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Marianne Kac-Vergne, *Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema. Cyborgs, Troopers and Other Men of the Future*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2018, 246 pages, ISBN 978-1-78076-748-2, 3

- 1 If, as J.P. Telotte has pointed out, science fiction cinema “has focused its attention on the problematic nature of human being and the difficult task of being human” (2), this “humanist” proclivity is in fact often, like da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*, about making white men the heart of the system. It also tends to return to the traditional definition of a totalizing and normative masculinity to essentialize domination over other social groups. This is one part of the thesis convincingly defended in Marianne Kac-Vergne’s *Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema. Cyborgs, Troopers and Other Men of the Future* (I.B. Tauris, 2018) which offers a rare look at men and masculinity in science fiction. This is a necessary and long overdue endeavor, as science fiction has historically been preoccupied with narratives and issues of discovery, exploration, conquest and progress as they were envisaged at the time of the genre’s crystallization, in the late 19th and early 20th century, when Edgar Rice Burroughs could dream up both the adventures of Tarzan and of John Carter on Mars.
- 2 This ironically conservative side to science fiction logically put the genre at the forefront of 1960s and 1970s’ questioning of the traditional social order (Ballard’s or Le Guin’s fascinating tales of masculinity, technology and violence). This is when science

fiction films increasingly put at the forefront of their narratives artificial beings—robots, androids, disembodied AIs, cyborgs, replicants, clones—which reveal their “growing awareness of and attention to our own level of artifice, of constructedness, of how we often seem controlled by a kind of program not so very different from the sort that drives the artificial beings which abound in our films” (Telotte 4). SF films were then able to depict the pinnacle of male fantasies, a robotic cowboy simulating virility, turning against and vanquishing men who had wished to indulge their sadistic fantasies of male domination, in *Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973). And yet, as in so many other areas, the 1980s introduced a backlash against such narratives and witnessed the spectacular rise of what is called here “hypermasculinity,” and which is when the book opens.

- 3 The previous example shows how right Kac-Vergne is, in the introduction, to defend the absolute need to complement textual analysis with a contextual approach to make better sense of the films produced between the early 80s and early 2000s and which make up the bulk of Kac-Vergne’s corpus. The latter is made up of highly influential blockbusters, but the other good decision here is to largely put aside the films directed or produced by Steven Spielberg or George Lucas, whose family-friendly, utopian, fairy-tale-like narratives do not agree well with Kac-Vergne’s discussion of triumphant, violent, eroticized masculinity. She opts instead to focus on films informed by a sense of urgency and crisis, typically offering dystopian diegeses mired in predicaments which often echo those economic, technological, social or racial crises agitating real-life America.
- 4 She also borrows from sociologist Raewyn Connell and men’s studies the concept of “hegemonic masculinity”—the idea that a dominant form of masculinity manages to pass itself off as natural and inevitable through artefacts such as films, transforming “the normative into the normal” (Richard Dyer qtd by Kac-Vergne, 5). However, such hegemonic masculinity is not just “a model that seeks to distinguish itself from femininity and maintain its power in unequal gender relations” (3), but also a dominant model in which “white heterosexual middle-class masculinity dominates gay, working-class and ethnic masculinities” (*ibid.*). This means that the book will also deal with alternate forms of masculinity as they are represented in these films, adopting an intersectional approach relating to issues of gender but also class and race. It will also show how these films can also include more critical, perhaps even subversive, content, trying to “queer” traditional representations of masculinity. Much like Sue Short’s excellent study of “cyborg cinema”, Kac-Vergne’s fine analysis “is one of measured deliberation rather than outright acceptance or dismissal” (Short 9).
- 5 Chapter one focuses on the 1980s and the emergence of “hypermasculinity” at the same time as the New Right and Star Wars-obsessed Ronald Reagan were calling for a return to the lost times of traditional values, and as “Hanoi Jane” was turning her attention to fitness videos. At the antipodes of Donna Haraway’s 1980s technofeminist visions of cyborg liberation, the Hollywood version is an ultraviolent action hero offering audiences the opportunity to admire his augmented, machine-like, bodybuilder body, be it Arnold Schwarzenegger’s or Jean-Claude Van Damme’s. The cyborg figure (whose definition should be restricted to a human being transformed by technology to exclude androids, but this is a quibble) has already been extensively written about (Sue Short, Scott Bukatman, Per Schelde, Rushing and Frenzt, Elaine Graham), while Hollywood masculinity in the 1980s has also been the subject of excellent studies (Yvonne Tasker,

Susan Jeffords). Therefore it is no small achievement that Marianne Kac-Vergne's chapter manages to add to and refine those earlier studies.

- 6 The most interesting part here, however, is how the author points out the paradoxical vulnerability of these characters, whose body often escapes their control and is often filmed in vulnerable and passive poses and situations, being manipulated and penetrated by various characters and objects. Kac-Vergne also inverts Laura Mulvey's male gaze to show how the male body is often offered to the female gaze, including by using intradiegetic female characters whose admiring reverse shots can be seen as standing for the audience's own gaze and which in turn objectify the male body. Kac-Vergne is also right to show how these films often use two characters, or two versions of the same character (before and after the transformation) to show two opposed forms of masculinity, as with Jeff Goldblum's Seth Brundle (Cronenberg's *The Fly*, 1986) and his horrific mutation into a hypermasculine monster. Through such analyses, she shows that "the muscular heroes of action films both enact and call into question the masculine qualities that they embody" (42).
- 7 Chapter two turns its attention to issues of class. The author shows how characters like RoboCop, designed and manufactured in floundering Detroit to rid the city's streets of its homicidal gangs, stand for white working-class workers threatened by technology (automation), globalization (Japanese competition) and high levels of crime often blamed on minorities. The latter film (released, we might add, the same year as Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* in 1987) offers a tale of revenge over the heartless yuppies bent on privatizing and monetizing everything, cathartically restoring audiences their threatened manhood. John Carpenter's *Escape from New York*'s critical, almost nihilistic narrative of a U.S. President brought down into the urban decay of a futuristic NYC is also used extensively here. Murphy/RoboCop, or *Blade Runner*'s protagonist, the powerless, passive Deckard and his nemesis, the alpha male Roy, embody "a widespread loss of identity in contemporary post-industrial and technologically advanced societies, which affects first and foremost the hegemonic position of men, who are sidelined from their traditional status as heroes at the center of the narrative" (57).
- 8 Chapter three focuses on women. Thankfully, the author decided to not devote a large amount of space to two characters who have already been extensively written about: *Alien*'s Ripley and *The Terminator*'s Sarah Connor. Discussing the problematic nature of their characterization as both masculinized women and a "bad mother" (101), along with the rapid degeneration of the Murphy character in the *RoboCop* franchise, Kac-Vergne moves on to a discussion of "postfeminism" and its influence in the late 1990s through *Starship Troopers*, another Paul Verhoeven film (1997), and *Ghosts of Mars*, another Carpenter one (2001). In these films, women are reconciled with their (heterosexual) sexuality and can be represented as both glamorous and physically or intellectually superior to men.
- 9 This is the rise of "girl power" and the "ass-kicking" female figures like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Xena the Warrior Princess* (107), or perhaps the return to Diana Rigg or Charlie's Angels-like character¹. Yet, the author stresses how *Starship Troopers*, for example, eventually recenters its narrative around its male protagonist. She argues more broadly and with good reason against a postfeminism which deludes people into thinking equality has been achieved and that "repressive" feminism is no longer useful. Other feminine figures, such as the omnipresent "babe scientists" (113), further show how initially strong women often devolve into plot devices and supporting characters.

- 10 Chapter four concentrates on race and African-American characters. While the first *Predator* played on orientalism to regenerate the protagonist (Schwarzenegger) through jungle violence against a racially other enemy (much like 1985's *Rambo II*), the second installment focuses on an African-American character confronted with yet another decaying urban setting. Careful analysis of the film shows its attempt at offering an alternative depiction of African-American masculinity, but also its limitations. Yet, most interesting is Kac-Vergne's analysis of Will Smith vehicles such as *I, Robot* (Alex Proyas, 2004) or *I am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007). She relies, like everywhere else, on many visual and narrative examples to show how Smith (the only African-American actor so far able to draw massive, blockbuster-level, multiracial audiences globally) typically portrays characters whose " 'safe' brand of blackness can be criticised as being sanitised for white viewers" (148) (the comparison of *I am Legend* with the forgotten *The World, The Flesh, The Devil* [Ranald McDougall, 1959] and *The Omega Man* [Boris Sagal, 1971] is a very welcome one indeed).
- 11 These films draw on safe stereotypes (the "cool factor," the way African-Americans can be portrayed as more grounded and closer to authentic and family life than whites, etc.) to offer an ideal, sanitized vision of masculinity. This time so-called post-racism is the issue, in much the same terms as postfeminism (placatory, misleading affirmation of full equality). The chapter is a fascinating one (including the multicultural utopia depicted in *Independence Day*, Roland Emmerich, 1996), to the extent that one wishes the author could have discussed other films, such as 1995's *Virtuosity* (Brett Leonard, 1995) (there are many parallels to draw between Denzel Washington's character and Smith's in *I, Robot*) or 1996's *Solo*, directed by and starring Mario Van Peebles (but admittedly a *Universal Soldier* rip-off). One is also curious to know what Kac-Vergne would make of films too recent to be included in the book, such as Netflix's *Bright* (David Ayer, 2017), featuring Smith, or *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018).
- 12 The final chapter in the book deals with the evolution of models of masculinity since the 1990s, at a time when many commentators were warning the country was going through a "crisis of masculinity" (157). With the end of the hypermasculine hero cycle in the early 1990s (which can be dated, we might add, in 1993 with the satirical *Demolition Man* [Marco Brambilla] and the release that same year of Jan de Bont's *Speed*), a new type of male action figure emerged: a less muscular, more fragile and more emotionally intelligent, sometimes androgynous, hero. Its embodiment is Keanu Reeves, "a Canadian citizen born in Lebanon of a British mother and Chinese-Hawaiian father, [who] can be seen as a 'postnational poster boy'" (139, quoting Joshua Clover). At this stage anyone should be feeling anxious when encountering the "post" label yet again, but Reeves did indeed offer a hero who was markedly more vulnerable than his predecessors and who "transgresses the taboo of passive male objectification" (161), a phenomenon which a contemporary critic described as "a homosexual panic" (160).
- 13 Among the many "cyberfantasies" of the time (162), when the mind and the information/data it contained was becoming more of a focus, *The Matrix* trilogy especially, but the other films in the corpus as well (1992's *The Lawnmower Man*, directed by Brett Leonard, could have been an interesting addition here, with its weak protagonist transforming into a hypermasculine freak), can be read as an attempt at questioning white patriarchal society, with the importance given to women and their literal position of dominance (Trinity) as well as black and other minorities (Sensei Morpheus, the multicultural city of Zion). At the same time, whiteness consistently

denotes “the system” which protagonists desperately try to escape or topple (we might add that, interestingly, Will Smith turned down the lead role in the film). Less well-known is the underrated *Strange Days* (the only film in the corpus directed by a woman, Kathryn Bigelow, in 1995, but written by her then-husband James Cameron), which does propose a similar depiction of a passive, even of a physically and morally weak character helped along by the “strong woman” of the narrative, an African-American (played by Angela Bassett). She will, like Trinity with Neo, lead him away “from the solipsistic masturbatory pleasures of the interface into a relationship which acknowledges the desires of others” (173), thus proposing a new, healthier, more balanced form of masculinity.

- 14 The chapter then ends with a discussion of the figure of the father, which reappears after another major crisis, 9/11. Unsurprisingly enough, Spielberg resurfaces here, with his *War of the Worlds* (2005), along with *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009), *Interstellar* (Jonathan Nolan, 2014) and *Terminator Genisys* (Alan Taylor, 2015). Beyond the need to return to the protection of a safe and caring figure of authority, Kac-Vergne sees in these films a “call[ing] into question of male and masculine hegemony by underscoring the transformation and especially the failings of hegemonic masculinity” (176-177). For instance, while *War of the World’s* Ray (Tom Cruise) is a working-class hero learning to be a caring and protective father, he “fail[s] at patriarchal reproduction” and must remain out of the family unit in one of the last shots of the film, when the children are reunited with their mother and stepfather. *The Road* is also read as a father’s failure to pass on patriarchal values to a son who rejects the fatherly model of distrust and Darwinian violence.
- 15 These last examples show how the films being discussed are not necessarily conservative warnings or bland odes to the nuclear family, but can in fact exhibit the same tension and contradictory forces which underlie the contemporary culture. One of the great merits of Marianne Kac-Vergne’s study is to convincingly demonstrate the ambiguity and problematic discourse underlying many of these films, as well as their link with their contexts, while still offering solid textual readings of the individual films being discussed and constantly drawing enlightening parallels between various productions. It is the sign of the great quality of this book that one wishes for even more films (superheroes and masculinity, including the *Iron Man* films, probably deserve a study of their own). All in all then, this work is a solid and needed addition to both science fiction, film and gender studies.

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NOTES

1. We might here note that, in a larger book, a closer look at contemporary TV series could have helped make the argumentation even stronger; for instance, masculinity in 1980s TV series centered on empowering, hypermasculine technology-everyday or futuristic cars, motorbikes, helicopters, trucks-would make for a fascinating study.

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