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Wonder Woman: The Female Body and Popular Culture, by Joan Ormrod. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 312 pp.

Fat on Film: Gender, Race and Body Size in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema, by Barbara Plotz. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 282 pp.

Claire Whitley

The idea of the female body as a site onto which sociocultural fears and anxieties are projected is well established in feminist theory. Theorists like Laura Mulvey, Kathleen Rowe, bell hooks and Hortense Spillers have created seminal works from their examination of how the body operates, conforms and resists under a patriarchal, heteronormative, white gaze. Discourse around the body—and in particular, the female-coded body—is what aligns the work of Joan Ormrod and Barbara Plotz reviewed here. Although their analyses focus on the body in different contexts (Ormrod charts the cultural icon Wonder Woman, while Plotz examines fatness in contemporary Hollywood cinema), both conduct in-depth examinations of the ways in which ideology can be projected onto the body.

Joan Ormrod's *Wonder Woman: The Female Body and Popular Culture* is an exhaustive chronological study of the evolution of comic book hero Wonder Woman. In addition to seven chapters of analysis, Ormrod also includes a detailed appendix of the main story arcs as seen in the comics, as well as their corresponding "body themes" (217). By charting the character's ever-changing origins, home life, nemeses and outfits, Ormrod spans almost eighty years of her place in popular discourse and argues convincingly for a more nuanced reading of a character often reduced to her "sexualized representation" (2).

Ormrod's comprehensive introduction positions Wonder Woman as a female character whose body is "culturally and philosophically constructed" within the ideological parameters of the numerous historical contexts in which the character has existed (4). This introduction also includes an efficient outline of author William Moulton Marston's ideological basis for the creation of Wonder Woman and a summary of the landscape of comic book production and

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consumption in which Wonder Woman rose to prominence. Ormrod concludes this section with a succinct review of the theoretical frameworks she uses throughout her study, identifying key theories by Bryan Turner, Chris Shilling, Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin as foundational for her analysis of a body moderated by contemporary popular media.

Ormrod follows this introductory chapter with an analysis of the wartime editions of *Sensation Comics* in which Wonder Woman had her cover debut in 1942. In this chapter, titled "Beautiful White Bodies", Ormrod contextualises Wonder Woman's debut and rise to prominence within the troubled race relations and heightened social focus on immigration as a result of the Second World War. Arguing that Wonder Woman represents the "ideal immigrant" of the wartime and post-war years, Ormrod identifies how the character's "erotic capital"—reinforced by her "showgirl" beauty—emphasised her ability to assimilate into American society despite her Amazonian heritage (32). Ormrod also points to the efforts to enlist women into work on the home front during the Second World War as critically important to the cultural construction of Wonder Woman as superhero. Like Wonder Woman/Diana Prince, American women inhabited dual identities encompassing both the domestic and public spaces. Ormrod utilises this language of dichotomies throughout her study to great effect, but particularly in her analysis of Wonder Woman in the war years. Not only does she argue that Wonder Woman's body represents contradictions connoting "purity/pollution, discipline/anarchy, modernity/nostalgia, love/ aggression" (32), but that Marston communicated much of his ideology around female empowerment through a "mind/body dichotomy" that emphasised the importance of a strong mind and will as an assurance of bodily autonomy (41). Ormrod's analysis of Marston's efforts to position Wonder Woman as a wholesome and empowered figure up to his death in 1947 expertly contextualises the character's position in the cultural zeitgeist at the commencement of the postwar years.

Following this examination of Wonder Woman's origins and wartime years, Ormrod begins her analysis of what she argues to be the most "overlooked and disparaged" era of the comics, during the Cold War years (63). Between the late 1940s and mid-1960s, Ormrod contends, the Wonder Woman comics reflected the conflict between the superficiality of the "golden age of family and traditional values" and the insidiousness of the moral panics caused by a fear of communism and perceived threats to these traditional family values (63). Ormrod convincingly argues that the character of Wonder Woman was altered to align with these traditional values by identifying the character's "softening image" (64). The character's footwear changed from boots to Greek sandals tied with ribbon, her jobs went from wartime espionage to editor of a newspaper's "Hopeless Hearts" section and, particularly as a result of the implementation of the Comics Code Authority in the early 1950s, she gained a family. Ormrod argues that this family—made up of Wonder Woman and younger versions of herself—reflects the reality of post–Second World War and Cold War era America, in which family units often lacked fathers and were "attacked by nuclear threats in the shape of a nuclear monster that continuously returned" (68).

Ormrod's analysis of the remainder of Wonder Woman's pre-Gadot characterisation is extensive and comprehensive. She succeeds in aligning the travels of Wonder Woman's "fashionable body" with the American political focus on the "New Frontier" in the 1960s (88), and in identifying the tensions inherent in Wonder Woman as a figure of divinity in the 1980s and 1990s while consumerism was succeeding in utilising unattainable beauty as a "means of

manipulating women" (140). Ormrod's interrogation of the post–9/11 iterations of Wonder Woman is particularly impressive, spanning considerations of a new national discomfort with vigilante heroics, the culture of surveillance and right-wing backlash (particularly against foreignness and working women) that characterised a tumultuous time in American culture.

In the final chapter of this extensive chronological study of Wonder Woman's place in American myth, Ormrod examines perhaps the most widely consumed (and certainly most profitable) iteration of Wonder Woman in Gal Gadot's portrayal of the character in the DC Extended Universe (DCEU) films. Ormrod concisely identifies the stakes for Patty Jenkins's *Wonder Woman* (2017), firmly positioning the film within the context of the early Trump years and emphasising its role in depicting a "more marginal and diverse heroism", along with other comic book films like *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018) and *Captain Marvel* (Anna Boden & Ryan Fleck, 2019) (191). Jenkins was the first woman to direct a superhero film, which, in turn, would become the "first successful superheroine franchise" (192). After identifying the significant feminist stakes of the 2017 film, Ormrod skillfully incorporates a discussion about Jenkins's use of nostalgia to please Wonder Woman's established audience as well as attract new demographics. This allows Ormrod to consolidate the analysis she has made throughout her study through the efficient identification of elements of Jenkins's and Gadot's Wonder Woman that reference previous iterations of the character's comic or televisual form. Ormrod utilises the final pages of the book to ruminate on the potential for future iterations of Wonder Woman. Considering significant cultural and political events like the Trump presidency and #MeToo, Ormrod posits that the future of Wonder Woman may lie in the character's appeal to fans in marginalised groups like the disabled and LGBTQ populations, racially diverse communities and, of course, women. From her beginnings as "a queer, immigrant and feminist character" (216), Ormrod argues, Wonder Woman has embodied diversity. Here, Ormrod makes a convincing case for the power Wonder Woman as a character may have in embodying the diversity of the modern media landscape.

This approach to the female body as a site for ideological projection is the key source of alignment for Ormrod and Barbara Plotz. Whereas Ormrod's analysis of Wonder Woman is based on the idea that the character embodies and reflects cultural values dominant in particular eras of American history, Plotz's contention is, in many ways, the inverse of this. In *Fat on Film: Gender, Race and Body Size in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, she argues that the fat body has been seen as a site of rebellion against middle-class ideals of conformity, self-control and gender binaries.

Plotz's examination of fatness in film is a far-reaching study of the myriad ways fat bodies are marked, othered, contained, stereotyped and objectified by mainstream filmmaking practices. Although Plotz limits her example texts to films released after 2000 with a character specifically marked as "fat" either by the film's dialogue or by another form of in-text othering, the detail of her analysis indicates a richness of source material. Much like Ormrod's discursive analysis of Wonder Woman's body, onto which she argues social and cultural ideologies are projected, Plotz argues that fatness is more "cultural construct" than a descriptor of a body's size or shape (8). Plotz concludes her introductory chapter by addressing one of the great strengths of her study: where fat studies has been criticised for its "colourblindness" and broader lack of scholarly attention on

diverse identities (4), Plotz considers how fatness intersects with gender, race and sexuality throughout her analysis.

Plotz begins by outlining historical representation of the fat male in popular culture, demonstrating that despite experiencing less stigma than, for example, the fat female body, the positioning of fat masculinity has significantly transformed over time. Plotz draws upon Sander Gilman's exploration of historical perceptions of male fatness and Niall Richardson's work on the socially constructed dichotomy between "masculine bulk" and "feminine fat" to reinforce the argument that the associations made with the fat body are decidedly gendered (27). Plotz also utilises foundational work by Sam Stoloff, Susan Bordo and Lee Monaghan, who argue that the lack of control and "softness" associated with the fat body undermines the perception of the fat man as masculine (28). If normative masculinity emphasises strict control over the body in order to achieve a desirable (muscular) shape, and fatness is the "immediate result of a lack of control" over the body (28), then, Plotz argues, the body of the fat male is a "less than masculine" body (28). The fat male body, therefore, becomes infantilised, and a site onto which socio-cultural anxieties about white masculinity can be projected. This thesis is first applied to a number of fat characters in contemporary films like *Monster House* (Gil Kenan, 2006), *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Thor Freudenthal, 2010) and *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Jon Watts, 2017). Plotz argues that the infantilisation of fat male bodies in these films—which focus on pre-pubescent or teenage boys—presents a stark delineation of masculinity based on maturity. In other words, the clumsiness, cowardice and ignorance of normative "social pressures" embodied by the fat characters in these films positions them as immature (31), and therefore still childlike, in comparison to the developing maturity associated with the slim protagonist. In this way, these characters serve to "validate the protagonist's own masculinity" by emphasising the protagonist's conformity (or desire to conform) to normative masculine physicality (29). Plotz then extends this analysis to a study of male adult fatness in films like *The Hangover* (Todd Phillips, 2009) and *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* (Steve Carr, 2009), and considers the implications of race on fat masculinity by examining black characters in films like *Kangaroo Jack* (David McNally, 2003) and *The Blind Side* (John Lee Hancock, 2009). This section of the book concludes with an analysis of the ways in which male fatness has come to be a cultural signifier of the decline of the power and privilege of white men in Western society since the 1960s, namely through the feminisation of the workforce and of labour more generally. Plotz conducts an in-depth study of *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* and its depiction of white working-class masculinity, arguing that the protagonist's body is marked as fat and is therefore presented as "the embodiment of the perceived inadequacies and loss of privilege of contemporary manhood" (63).

The third chapter of *Fat on Film* extends Plotz's analysis to female fatness. After acknowledging the importance of seminal works by Sandra Lee Bartky and Kathleen Rowe in outlining the ways in which the female body operates under a patriarchal gaze, Plotz specifically identifies the perception of whiteness as an integral part of normative femininity, and thus emphasises the importance of analysing female fatness in the context of racial identity. This more intersectional approach to fat studies allows Plotz to conduct a significantly more nuanced analysis of female fatness in contemporary cinema and is a key strength of her study. This analysis begins with an examination of the physical aggression often associated with fat female bodies. As femininity is associated with passiveness—and therefore, a lack of active aggression—the fat female body, being nonnormative in size, is often depicted as unusually strong or a vehicle for

unusual aggression. Plotz identifies Melissa McCarthy's characters in *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011) and *Identity Thief* (Seth Gordon, 2013), and Fat Amy in *Pitch Perfect* (Jason Moore, 2012) as exhibiting behavioural examples of this aggression. Aggression in itself is already a subversion of expectations around feminine meekness, but, as Plotz argues, the physical strength of the fat female body in these instances "compromises traditional gender roles based on the dichotomy of (physically) strong masculinity vs. (physically) weak femininity" (74). Plotz identifies this nonnormative strength with the common cinematic depiction of the fat female dominating her submissive husband—further destabilising the accepted strong/weak masculine/feminine dichotomy. This is particularly significant when Plotz incorporates considerations of race into her analysis, as this domination is present in the notion of the "black matriarchy", which refers to the "discursive fixation on the role of black mothers" (79). Plotz draws upon Hortense Spillers' seminal work in this space to form the foundation for her analysis of this nonnormative practice of fat female domination in contemporary cinema, identifying comedic examples as seen in films like *Grown Ups* (Dennis Dugan, 2010), and *Norbit* (Brian Robbins, 2007), as well as dramatic examples of Patricia Hill Collins's "Bad Black Mother" in films like *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009). Plotz also identifies the sexual aggression often associated with fat female bodies on film, but rather than generalising this sexuality as an exercise in obliviousness on the part of the fat woman, Plotz identifies a change in the depiction of fat female bodies as desirable in recent years. Pointing to the rise in prominence of heterosexual romantic storylines for stars like Melissa McCarthy and Rebel Wilson in a number of their mainstream cinematic vehicles, Plotz cautiously identifies a subversion of the way female fatness is positioned on screen. At the same time, she rightfully identifies the clear normativity these particular figures conform to in terms of race, sexuality, and relative size.

Following an examination of the depiction of the fat eater in contemporary Hollywood film, Plotz uses the final segment of her book to reinforce her commitment to analysing the relationship between fat bodies and marginalised identities in popular film. This culminates in the final chapter "The Fat Outsider", in which Plotz examines "outsider figures" in her chosen texts and attempts to determine whether these texts support or critique their in-text marginalisation (210). Plotz identifies the narrative of films like *The Blind Side*, *Dreamgirls* (Bill Condon, 2006) and *Precious* as cinematic examples of fatness not being depicted as "an isolated contributor to the outsider status of a character but rather as intertwined with race, class and gender" (217). In this way, she convincingly argues that fatness, like race, class or gender, can serve as a marker of otherness—particularly in Western popular media. Plotz then outlines modes that the fat outsider may inhabit in-text that can serve to "reinforce and/or protest" the character's stigmatised position (229), which include the fat outsider as a performer and as an inspirational figure. Finally, Plotz briefly identifies the more recent phenomenon of body positivity in mainstream Hollywood cinema with a short but incisive examination of the Amy Schumer vehicle *I Feel Pretty* (Abby Kohn and Marc Silverstein, 2018).

Although Ormrod and Plotz conduct their analyses using different approaches: Ormrod through a historical and cultural lens and Plotz through feminist and film theory, both take on the concept of the public body with nuanced extensiveness. Both authors conduct their most interesting analysis in the context of the intersectionality that they each identify as a key potential area for current and future scholarship. For Ormrod, the diverse identities that Wonder Woman could embody in future iterations of her character indicates a fascinating trajectory for future

scholarship. Plotz calls for the establishment of "fatness as a category of analysis within the discipline of Film Studies" (256) and argues that it should be considered just as race, gender and sexuality are when analysing the representation of social identities on film. The accessible nature of both Ormrod's and Plotz's writing allows for the concise application of complex theories to popular media, and both studies finish with an exciting insight into the future of scholarship in their respective fields.

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