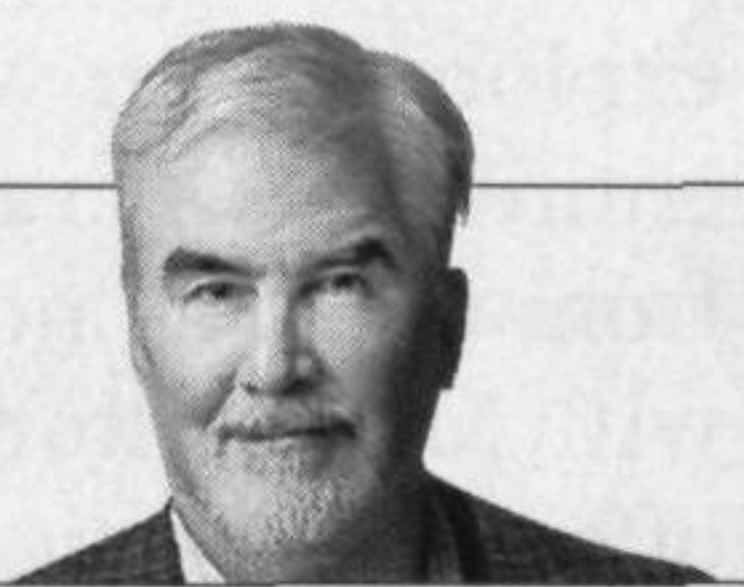


Her leg is an arm
McGowan strides
into *Grindhouse*

THE BIG PICTURE

Why Can't a Woman ... Be a Man? That may be the only way females can get good roles in today's blockbuster movies

RICHARD CORLISS



WITH ALL OF ITS BUSTLING AND AGENDA setting, the new Nancy Pelosi-led Democratic majority ought to think about passing an Affirmative Action Resolution for Women in Movies. Madame Speaker, women are more than half the population of this great country, yet onscreen they're an endangered species—the ivory-billed woodpeckers of cinema.

Visit your multiplex, and try, just try, to find a movie where women are as plentiful and powerful as men. 300, the Spartan workout video, has one important female role, of King Leonidas' wife (Lena Headey); that leaves 299 for the guys. In *Shooter*, the hero-on-the-run gets brief assistance from a young widow (Kate Mara) before returning to his mission of evaporating a million bad guys. Girlish Jon Heder, one of the two skaters in the Will Ferrell hit *Blades of Glory*, does have a love interest (Jenna Fischer), but Ferrell doesn't—unless it's Heder. Indeed, the one big new movie fully populated with strong women is the “double feature” *Grindhouse*, from those epicures of raw meat, Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez.

Only retirees may recall that movie women used to be on an equal footing with men. Female characters were at the center of some of the top-grossing films in history,

from *Gone With the Wind* to *The Sound of Music* and *Titanic* (sort of). Now they mostly ornament the margins. If they're lucky.

One reason for the vanishing movie female is that the genres in which women used to be equal or dominant—the romantic melodrama and comedy—fell out of favor when the core audience changed from families to teen boys. The guy-kids prefer starker fare: action movies (one man against the system), science fantasy (techies save the solar system) and horror films (where young women are the naked and the dead, usually in that order). What didn't change was Hollywood's view of the sexes: that men are defined by their exploits, women by their emotions. In a movie era that found sentimentality risible, thus unprofitable, the ladies were excluded.

Even in comedy, where women were mandatory for smart repartee and the fade-out kiss, guys have elbowed them out of the equation. Forget Tracy and Hepburn. Today the standard pairing is some combination of

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Ben Stiller, Vince Vaughn, Ferrell and one or more Wilsons. *Wedding Crashers*, *Talladega Nights* and *Blades of Glory* are basically male love stories: boy bonds with boy, boy breaks up with boy, boy and boy make up. The female interest is strictly nominal.

Old Hollywood had men-only genres too, especially the western. Cowboy films allowed for a token lady part, to give the hero someone to fight over; but she would never do the fighting, instead cowering, paralyzed with dread, during the final showdown. It wasn't until the exploitation movies of the '60s and '70s—the ones paid lavish tribute in *Grindhouse*—that the gals in guy-genre films finally had something to do: take charge, kick ass and kill people. The films weren't exactly feminist, since the actresses usually had to take off their blouses before they could flex their muscles. But they gave women a snarly, ballsy attitude, and the chance to be as quick on the draw as John Wayne.

In *Planet Terror*, Rodriguez's half of *Grindhouse*, a go-go dancer (Rose McGowan) loses a leg when zombies chew it off—wait, it gets weirder—and instead of a prosthetic limb has her stump fitted with a machine gun, which she uses to mow down acres of the undead. *Death Proof*, Tarantino's contribution, presents two trios of high-adrenaline chicks menaced by a psycho stunt driver. The women in both entries love guns and cars and don't mind using them for righteous vengeance and reckless thrills.

For these directors, female empowerment means armament; they liberate their movie women by turning them into men. They will show their actresses killing villains but never making love. (When two lovers start a sex scene in *Planet Terror*, the screen flames out and a sign, MISSING REEL, appears.) So the young males in the audience get not a window into the complex and mysterious nature of women but a mirror of their own urges: to talk tough and blow stuff up.

Speaker Pelosi, is this the legacy you want to leave your grandchildren? ■



The incredible shrinking women You have to look hard to find them in the latest big movies, be they epics (Headey, left, in 300), thrillers (Mara in *Shooter*) or comedies (Fischer in *Blades of Glory*)