

Can superheroines escape their gender ?

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"Jewel is a great superhero name! »

" Jewel is a stripper's name. »

dialogue in *Jessica Jones*

In 1938, the first issue of *Action Comics* featured the character of Superman on its cover. Success came fast. Although Superman was not the first superhero (Gabilliet 2004), he would become the prototype of the American superhero story. As products of mass culture, which today have a worldwide influence, superheroes did not confine themselves to comic books for long. In 1941, Superman also reached TV screens through the animation series produced by Fleischer Studios (Fleischer 1941). The same year, *Adventures of Captain Marvel* (English and Witney 1941) was published, a *serial* divided into 12 parts. In 1952, the television series *Adventures of Superman* (Syndication, 1952-1958) was the first live-action adaptation of Superman's adventures. Many other superhero story adaptations have since been produced, which soared in the early 2000s with many television, film and video game adaptations of the stories by the two main publishers of the superhero genre: Marvel and DC Comics.

While superheroines were born shortly after Superman (Fantomah in *Jungle Comic* No. 2 in late 1939/early 1940s or The Lady in Red in the early 1940s, No. 2 in *Thrilling Comics*), they had more difficulty than their male counterparts in being adapted to small (and large) screens, with a fairly marked time lag. This issue of *Genre en Séries* will therefore be devoted to the place of superheroines since their creation and proposes to study them both in comic books and through their adaptations in types of media.

Apart from Trina Robbins' books, which provide a fairly broad overview of the evolution of superheroines (Robbins 1996) and the place of women in the comic-book industry (Robbins and Roniwode 1985; Robbins 1999 ; Robbins 2001; Robbins 2013), superheroines are poorly studied, with the exception of the most famous of them, Wonder Woman (Robinson 2004; Bilal 2011; Hanley 2014; Bajac-Carter, Jones and Batchelor (eds.) 2014; Zechowski and Neumann 2014; Cocca 2016). Most of the time, superheroines are just mentioned in a book (Hassler-Forest 2012) or are sometimes the subject of a specific chapter (Gray II 2011; Ducreux 2013). We believe it is necessary to compensate for this delay.

If our questioning focuses on superheroines from comic books, this issue also aims to question the limits of these characters. Proposing a list of definitional, but not essential, characteristics, as Jean-Marc Lainé has done (in Lainé 2011, we find the following: superpowers, costume, secret identity, companions, Achilles' heel, founding trauma, adversary and relationship to the city) is not a satisfactory definition, as it allows to group under the superhero name characters as old as Gilgamesh or Hercules (Reynolds 1994 ; Knowles 2007). A definition by characteristics must be combined with a definition that makes it possible to locate and contextualize the characters that are superheroes and superheroines. Is Buffy, the vampire slayer (The WB, 1997-2001, UPN, 2001-2003), who has superpowers and protects the world by looking after the small town of Sunnydale, a superhero? She is not wearing a suit, but her identity as a killer is a fact she hides from her family during the first few

seasons. Are the action women of 1980s cinema - such as Ellen Ripley from the *Alien* film series (Scott 1979; Cameron 1986; Fincher 1992; Jeunet 1997) and Sarah Connor from the *Terminator* franchise (Cameron 1984; Cameron 1991) superheroines, since they are fighting to protect humanity? And what about Max Guevara, the heroine of *Dark Angel* (Fox, 2000-2002), whose genetic heritage was modified during childhood to turn into a weapon and who fights as an adult for her right, and that of her fellow human beings, to exist: does she not recall the *X-Men* team of mutants?

This issue therefore proposes to study superheroines as such but also in their relationships with their male teammates. From comic books to animated image adaptations, the reasons for their relative lesser success compared to superheroes is at the heart of our questioning.

Who are the superheroines and where are they today? What place(s) do they have in the different media? Who are their audiences? How does the transition from comic book to another medium transform, or not, the heroine in question? What are their links with superheroes? Approaches from the different social sciences are welcome in this issue, which will focus in particular on the following non-exhaustive areas:

1) Evolution of superheroines

A first approach can focus on the socio-historical context of the appearance of these characters in the tradition of Loïse Bilat's work on Wonder Woman. When Wonder Woman appeared in 1941, she had physical strength similar to Superman's. However, its creator William Moulton Martson, also endowed her with qualities that he considered intrinsically feminine such as softness and charm. This construction of Wonder Woman is attributable to William Moulton Martson's essentialist vision, but also to the gender relations at the beginning of the Second World War, when women were called upon to support the war effort, taking on male roles while remaining male supporters.

Superheroine stories have since gone through 70 years of American social transformation. The social changes that have taken place since 1941 - changes in the status of women, civil rights, feminist movements, LGBTIQ+ struggles - have influenced the stories of superheroines. The creation and simultaneous broadcasting, between 1975 and 1977, of the superhero series *The Secret of Isis* (CBS, 1975-1977) and *Wonder Woman* (ABC, 1975, CBS, 1977-1979) were made possible by the women's rights movements that shook the United States during the Second Wave of feminism, but also by the massive entry of women into the paid labour market, which turned them into consumers to whom a product can be sold (Passerini 2002). In the early 2000s, Jessica Jones, an alcoholic and borderline ex-superheroine, was created. *Alias* (2001-2004, Max Comics), the series in which she is the protagonist, is a meta-report that offers a reflection on the evolution of superheroines, but also on their future. The character's success in comic books but also on the Netflix video platform (Netflix, 2015-ajd), where the series has been renewed for a third season, supports an unconventional superhero model. Nevertheless, Jessica Jones must also question the possibility even for a woman to embody a superheroic figure, because the character has precisely renounced being a superhero.

How are superheroines representatives of their time? How do superheroine stories portray and interact with American social changes in different media? And does adaptation make it possible to solve certain "problems" posed by superheroines in comics (objectification, use for scriptwriting purposes in stories centred on men) or are they reproduced in the target medium?

2) Creation, production, mediation and public

In this axis, priority will be given to studies that focus on the contexts of these comic books and their adaptations. On the one hand, the reception context: which audiences, for which works? Are the audiences of superhero and superheroine stories really more masculine? How does this audience influence the content of these superheroic fictions? In 2013, Paul Dini, one of the creators of *Batman: The Animated Series* (Fox Kids, 1992-1995), attributed the cancellation of *Young Justice* (Cartoon Network, 2010-ajd) and *Green Lantern* (Cartoon Network, 2011-2013) to the overly female audience, which was not good for broadcasting channels, as girls are known to buy fewer toys. While the reasons for this cancellation were never confirmed by the Cartoon Network, Paul Dini pointed at the gendered dimension of superhero productions that are intended for the youth market in relation to the importance of the sale of ancillary products in their profitability.

This also raises the question of the production context: who are the people who create these superheroic adventures? Can the gender relations that are played out within a television channel, film studio, video game production company or comic book publishing house influence its brand identity? The CW channel, for example, which produces many of the current superhero television series, was, when it was created in 2006, the network with the highest number of female employees and its identity was marked by the production of series for young women such as *Gossip Girl* (Le Fèvre-Berthelot 2015). Can CW's recent production - *Arrow*, *The Flash* - be seen as a desire to remasculinize its audience - after Mark Pedowitz was appointed head of the network in 2011 - or are these series also dedicated to a female audience? If so, how can we explain the inclusive approach of these television series that feature racialized, homosexual, bisexual and soon-to-be transgendered characters and on which the CW is basing its brand identity in a video announcing its upcoming series for the 2018-2019 season (AlloCine)? While these superheroic television adaptations play the card of a certain diversity, it is worth questioning the timidity of the film adaptations on this subject: we had to wait for the 21st film produced in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Captain Marvel* (Boden and Fleck 2019), to have a superheroine as the main protagonist.

3) Superheroine stories and politics

This axis aims to analyse the place and role of television and film superheroines by observing the narrative construction of these characters. How is the scene set for superheroines? What role do superheroines working alongside superheroes play, for instance in *Heroes* (NBC, 2006-2010), the *Avengers* film franchise, the *Batman: The Telltale Series* video game (Telltale Games, 2016), *Batman* (ABC, 1966-1968), and *Gotham* (Fox, 2014-ajd)? More generally, these superheroines must be examined as heroines (Cassagnes-Brouquet and Dubesset 2009), but also as women of action (Monk 2010; Bilat and Haver 2011).

It is also necessary to question how superheroines can experience other types of domination than gender. Superheroes and superheroines were originally white, heterosexual characters - even if their sexuality was never mentioned - and they often come from higher social classes. Today, these representations have diversified. Racialized and/or non-heterosexual superheroines exist, and a transgender superhero appeared in the fourth season of *Supergirl* (CBS, 2015, The CW, 2016-ajd).

The status of all superheroines must nevertheless be questioned. The use of the image of Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan), a Muslim superhero, to fight Islamophobic campaigns in San Francisco evokes a certain political power of these representations, but what is really happening? Do superheroines contribute to challenging patriarchal norms or are they pure post-feminist products devoid of any political substance (Cervulle 2009)? Are they simple feminist pop characters who

spread a message of individualistic *empowerment* without its political and collective side or do they spread globally the idea that women, whoever they are, can be heroines and even more?

Proposals for articles, accompanied by a short biography, should be sent to sbonade@gmail.com and rvallee@univ-evry.fr before **15th December 2018**. The authors will be advised by 15th January 2019 and the articles must be sent by 30th April 2019, for publication after proofreading in Autumn 2019.

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