots, and riding gloves. In her origin story (published first in *Kull and the Barbarians* issue 3 in 1975), Sonja was a rape victim who earned her fighting powers from the Goddess Scáthach with the provision that she could only give her body to a man who could best her in battle.

This particular element was so integral to the story that it played a prominent role in the movie *Red Sonja* (1985), produced by Dino de Laurentis and co-starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as a non-Conan barbarian, indicating that this is her defining characteristic.

As a comic character, Sonja has been kicking around for thirty plus years, and given that amount of time, there are naturally going to be good stories, mediocre stories, and pretty terrible stories told about her. Although one could view her as a powerful female character, this was often offset by her ridiculous armor, her nickname "She-Devil with a Sword" which linguistically marks her as an anomaly, and the penchant for her artists to draw her in sexualized and revealing poses. Too often, the reason people read her adventures was the chance to see a beautiful, red-haired woman wearing practically nothing, and no matter how many times the comics showed her besting men or declaring herself an independent person with her own agency, it was nearly impossible to get past her sexualized image. Her near-nudity is enticing and often her body language, her posture, and the panel angles from which she is shown highlight the beauty and desirability of her body. That and her declarations of independence create the idea that she is a prize to be won violently (after all, one must best her in battle before she will submit), which negates her agency and makes her nothing more than an object. This leads naturally to her being voted number one out of one hundred in the *Comics Buyer's Guide Presents: 100 Sexiest Women in Comics* in 2011 (Frenenhoff). The very fact that there exists a ranking of "sexiest women in comics" is profoundly telling of a powerful segment of



Fig. 2: Red Sonja Cosplayer 2

comic reading culture. To be fair, this is not limited to just comic readers. Magazines, such as *Maxim*, regularly request votes from its readers to rank female celebrities based on their sexual desirability. This reduces women to an image, a fetish *object d'arte* whose worth is determined solely on societal definitions of beauty and desirability. This is anachronistic thinking and highly problematic as it negates personhood and agency.

Of course, this was not the intention of the writers, but as literary theory has so often taught us, authorial intention only counts for so much, and the politics and environment that shaped the writer's life seeps into the writer's work. Sonja does have the potential to be a well-rounded, even empowering, character, but it takes a writer who understands the politics underlying the character and our society in order to do so. This is one of the reasons why Gail Simone's stint as writer has been so refreshing.

For the moment, though, we should table this discussion and move on to *Grindhouse*. We will return specifically to what Simone has done on *Sonja* and couple that with what de Campi has done on *Grindhouse*, but first, it needs to be explained just what *Grindhouse* is and the source material from which it derives.

Grindhouse: Doors Open at Midnight

There is a long tradition of horror anthology comics and perhaps the best titles were published by Entertaining Comics (EC). Entertaining Comics was once known as Education Comics. Its publisher, Max Gaines, established the company to market science, history, and bible comics to schools and churches (EC Comics). However, after his son William took over, the company switched to publishing crime, horror, and science fiction comics, the most famous of which were *Tales from the Crypt* and *The Vault of*

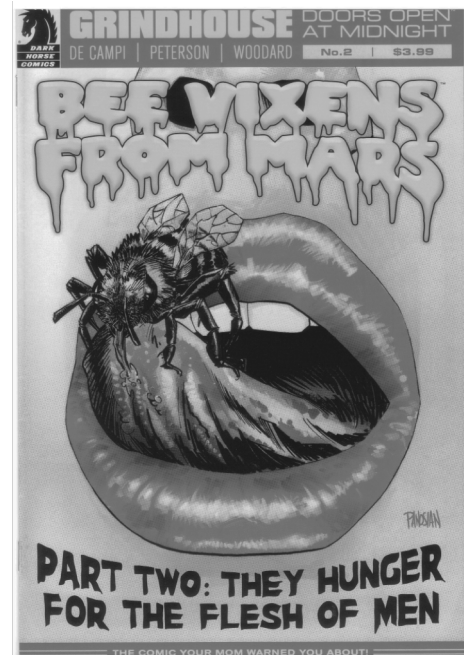
Fig. 3: Cover for *Grindhouse* Issue 2



Fig. 4: Page from *Grindhouse* Issue 1

Horror. EC also published the comic magazines that were instituted after the Comics Code Authority was instituted such as *Creepy*, *Eerie*, and, most famously, *Mad*. William shifted the focus of the content to the more provocative and lurid because biblical and historical stories published by Education Comics did not sell. For the most part, *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror*, and their numerous successors and knock-offs eschewed what H. P. Lovecraft considered the finer wine of terror for the more bottom-barrel gut rot of horror and gore ("The Appeal of the Unknown"). These comics were often characterized by loathsome protagonists, sexy-yet-evil women, and horrors visited upon female bodies. Alex de Campi's *Grindhouse: Doors Open at Midnight* (2013-14) continues in this grand tradition while also serving as a love letter to the B or "Grindhouse" movies that were once the staples of Drive-Ins across the United States.

A typical *Grindhouse* movie is one with a low budget, short shooting time, amateur actors, contrived plots, and a reliance on sex and gore to titillate the audience. As a genre, it is not well regarded by critics, but it does have a loyal following. A popular satirist, Joe Bob Briggs, made an entire career out of reviewing these movies, and in the past ten years some well-known directors have let their love of the style show through homage films, such as Robert Rodriguez's *Planet Terror* (2007) and Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof* (2007). In some respects, Quentin Tarantino's entire *oeuvre* could be viewed as art house Grindhouse. As a style, it is often considered a guilty male pleasure—enjoyed as much for the blood and breasts as for the laughable plots and acting. There also exists a strange sort of earnestness in some of the better Grindhouse features as well as a sense of play that make the movies enjoyable at a visceral level. In an interview with *Bleeding Cool*, de Campi sums up her love for Grindhouse movies:

I love a bunch of things about Grindhouse / Exploitation films. I love the rather loosey-goosey, anything might happen structure of them, especially now that everything is so "Save the Cat!" / Screenwriting 101 three-act structured into the ground. This is also a reason I love Korean and Japanese thriller films because WHAT JUST HAPPENED?!. I love crazy gore (who doesn't?). I love that the heroes are all sorts of people. It mattered so much to me to see female action heroes in films, like Cleopatra Jones and Coffy, when I was growing up. I know we're all supposed to be all post racial and shit now (spoiler: we're not) but for some people that seems to mean we don't even have to try any more and we're all equal so let's just cast a white guy. And that is so. fucking. boring. (2014)

De Campi also points out the subversive nature of Grindhouse cinema and the level of female empowerment in the genre (which she sums up as "bitches kicking ass"): "Seriously. Look back through exploitation films and you'll find a good collection of the earliest and most powerful female leading characters that cinema gave us.... As a woman writer, that really mattered to me growing up, seeing these gals who were strong and super hot" (Bigl).

It is easy to see how Grindhouse movies would mesh well with the horror anthology comic, and that is just what Alex de Campi did

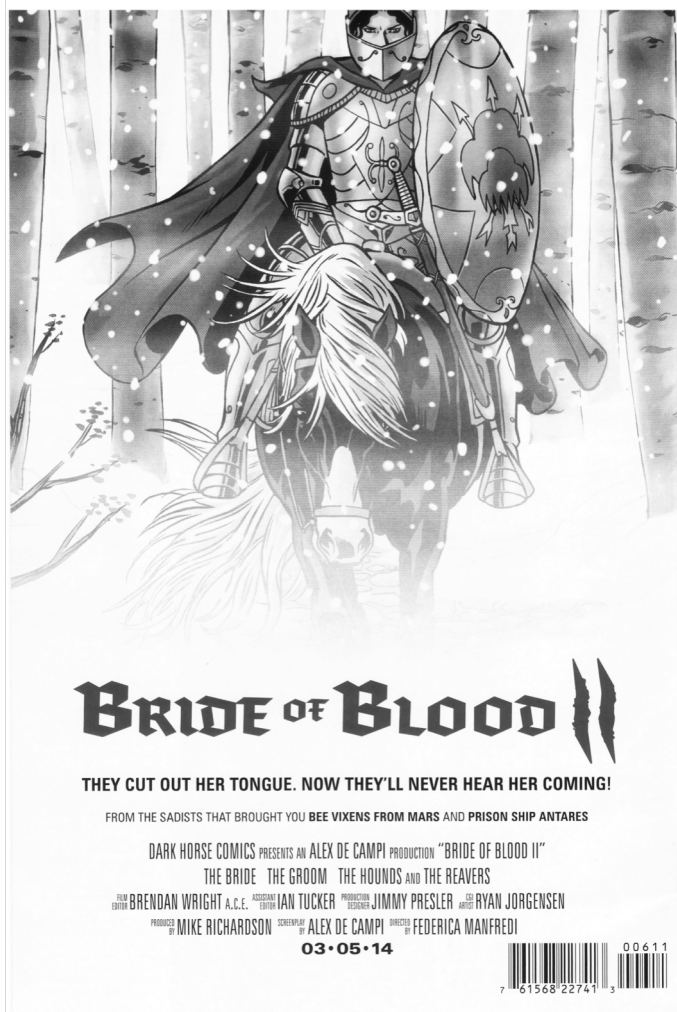


Fig. 5: Mock Movie Poster from *Grindhouse* Issue 6

in her mini-series *Grindhouse: Doors Open at Midnight*. It lasted for eight issues and told four stories, each only two issues long. De Campi twisted the traditional Grindhouse genres and often merged them in new and different ways. The second story, "Prison Ship Antares," places the standard women-in-prison story in a science fiction setting, and her third story, "Bride of Blood," is essentially a *Death Wish* rape-revenge tale in a medieval setting.

De Campi twisted and subverted the genre in other ways as well, but in order to properly understand what she did, and to connect it with what Simone did on *Red Sonja*, we must take one more digression to examine the theory of the male gaze.



Fig. 6: Page from *Grindhouse* Issue 1

The Male Gaze and Comics

The concept of the male gaze was first proposed in 1975 by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema." What Mulvey did in her essay was take Lacan's theory of the gaze, gender it, and apply it to the cinema, stating that the camera eye of a typical Hollywood movie presented a male gaze. This gaze is an ideological vehicle that functions on several different levels in the film viewing event. On the one hand, movies typically present a narrative from a masculine perspective with a male protagonist who functions as "the male viewer's onscreen surrogate which allows the viewer to maintain a sense of masculine activity instead of falling into female passivity" (Mulvey, 442). On the other hand, women in these movies operate on two levels: "as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (442). Mulvey goes on to link this to Freud's theory of scopophilia, or the pleasure of looking. In this case, cinema is an act of fetishistic scopophilia, which "builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself" (444). The pleasure that the audience takes in viewing this physical object is inherently voyeuristic due to the "hermetically sealed environment of the movie theater" because it and the conditions of "narrative conventions" creates the illusion that the cinema-goer is peering into a private world (440-1). The spectators can see everything that is occurring in the scene, but the characters cannot see them. This places the spectator in a position of power to project "repressed desire onto the performer" (441).

The male gaze ultimately objectifies the female body, reducing a woman to an object of desire, negating her personhood and her agency. This is viewed as a type of violence against women because it imposes upon them a framework of desire and accessibility. After all, one does not need to ask permission of a lamp to turn it on or a couch to sit on, and so, by extension, here a man gazes at a woman without asking her permission, disempowering her and using her body's appearance for his own desires.

This theory gained popularity and began to be applied to areas outside of the cinema. The male gaze could be seen in how women were photographed, how they were drawn (as in comics), and generally how men look at women. However, there are issues with Mulvey's approach. Both Todd McGowan and Clifford Manlove point out that Mulvey mixes Freudian and Lacanian theory, but does so without properly understanding Lacan. This leads her to discount the role of the Real in the algebra of gaze and object (McGowan 28; Manlove 84). McGowan also points out that Mulvey (as well as traditional Lacanian film theorists) misunderstands Lacan's points about power and desire, instead "splicing" onto Lacan's view of gaze and the mirror stage Nietzschean and Foucaultian views on power and desire where "power wholly informs desire" (30).

While Manlove and McGowan do raise valid points, Mulvey's basic conceit still stands as a compelling and worthwhile theory. Manlove ends his essay by stating:

Her thesis—that the pleasure found in one person gazing at another can be used for power—has the potential for broad application despite the steady criticism and revision by many of her colleagues in feminist and film studies....Mulvey's theory of the gaze has maintained its force precisely because it analyzes an aspect of vision that cannot necessarily be measured, counted, or even seen. (103)

This essay takes a similar view. While some of the finer aspects of Mulvey's theory may be a bit problematic, the idea that a great deal of visual art produced in North America is created for a male audience was true for a very long time. As Steven Kirsh and Paul Olczak write, "Historically, the target audience for comic books has been 10 to 14-year-old boys" (48). They do note that the age range has expanded by the year 2000, where readers over the age of 40 comprise 25% of sales, but female readers do not factor into their research at all. This could be an issue with their data collecting criteria, but even if that is the case, it illustrates that comics are "boys books," to quote Robin Moeller. Moeller writes, "What I noticed, however, was that the majority of graphic novel readers were male" (476) and when he approached high school-aged females about this, they often said that "[graphic novels] were boy books" (477). Moeller's study was undertaken to ascertain the effectiveness of using graphic novels in high school curricula and his desire to understand the reactions and gender identifications of the students in regard to reading graphic novels. He discovered that both males and females enjoyed reading the sample graphic novels he provided, but that they were hesitant in part out of fear of being labelled by their peers as "nerds," which itself contains gender assumptions (482). One of the participants in Moeller's study, a boy, said, "It's that cultural thing. You just don't expect girls to be into that whole thing as much as guys are. You know, video games, graphic novels, comic books, and all that, the works of nerd culture, not saying that in an insulting way. I'm a nerd, really. But that's now what you would expect" (480). Taking his cue from performance studies, Moeller writes that of the students that have examined the "multiple diversities of nerds," "maleness" and "whiteness" were key identifiers of the subgroup and that enjoying graphic novels went against the performance of femininity (481). One can also look at the multitude of comic art guidebooks to see the objectification of the female image. In Karen McGrath's "Gender, Race, and Latin Identity" she examines several of these "how to" books and concludes that "[c]omic book artists rely on certain techniques to enhance the superhero fantasy world for the audience. However, in doing so, the characters' bodies are objectified to reveal their superhero strengths. This objectification is especially problematic for women characters' depictions, because in using these techniques, their objectification is also a prominent sexualization of their characters" (272). The power, prominence, and focus of comics tend to be male. As McGrath points out: "as with most major corporations in the United States, men are typically in positions of power 'behind the scenes' in creating these comic books, from writers, to artists, to inkers, to editors-in-chief, and authors of the book that teach artists

how to draw women in comic books tend to focus more on women's bodies (objectifying) than their talents, even if they are women" (271). To put it more succinctly, "The superbody currently functions quite near to a pornographic polemic" (Taylor 345). To pull this all together: although there are female comic book readers and creators, comic books are still primarily made by men for a perceived primarily masculine audience.

Sequential art and the cinema have often been equated to each other as both are essentially visual art forms dependent upon the power of the image. In the case of comics, the power resides in the icon. The word "icon" denotes many different meanings, but for the purpose of this essay, I will use Scott McCloud's definition of "any image used to represent a person, place, thing, or idea" (27). McCloud begins the second chapter of his *Understanding Comics* (1993) by discussing Magritte's painting "The Treachery of Images." The painting depicts a pipe and written under it is "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*," meaning "This is not a pipe." Magritte's painting is a self-referential work of art displaying an image of a pipe while at the same time making it clear that the image is not the object it represents. McCloud then goes on to discuss the power of icons and how pictorial icons are fluid and variable, whose power depends on the level of abstraction the artist employs (29). McCloud creates a continuum between realistic, representational art, and what he dubs cartoons, which are less mimetic but almost paradoxically more powerful. He posits that we, as readers, respond more to a cartoon than a realistic image because a cartoon focuses on specific details: "By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (30). He goes on to say that "Cartooning isn't just a way of drawing, it's a way of seeing" (31). It is important to note that McCloud places the word "meaning" within scare quotes, indicating that whatever meaning is amplified in the cartoon is subject to the desires and mindset of the artist. It is also important to note that the primacy of the image in terms of cartoons is shared between drawing and seeing, which may explain why sequential art can be a powerful vehicle for fetishistic scopophilia.

Returning to Mulvey for a moment, she emphasizes the closed nature of the movie house to illustrate how it facilitates a sense of voyeurism in the viewer. In their own way, comics are just as much a "hermetically sealed environment" (page #?). Pages are typically broken into panels surrounded by the empty space known as the "gutter," and while capable artists make use of the gutter space (some even do away with it entirely), the gutters indicate frames, as if we are looking in through a window. The border of the movie screen creates the same idea. However, one of the many areas where comics and cinema differ is in the illusion of movement. Movies are nothing more than a series of still images projected at a steady frame rate, creating the illusion of life and movement that is so convincing that the audience is completely fooled; sequential art, on the other hand, is limited by the logistics of the form, and artists must find new ways of creating this feeling. The luxury of the art form, in many respects, lies in the ability of the reader to linger on the image for how-

ever long s/he wants. In terms of Mulvey's gaze theory, this imparts an added level of power and control on the part of the viewer. If, for example, I am intrigued by the image of Scarlett Johansson dressed in her Black Widow costume, I am limited by the technology to linger and enjoy the image. Linger is impossible in the movie theater unless the camera grants us the time. Thanks to modern technology, I do have the power to pause my Blu-ray copy of *The Avengers* when her scenes arrive, but doing so will ultimately put unnecessary wear on my Blu-ray player and my television. However, I can open up a comic featuring Black Widow and stare at the images until my eyes bleed. The power to move the story along or to linger is much more in my hands in comics than in cinema.

This is also where McCloud's description of the icon and the cartoon come into play. As he wrote, cartoons are not just a method for drawing, but for seeing, and in many cases female characters have been seen as hypersexualized eye candy. Like Magritte's pipe, these characters are not women (*ceci n'est pas une femme*). These images of women are further removed in that they are not always based on any one referent in reality. Their "meaning" can, and often is, abstracted to highlight their bodies, presenting viewers with women possessing gravity-defying breasts, toothpick waists, and curvaceous hips covered in skintight spandex outfits that show off every curve. As lovely a woman as Scarlett Johansson is, she can never match the idealized female body possessed by the comic book Black Widow.

In many cases the costumes are so enmeshed with the image of the comic book woman that they act as fetish objects in and of themselves. Of course, the practicality of these costumes was never considered, which is why Jean Grey went around wearing a green miniskirt for a good deal of her career (and also went by *Marvel Girl* until she became the Phoenix), why Wonder Woman fights in a bustier that by all rights should slip down and expose her breasts every time she jogs, and why Red Sonja fights in a scale-mail bikini. Wonder Woman's look is so iconic that there was fan uproar when writer J. Michael Straczynski gave her pants and a jacket to wear (Alex Romagnoli and Gian Pagnucci also discuss this issue in their work *Enter the Superheroes*).

It is because of this propensity for hypersexualized female representation that the male gaze (and the overall depiction and treatment of women) is being brought up more and more in the comic book industry by the creators and the readers. For the majority of their existence, comic books have been a male-dominated field in both who was creating and who was consuming. Naturally, there were exceptions, but the industry assumed that the majority of its readers were young boys. Various comics designed specifically for girls were created, such as *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* and *Martins' Millie the Model*, but Westerns, crime stories, horror tales, and especially superhero stories were written with young boys in mind. It is because of this mindset that most of the women are the hero's girlfriends, damsels in distress, or both. They are often portrayed as helpless and, more often than not, interested in tricking their hero boyfriends into marrying them. That is what Lois Lane primarily tries to do in the 1950s comics. Even Wonder Woman, the first and most prominent



Fig. 7: From *The Hawkeye Initiative*

female superhero, is purposefully designed to appeal to male bondage and sadomasochistic fantasies (O'Reilly 274). DC, of course, does not hold the lock on poor and/or stereotypical views of women. One of the founding members of the Fantastic Four, Susan Storm, originally could only become invisible, and her overall role at first was den mother to the three other male members of her team—even Reed Richards, with whom she had a sexual relationship and eventually married. She was even called the Invisible Girl until issue 284 when she changed it to Invisible Woman. Peter Parker's first love, Gwen Stacey, while nice, was considered bland to the point of being a non-character, which is the reason why writer Gerry Conway decided to have her die in a battle between Spider-Man and the Green Goblin. Conway describes Stacey as "beautiful, kind-hearted, not particularly bright" in his introduction to the Smart Pop book *Webslinger* (2). He goes on to write, "She was a babe, nice enough, but not particularly interesting, and in no way suitable—in this writer's opinion—as the love of Peter Parker's life" (3). Although one might take issue with Conway calling her a babe, he is right about her being a rather bland character. Stacey fits the basic Stan Lee model for a love interest: blonde, beautiful, and dull. One could almost say that she is the product of Stan Lee's gaze. What is chilling about this incident is that Stacey is considered disposable because she is uninteresting. The male writer passes judgment on her, finds her wanting, and instead of writing her out of the story, has the Green Goblin kill her to further *Peter's* story. Her life and death only possess meaning in relation to Peter Parker, relegating her personhood and agency to practically nothing. Once she no longer possesses value as a sex object to the male gaze, she becomes disposable.

Another issue to take into consideration is camera placement and posture. Female superheroes often stand at impossible angles to show off their busts and bottoms while looking out at the camera.



Fig. 8: From *The Hawkeye Initiative*

This has become such an often-used pose that it has become colloquially known as the “Boobs-and-Butt Pose” on the Internet and has its own entry on TVtropes.org. This falls under the more ubiquitous umbrella of “Fanservice,” which Keith Russel describes as, “the random and gratuitous display of a series of anticipated gestures common in Manga and Anime. These gestures include such things as panty shots, leg spreads (spread legs) and glimpses of breasts” (107). The term was popularized by Manga and Anime fans but certainly can be applied to Western comics.

The issue of Fanservice has reached a point with fans that there now exists a web entity called “The Hawkeye Initiative” which was created in 2012 by webcomic artist Noelle Stevenson. Stevenson suggested that when women are drawn in stereotypical “Fanservice” poses that they should be replaced by the male hero Hawkeye in order to “illustrate how deformed, hyper-sexualized, and impossibly contorted women are commonly illustrated in comics, books, and video games” (*The Hawkeye Initiative*). Another artist, who goes by the name Blue, took Stevenson’s suggestion and redrew the cover to issue 17 of *Marvel Adventures Superheroes Hawkeye & Black Widow*. On the original cover, both characters are dropping out of the sky. Hawkeye is falling feet first with his bow held at the ready, while Black Widow is falling head first, with her spine arched, her body twisted in the boobs-and-butt pose, and her legs spread akimbo. Blue redrew the cover so that the two heroes’ postures were switched, and it became a successful Internet meme and started the Hawkeye Initiative website.

The problem with the male gaze in comics (and, indeed, all forms of media) is that it hurts everyone. Despite popular opinion, girls and women do read comics of all genres, and while it is disheartening



Fig. 9: From *The Hawkeye Initiative*

and possibly damaging to see one's gender portrayed in strictly sexualized manners, it is doubly troubling when that female character is a hero—a person who stands for a higher ideal and whose example should inspire readers to do the same. It instills and reinforces the cultural view that a woman's only value is derived from her body and her physical attractiveness. This is especially problematic when children are exposed to these stereotypes because "gender-role stereotypes...help define what it means to be female or male for children" (Baker and Raney 27). Although Baker and Raney are writing specifically about children's animated programs, they do focus primarily on the gender-role stereotyping of superheroes in those programs, which often take their cues from comics. In their study, one of the gender-role stereotypes they specifically point out is "female superheroes were expected to be presented as slimmer, wearing more revealing clothing, having more human-like features, and to be portrayed more often as a team member than a leader" (28). The problem with this is that children who view these shows will identify heavily with these characters and desire to act and appear like them (Baker and Raney 39), meaning that they will internalize the male gaze and try to appeal to it.

This is where writers like Gail Simone and Alex de Campi come in, and why their work on *Red Sonja* and *Grindhouse* is important to the industry and (hopefully) represents a change in attitude in both the creators and consumers of comics.

Ditching the Scale Mail Bikini and the Male Gaze

In the opening story arc of her run on *Red Sonja*, Sonja travels to the kingdom of Patra at the request of King Dimath. Dimath is, in Sonja's words, the only good man she knows, and she owes him a

debt. Sonja had once been a prisoner and slave, fighting in nightly gladiatorial battles alongside her friend and fellow slave, Annisia. King Dimath freed her and Annisia and provided them medical care, food, clothes, and provisions. The king also allowed them to go where they wished. His kingdom then comes under attack by a horde of monsters from the sea lead by Annisia, who suffers from severe survivor's guilt.

There are several things that Simone does in her run on *Sonja*, particularly in this first arc. First, she ditches the scale-mail bikini early on and has her dress appropriately for battle and for the weather. Second, she drops the marked pronoun "she" from "She-Devil with a Sword," making Sonja the "Devil with a Sword." Finally (and credit must also go to the artist Walter Geovani as well) Sonja is drawn standing and acting like a normal human being. There are no instances of boobs-and-butt pose or other types of Fanservice. Sonja is drawn as a beautiful woman, but the camera eye never leers at her and the story never makes her beauty a vital part of her character. Instead, what is emphasized is her courage, her prowess on the battlefield, her intelligence, and her kindness. In addition to that, Simone also focuses on Sonja's less-than-noble qualities. In an interview with *Cosmic Booknews*, Simone states, "I like that she's earthy and bawdy. She wants a haunch of meat and about twenty ales and three jugs of wine and maybe a good scrap once in a while" (par. 6). Additionally, in an interview with *Comic Vine*, Simone discusses how her approach to the character differs from previous versions: "She's a bit more wild than we've seen her lately. She's often written as a bit of an ice queen, whereas originally, she was more wild and untamed. I like that Sonja, the Sonja who is lewd and a bit of a drunkard and very, very impulsive" (par. 18). This mix of the admirable and not-so-admirable portrays Sonja as a human being and not an object. This Sonja is a warrior and a woman but is not a masturbatory fantasy for adolescent boys.

The first story arc ("Queen of Plagues") ends with the mastermind of the invasion being revealed: King Bazrat, the former ruler of Patra and the man who had Sonja and Annisia imprisoned and fighting for his pleasure. Bazrat is the male gaze. He even has eyeballs tied into his long hair. He contrives to have Sonja and Annisia meet in an open air amphitheater. The two warriors stand on the ground while he watches from above, drinking wine and abusing a serving woman who had once been the wife of a general. He even boasts at one point that "no mere woman can resist" him (*Red Sonja* 6, 11).

Bazrat demands that Sonja and Annisia fight to "amuse [their] King" (*Red Sonja* 6, 1). Sonja manages to break away and attempts to kill Bazrat, slaughtering his soldiers on the way. As she climbs up the seats, she becomes an animal and a witch to Bazrat's eyes, becoming even less of a woman, and at the same time less an object of sexual desire. However, it is not Sonja who kills him, but the serving woman he abused, who used the same poison that Bazrat had used on Patra's army—including her husband.

One of the aspects that make this final confrontation so interesting is that Sonja and Annisia arrive at the fight in full armor. The only exposed skin on the two women is their faces, and yet Bazrat clearly



Fig. 10: From *The Hawkeye Initiative*

leers at them as if they were naked, reinforcing the Lacanian idea that the object of desire is desire.

While the death of King Bazrat could be construed as the killing of the male gaze, that interpretation would be a perfunctory and simplistic reading. However, when his death does come, it is a relief not only to Sonja and the people of Patra but also to the reader as Bazrat is a thoroughly loathsome character. If he is the male gaze personified, then the male gaze is as ugly and lecherous as we always suspected it to be, and that portrayal, more than its death, is the power of this particular moment because we as the reader are also a spectator. We pick up the issue because we want to see Red Sonja and Annisia fight and because we want to see how the story ends. I would also be lying if I didn't say that I enjoy looking at Sonja—she is a beautiful woman—and that attraction to the image and the violence of the situation places me in the role of Bazrat, which causes me to examine certain aspects of myself. It would be tempting to say that this issue functions as a mirror. However, that would be problematic as the image in the mirror is a reflection—a distorted image that is filtered through our vanities and perceptions. Instead, we are given the privileged position of looking at ourselves from a different, subjective viewpoint making this less about our reflection and more about how we truly appear, and that ugliness is something we must all deal with in some manner or another.

Another area where Simone deconstructs the male gaze is in the handling of Sonja's sexuality. Simone's Sonja is not a rape victim waiting for a worthy man to best her in battle. She is written as an adult woman with healthy human needs. In the current story arc, Sonja is tasked with gathering artisans from around the world to attend an Emperor's final royal dinner. As she searches, she is also deal-

ing with the fact that she is lonely and longing for sexual companionship. At one point she runs into a pair of swamp people—a man and a woman—and propositions them for a threesome. Nothing comes from it, but Sonja's blasé attitude towards sexual partners is interesting and walks a particularly fine line as lesbianism is a fetish fondly regarded by many men. By treating it so matter-of-factly and downplaying the titillating aspect of the potential situation, Simone denies the male gaze and defuses the situation.

Later in the next issue Sonja propositions the chef she rescued from the swamp people. The chef refuses, saying that he wants to be romanced first and that Sonja might not even be his type. Sonja replies, "I'm Red Sonja. I'm everyone's type," (*Red Sonja* 8, 5) which is a funny line but also speaks to the power dynamics of the situation. She holds the power in the situation, which extends to her power over choosing with whom she shares her body. This is one interpretation of the situation. One of the themes of this particular arc is Sonja feeling aroused and desiring sex (which is not fulfilled until the very end of the arc), so this particular instance does not drive the plot forward, and that interpretation could make it a titillating scene. The tone makes it read as comical (at least to me), but there does exist a certain amount of perceived authorial intent and potential reader interpretation.

Obviously, this particular scene also inverts standard gender roles. Males are the ones who are supposed to be amorous and can become aroused at the drop of a hat (or scale-mail bikini, as it were), not women. Men are also typically portrayed as willing to sleep with any- and everything. Women, on the other hand, are portrayed as being pickier about whom they sleep with and when they sleep with them as well as needing to be "romanced." What makes this scene work is that while it is played for laughs to some extent, both Sonja and the chef act in character. Sonja is a very Earthy, matter-of-fact person who likes meat because it tastes good and fills her stomach, whereas the chef is an artist and is much more interested in the interplay of taste, texture, and aroma. Their attitudes towards food exemplify how they approach life, which extends to how they perceive sex and what they want from sex. Sonja wants something quick, simple, and pleasurable while the chef wants an experience. The humor comes from the clashing of their two points of view and not out of them acting outside of traditional gender roles. In fact, neither character admonishes the other for acting in a way that is contradictory to his and her gender. One could very easily view this as pandering to male readers and make a substantial case for it. However, the humor defuses the potentially provocative nature of this encounter.

Red Sonja approaches sex as a natural and pleasurable human experience. Sonja has yet to have sex in the comic, but her desire for it is natural and never played for titillation. *Grindhouse*, on the other hand, approaches sex and female and male bodies in a different manner. This is hardly surprising given the genre in which Alex de Campi is working. She keeps the *Grindhouse* staples of "blood, breasts, and beasts," to quote Joe Bob Briggs (*Crowdus* xvi), and the stories center around bodily horror and sex. However, the key distinction between this comic and *Grindhouse* cinema and the way

that it subverts the male gaze is in who is perpetrating the bodily violence, who is the victim of it, and how it is portrayed. De Campi was very aware of this, as she talks about in an interview with Think Progress:

There was a very fine line to walk, though. To create a book that Comic Book Guy could enjoy because wa-hey, boobies, and gore... but that also as a female writer (and a feminist) I could be OK with. Most people won't notice that the gaze in the book towards the female characters is not predatory—the women are complicit, and in fact usually in charge. It's a gossamer thing, this manipulation of gaze, this slight change, this look awry—but it makes a huge difference to how the book feels when you read it. The book makes people really happy. And, you know, for the horror crowd, the little changes in having a woman write it so some of the invasive, penetrative horror happens to men—well, it makes for more effective and unexpected horror. (Par. 8)



Fig. 11: Millie the Model

of Blood," is a rape-revenge story set in Medieval Europe; and "Flesh Feast of the Devil Doll" plays with devil possession stories. Even

De Campi took this even further and made sure that her third story, "Bride of Blood," was drawn by a woman because it featured a pivotal rape scene: "I needed a woman to draw Bride of Blood, because I didn't want to have the male gaze imposed on the rape scenes" (Bloody Disgusting par. 14). De Campi is obviously very aware of the politics of vision in her work, and the problems typically identified in Grindhouse cinema. However, she subverts this by putting the women in positions of power both in terms of desiring and having the power to choose when, who, and with whom they act upon that desire. She and the artists also make sure to draw women of different body types, and even the ones who could be considered beautiful possess bodies that are realistic.

As mentioned before, each two-issue story works from a particular Grindhouse story type. The first one, "Bee Vixens from Mars" is an aliens-have-invaded-and-want-to-mate-with-humans story; the second, "Prison Ship Antares," takes the women-behind-bars genre and places it in space; the third, "Bride

though each story differs in terms of genre, they do feature the same important elements: they have a female protagonist(s), a great deal of the violence is perpetrated against men, and when it's not, it's women doing violence to women, with the exception of "Bride of Blood." For example, in "Bee Vixens," female space bees travel to a small town in Texas where they use their honey to transform the local women into drones and kidnap the men as sex toys. In this case, the women come off well compared to the men, who are violently torn apart when they give birth to space bee larvae. In fact, the women seem to be having a good time, as the space honey increases their libido, and they engage in off-panel sex.

In "Prison Ship Antares," the eponymous ship is crewed by female inmates serving life terms. They were chosen for this mission because the trip to Antares is one way and extremely long; however, the warden turns out to be a sadist with religious delusions, and once the ship passes out of radio contact with Earth, she uses her clone guards to torture the inmates in order to "purify" them. Although there is plenty of female nudity in this story, it is not played for titillation, and the scenes of violence are graphic and decidedly nonsexual in nature. The problem with *Grindhouse* is that there are times when it wants to have its cake and eat it too. It wants to subvert the male gaze while at the same time celebrating the elements that make Grindhouse cinema so fun and exploitive. The issue here is that Grindhouse cinema may be inextricably linked to the male gaze and that it may be impossible to subvert it, and while I can say that the series never aroused me or made me view the characters as objects, I cannot say that others had the same experience. It certainly tries, but I cannot speak with any certainty how well it succeeds beyond my own subjective feelings.

This brings us to an issue underlying this entire essay: how can the male gaze be subverted?

Subverting and Replacing the Male Gaze

If the male gaze is as ubiquitous as it appears to be, what can we replace it with? Is there a female gaze? A gender-neutral gaze? Would we recognize such a gaze if we saw it? While these questions have implications far beyond sequential art, they are particularly important to consider in this medium, as it has been dominated by the male gaze for much of its existence. The answer that these two series suggest is not a negation of the male gaze but an inclusion of other gazes.

Another part of the solution lies in reconfiguring how we approach the idea of the gaze. As already stated, Mulvey's theory of the male gaze borrows a great deal from Freud's theory of castration: "The paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world....[I]t is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack of that phallus that signifies" (438). Woman signifies man through her lack of the phallus. Linguistically, we see this in the English language through the marked terms used to describe women. Even the label "woman" is marked, taking "man" as the base, natural, starting position and

marking it as different with the addition of “wo.” A woman, therefore, acts as a bearer of meaning, not as a producer (Mulvey 439), erasing any sense of identity or even the potential of identity. This is why Mulvey writes that voyeurism “has associations with sadism” (444). A woman’s lack of a phallus justifies a man’s phallus, and this is reinforced through cinema.

This interpretation of the phallus and the gaze is the reason that McGowan and Manlove write that Lacanian film theorists fundamentally misunderstand key concepts, especially in regards to the Real. Manlove writes, “Lacan’s theory of the ‘real’—existing prior to the symbolic and the imaginary—explains the power of the eye, the idea of ‘spectatorship,’ and the visual nature of ‘agency.’” (84). For Lacan, the Real is that which exists prior to the symbolic and the imaginary, and we structure our world through language. We understand our selves, each other, and the world around us through this filter, but underneath it is the Real, “that which is impossible or unbearable,” which denies signification and language and can never be apprehended (96). Gaze and the Real both play a role in desire, as McGowan writes: “the gaze is not the vehicle through which the subject masters the object but a point in the Other that resists the mastery of vision....In other words, the gaze is a blank spot in the subject’s look that threatens the subject’s sense of mastery in looking because the subject cannot see the spot directly” (33). The Real is veiled by the *objet petit a* which, according to Manlove, alleviates the anxiety in each subject, permitting each to develop stable patterns (and characteristics)....[it] helps to fill in the split between reality (the imaginary and symbolic registers) and the real” (96). Taking the Real into account, then, “[t]he gaze is not the look of the subject at the object, but the point at which the object looks back” (McGowan 28-9). The *objet petit a*—the object that stands in the gap between the Real and reality—looks at us, and it is in that realization that we are being looked at that the gaze becomes one of desire and the object draws us towards a moment of “traumatic jouissance” (33).

Judith Butler writes, “By claiming that the Other that lacks the Phallus is the one who is the Phallus Lacan clearly suggests that power is wielded by this feminine position of not-having, that the masculine subject who ‘has’ the Phallus requires this Other to confirm and, hence, be the Phallus in its ‘extended’ sense” (59-60). This dialectic between man and woman, between possessing and lacking, and aggressive and passive, has been articulated by Freud, by Beauvoir, by Irigaray, and others, and it always places the woman in a subservient position. It is for this reason that Butler writes, “The female sex is thus also *the subject* that is not one” (15) and that “Lacanian theory must be understood as a kind of ‘slave morality’” (77) because its interrelation of linguistic positions of male and female “recalls the Hegelian structure of failed reciprocity between master and slave,” where the master is dependent upon the slave for his existence (60). The woman, as *objet petit a*, lives to affirm the life of the man.

McGowan writes that the Other—the *objet petit a*—hides the truth that the Other hides nothing, that there is no grand secret that it

shrouds through hazy signification (35). This means that desire simply “circulates around a void” (36), and that the object matters less than the power of desire that we project unto it. Recognizing this takes away some power of the male gaze, as it is less about sexual gratification and domination and more about the desire for desire, for that moment of *jouissance*.

What is important to note here is that there is no mention of gender whatsoever in terms of gaze, meaning that the one gazing can be male, female, or transgendered. It would be facile and unproductive to simply try to reverse the male gaze in order to negate it and make the object of desire be male. What is necessary is to present characters as more than just types. Comic books in particular deal in archetypal figures and idealized forms. They have also been historically regarded (justifiably) as male power fantasies. The real key to combating the issue of the male gaze is less a recognition of what the gaze truly is (although it will certainly help), but simply good storytelling that starts with three-dimensional characters with human desires, drives, and fears. This also creates stories that spin naturally out of those characters. Related to this is what Scott McCloud said about cartoons being about *drawing* and *seeing*. In pictorial icons, the artist has power in what aspects of the character s/he emphasizes.

This brings us back to *Grindhouse* and *Red Sonja*. Both comics fulfill different functions for their readers. While not super, Red Sonja is a hero—she’s an adventurer, a fighter, and an embodiment of many admirable qualities. Comics have often been criticized as male power fantasies, and while it is debatable whether or not power fantasies are helpful or harmful to individuals and society, women should have just as much access to them as men. In addition to that, for all her drinking and fighting and general grumpiness, Sonja is intelligent, confident, courageous, and loyal, which are all qualities that should be encouraged in all people. In terms of how she is drawn—of how her meaning is imparted through her image—she does possess a beautiful body that is slightly idealized; however, the way her body is depicted emphasizes her strength, her agility, and her power. She is not a sex object, and this is why she rarely wears the scale-mail bikini anymore.

Grindhouse, on the other hand, provides stories within a set of overlapping genres that empowers women instead of victimizing them as Grindhouse cinema has so often done. Although there are times when the gravity of the genre seems to pull the stories back towards victimizing, *Grindhouse* is an intelligent attempt to update these stories and examine sexuality and violence from a female perspective. Like in *Sonja*, the women in *Grindhouse* are presented as having power and agency and are drawn with realistic body types in such a way as to avoid being titillating. Their meaning as imparted through the art is that they are strong women.

While the image will never be the object (whether it be a pipe or a woman) the power of the image over how we perceive its referent is considerable and should be taken into account, especially in sequential art. There exists gender politics in how we draw and how we see, and what both of these two comics teach us is in order to

negate the male gaze, we must step out of the binary master-slave dynamic that language establishes. We must recognize that women can desire as well as men, and that there is a multiplicity of gazes—male, female, and transgendered; heterosexual, queer, and bisexual. And while there is only so much control an artist can have over how others see their work, more care and attention can be placed in the *drawing*.

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Fig. 1: *Ex Machina: Book One*™ and © Brian K. Vaughan & Tony Harris. Courtesy of DC Comics.