

Writing the Woman: An Exploration of Domesticity and Feminine Power in Sci-Fi/Fantasy Film and Television

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Abstract

In 1979, Ellen Ripley appeared on screens as the first female lead in a science fiction film. Forty-five years later, the genre of science fiction and fantasy in film and television has introduced the world to a plethora of strong, powerful, and iconic feminine characters like *Terminator's* Sarah Connor, *Star Trek's* Captain Janeway, and *Wonder Woman's* Diana Prince. The development of these feminist powerhouses has coincided with a steady rise in popularity of the speculative fiction genre, facilitating strong, independent women who defy the tired femme fatale or damsel-in-distress archetypes to mainstream audiences. These powerful cinematic incarnations showcase women's capacity to be independent and powerful modern-day paladins who have ventured where no women in film had gone before—outside of the home. As this paper argues, however, this rearticulation of women across these genres has come at a cost, one that has problematised the representation of women as both powerful and feminine. Through the lens of two of the genres' more recent protagonists, Trinity in *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) and Galadriel in *The Rings of Power* (2022), this paper utilises interpretative analysis and critical feminist film theory to highlight how domesticity and heroism are represented as incompatible. The analysis reveals that female protagonists in recent speculative fiction, such as Trinity in *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) and Galadriel in *The Rings of Power* (2022), are systematically distanced from domestic roles. Furthermore, this paper highlights how this very binary is inherently harmful and problematic, as it naturalises this distinction.

Keywords: domesticity; heroism; femininity; science fiction; fantasy; representation

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Introduction

Alien (1979) and its heroine, Ellen Ripley, saw the birth of the contemporary heroine in the sci-fi film genre. The film, originally written for a male lead, presents Sigourney Weaver as the strong, complex, and much-loved Ellen, portrayed (quite radically, for the time) as a female saviour of male victims. *Alien* (1979) is widely regarded as the first feminist blockbuster and Ellen Ripley the “first action heroine,” drastically altering Hollywood’s guidelines for the presentation of women in action movies (Brooks 2009). In the 45 years since, the mould for women in sci-fi and fantasy texts has shifted considerably. The time-worn damsel in distress has largely been supplanted by women with agency, strength, and the moral fortitude necessary to combat not only the evils of their in-text worlds, but the misogyny that still plagues the darker recesses of the internet. It is no secret that audiences, particularly men, have not always been supportive of the feminine archetypes that espoused female power (Oppenheimer et al. 2003), but these progressive representations of women with heroic qualities have become increasingly common.

While feminist criticism on science fiction has long focused on the rise of the strong female character, less attention has been given to how these characters are shaped by and distanced from domesticity. Much of the existing literature celebrates the contemporary heroine for her strength and independence, praising screenwriters for their feminist portrayals of the modern woman, yet rarely does it interrogate what has been omitted from the narrative to achieve these heroic virtues. This omission is significant because Western constructions of gender have historically positioned the idea of “heroism” within masculine terms in the public sphere, while associating the feminine within the private sphere of home and childcare (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Simone de Beauvoir (1949), in *The Second Sex*, argues that the treatment of women across history is one marked by inequality, deferring women to the status of Other. Beauvoir (1949) also illustrates how females have historically been pushed to the margins of society, culture, and narrative. In contrast, men have occupied the public sphere, often associated with politics, citizenship, authority, and leadership (Pateman 1988, Elshtain 1981). Over time, heroism became associated with masculinity existing in the public space while domesticity, linked to the female gender, was marginalised to the private.

Tracing the hero archetype as far back as mythology, folklore, classic literature, and early media, the heroic narratives frequently begin away from home (Campbell 2008), i.e. home and heroism are not compatible in order for the narrative to progress. While at first, contemporary sci-fi and fantasy cinema appear to challenge these conventions by creating female protagonists and placing them at the centre of heroic narratives, they inevitably (and quite frequently) reinforce the initial idea that while strong heroines can exist, they may only do so if it is outside of the home. Writers such as Misailidou (2023) and Tang (2019) observe the evolution of heroines in the sci-fi film genre, highlighting the departure from familial ties and obligations within the domestic sphere as key legs in the race towards self-actualisation

in the last 20 years. It is particularly telling how the discourse around the heroine's narrative transformation represents domesticity negatively, affirming how home and family are largely accepted as inhibitors of female power and leadership. As sci-fi and fantasy continue to dominate television and cinematic screens globally, they also shape social and cultural notions of agency, empowerment, and the representation of gender.

Scholars have long argued that domesticity is not simply a concept in relation to material location such as the home or the family dwelling but an ideological construct through which femininity is defined, negotiated, and regulated by external hegemonic structures (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Where the home has become a site for gender roles to be produced and reinforced, so too, feminist film theorists (Mulvey 1975, Lauretis 1987) demonstrate that cinema does not simply reflect these constructions of gender but also actively participates in their production and circulation. For this reason, Judith Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble* is central to this discussion as it demonstrates how constructions of gender are produced through repeated acts, language and behaviour before they become accepted as natural. This consequently impacts the way the audience of sci-fi or fantasy films and, by extension, society, understand the relationship between domesticity, caregiving, home-making and marriage in relation to womanhood. Within this theoretical framework, this article examines how contemporary sci-fi/ fantasy negotiate the relationship between female heroism, agency, and domesticity.

Contemporary representations of the female hero on screen have encountered challenges in their depiction of what female strength might look like. Namely, they struggle to situate power and heroism within feminine contexts, and (arguably more so) struggle to include the context of "the home" in presenting "strong" female characters. This paper aims to interrogate these gaps in representation, focusing on two recent female heroines: Trinity in *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) and Galadriel in *The Rings of Power* (2022). More importantly, this study asks why mainstream narratives find it so difficult to conceive of a woman who is both powerful and rooted in the domestic sphere.

Contextualising the Selected Texts

The Matrix Trilogy is regarded as cyberpunk, a subgenre of Science Fiction films, which focuses on a futuristic, dystopian setting in which artificial intelligence surmounts and enslaves the human race in order to maintain power and control over an elite virtual reality system. The tetralogy, directed by Lana Wachowski, centres around Neo (Keanu Reeves), whose journey from hacker to the much-anticipated hero of humanity is chronicled in four films spanning from *The Matrix* (1999) to *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003) to its most recent feature of 2021, *The Matrix Resurrections*. Alongside battling the machines is Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), who is not only a master of combat but also becomes Neo's partner as the tetralogy progresses.

The fourth film, *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021), sees both Neo and Trinity reinserted into the Matrix, completely wiped of their memories without any recollection of their former heroic lives. The film depicts the chemistry between Neo and Trinity as the most powerful source of energy to have ever existed, and so long as the two never actually meet one another and recall their past lives, the Matrix can continue to function under the manipulative hand of the Analyst (Neil Patrick Harris). Trinity already exists in the Matrix as Tiffany, a slightly altered character, complete with a family of her own. As Tiffany episodically experiences bouts of de ja vu, she pines for a life of adrenaline with fast motorbikes and high-speed pursuits to colour her exceptionally mundane routine. It is only upon reconnecting with Neo that Trinity is given the ultimatum to choose between self-actualisation and becoming the hero she was made to be, or her fictitious and comfortable suburban lifestyle.

This radical attempt at portraying a somewhat contemporary feminist character who embodies the strong female character archetype may have been a response to what has been referred to as “Trinity Syndrome” articulated by Tasha Robinson (2014) in “We’re Losing All Our Strong Female Characters to Trinity Syndrome.” Robinson (2014) observes that numerous films feature female characters who are initially portrayed as strong, powerful, wise, and principled, but ultimately become marginalised and relegated to secondary roles once the male hero emerges and asserts his dominance. The conclusion of the film sees Trinity regain her agency and emerge not just as Neo’s partner but as the one (the other one), presenting her on an equal plane with Neo.

The Lord of the Rings: Rings of Power (2022) has quickly grown in popularity and caused considerable consternation among the fans of the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. The Fantasy series is set thousands of years before the events of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), the first of the trilogy. The show focuses on how the antagonist, Sauron, comes to forge the infamous rings and ultimately rises to power. The series also showcases some of the backstories of other much-loved and iconic characters like Elrond, Gandalf, and Galadriel, who are also depicted in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Galadriel quickly takes the lead as the protagonist of the show, depicted as a fearless and vengeful warrior against the enemy. This updated and headstrong revision of the original character has not necessarily been a welcome departure by critics who question the radical jump from ethereal and wise in *The Lord of the Rings* (2001) to someone whose “strength is only equal to her bristling anger” (Kain 2022).

This paper aims to examine the function that traditionally domestic roles play in the depiction of the strong female character in the science fiction and fantasy genre, using examples from both film and television. The paper further analyses how domesticity is often in contrast to heroic qualities such as strength, bravery, and independence or agency. This analysis is particularly central to expanding the existing feminist discourse in gender studies as well as in re-evaluating gender representation in an already widely consumed and influential media genre.

Literature Review

The Strong Female Character Archetype in Speculative Fiction

In examining the relationship between domesticity and the strong female character, a consideration of how film and media have historically constructed these gender archetypes, positioning domesticity and heroism as opposing expressions of what masculinity and femininity look like. Baker and Raney (2007), who articulate what these gendered stereotypes typically look like in children's animated media, became largely influential for examining the persistence of these representational patterns across other forms of visual media. Sarkeesian (2010) later refers to a tabulated form of these gender archetypes from her study of gender representations of typically male and female attributes on television, as seen below.

Table 1: Gender Specific Values

Masculine		Feminine	
Rational	Physically and verbally aggressive	Intuitive	more likely to show affection
Emotionally Inexpressive	more frequently rewarded	Emotionally Expressive	more likely to emphasize relationships
Strong	showed more ingenuity	Weak	more helpless
Cool Headed	asked and answered more questions	Hysterical	more likely to ask for advice or protection
In Control of Themselves	emphasized more tasks	Lack Self Control	Passive
Independent	Violent	Dependent	selfless in situations of forced submission
Active	threatened others more frequently	Passive	Materialistic/prone to attachment
Objective	keen minds and problem-solving abilities	Erratic	Unaggressive
Dominant	muscularity and strength	Submissive	Shy
Decisive	resourceful	Indecisive	Cautious
Self-Confident	Daring	Lacking in Self Confidence	Cooperative
Not nurturing	Competitive	Nurturing	

Source: Sarkeesian 2010; Baker and Raney 2008; Johnson 2005

Sarkeesian (2010) argues that despite the binaries identified in Table 1, female characters in television shows demonstrate progressively confident, intellectual and brave characteristics, albeit these qualities are still assimilated to the masculine identity. Merrick (2003, 241), who refers directly to sci-fi, recalls David Attebery in arguing that technology and science, which are central to sci-fi narratives, have been historically represented as “masculine endeavours,” further reinforcing an age-old self/other dichotomy which positions women as the “passive object of exploration” while the masculine represents “knowledge, innovation and even perception.”

Robinson’s (2014) coinage “Trinity Syndrome” has proven to be a valuable descriptor for what scholarship has identified as a pattern with strong female characters in speculative fiction who portray ambition, power, and intellect but are quickly sidelined upon the arrival of the male protagonist in film and television shows. According to Robinson (2014), filmmakers often add female characters to their narratives simply for the sake of inclusivity without the character actually bearing any meaningful value in the overall plot, “brining in a ‘strong female character’ isn’t actually a feminist statement or an inclusionary statement, or even a basic equality statement, if the character doesn’t have any reason to be in the story except to let filmmakers point at her on the poster and say ‘See? This film respects strong women!’”

Domesticity and Heroines in Sci-Fi/Fantasy Genre

While theories around the representation of domesticity in post-feminist media emerge largely from romantic comedy genres and lifestyle television, the underlying frameworks offer a valuable lens for speculative fiction, a genre in which the relationship between heroine and her home is rarely considered incidental. Negra (2009, e1), whose focus is on the United States and the American cultural marketplace affirms that the binary exists by arguing that that post-feminist narratives appear to have a recurring pattern that she terms “retreatism,” that is the female protagonist only regains her selfhood by abandoning a desire for public achievement and returning to their “natural order” of domestic life through romance, motherhood, and returning home. This is particularly interesting as it associates the independent protagonist as artificial or a diversion, whilst domesticity is a return to a pre-feminist state that is considered restorative, natural, and desirable. Although Negra’s (2009) work sits outside the realm of speculative fiction, the narrative pattern highlighted in *The Architecture of Post-feminist Retreatism* showcases the aforementioned tension between the private and public sphere discussed here, where domesticity and female agency are polarised.

Nelson (2024) in *The Heroine Archetype* highlights the historic imbalance in heroism studies, which treats heroes as a gender-neutral category while still fundamentally acknowledging that its conceptualisation is essentially masculine. In other words, Nelson (2024) posits that the heroine has a choice between relationality and masculine-coded independence. By integrating both Jungian theories on archetypal identification and Campbell’s (2008) traditional journey of the hero, Nelson

(2024, 8, 11) argues that a balance between what is considered inherently masculine and feminine qualities may be the level of “interconnectedness” and “relational knowledge” by finding community support, leading to the “creation of a new normal in the heroine journey cycle.” Nelson’s (2024) conceptualisation of qualities of empathy, to be nurturing and self-confident, appears as a challenge to the existing hero/domesticity binary since these are qualities which sit across the gender values spectrum (Table 1).

Briggs (2020) expands this conversation to include marginalised perspectives outside of Eurocentric constructions of motherhood within the genre. The argument rests on the premise that representations of domesticity in speculative fiction, specifically the ideas surrounding motherhood and pregnancy, reflect a traditionally Western ideal that is static, monolithic, and resistant to cultural context. By integrating Afrofuturism and reproductive futurisms, Briggs (2020) argues that reproduction and motherhood have historically been a political site of control and that the concept of communal “othermothering” (Collins 2000), which relies heavily on ensuring the well-being and survival of the community by supporting children who are not biologically their own. Here, it seems traditional notions of what motherhood looks like are largely challenged by existing and successful community practices that translate into the archetype of heroines in speculative fiction.

Existing Scholarship on Selected Texts

The Matrix saga has generated considerable popularity for its interdisciplinary contributions to the field of sociology, psychology, philosophy, race, and gender studies. One of the key themes in the films, and one which carries over into *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021), is that of simulation. While the idea of illusion and control was present in the initial movies, the fourth film offers a nuanced and complex interpretation of simulation through its layers of meta-commentary. Part of the concept of illusion is in the act of belief, which is what Christopher Williams (2003) posits as the essential catalyst in Neo becoming “the one.” Williams’s (2004) study argues that Trinity has had the power the entire time to become “the one,” even alongside a weaker, more feminised Neo, but still chooses to believe that he is meant to be the saviour of humanity.

It is her belief in this reality and her ability to manipulate a simulated world which propels Neo into his role. While the solipsism narrative paints Trinity as the true hero, it also entraps her in what was earlier mentioned as the Trinity Syndrome. Although Trinity in *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) inverts many traditional female stereotypes, writers have also managed to reinforce some of them. Niessen (2022) highlights how tropes like the red pill in the previous films, which were taken over by anti-feminist and neo-fascist groups, have been transformed as a symbol of hope within the feminist and queer narrative framework, and that although the latest instalment of the film is challenging far-right thinking, it also fails to address other pressing contemporary issues.

Present studies suggest a trans-reading of the film in considering how Trinity has overcome the initial binaries existing in the previous films: real and imagined, human and machine, male and female. According to Porter and Albrecht (2023, 8), Trinity transcends gender binaries and heteronormative narratives that the initial films carried, not just due to an androgynous aesthetic but also through inversions where Neo discusses his therapy sessions and Tiffany confesses her love of motorbikes and video games, “You have your analyst, I have my bikes.” In representing how this non-binary identity exists, Gasque (2023) further highlights how the film reveals the realities of queer identities, which have been appropriated and exploited by modern ecosystems to channel their discontent into compliance. Critics argue, however, about whether these inversions actually meaningfully challenge or unsettle the domestic heteronormative roles, or simply place them elsewhere.

In contrast, very little scholarly debate is present on the representation of Galadriel in *The Rings of Power* (2022), with previous literature centred on how she is depicted in *The Lord of the Rings* universe instead. For this analysis, it would be worth the effort to contextualise this earlier depiction to better contrast the more recent representation of the character. Galadriel is known to fans as a “life-sustaining” source, whose ring, Nenya, harnesses the power to keep the Golden woods alive (Ramaswamy 2014). Aside from her supernatural abilities, her character in the trilogy is described as generous, wise, and benevolent. Ramaswamy (2014, 236, 239) notes that without her help, “the fellowship would not have been able to complete the task of destroying the ring” and that as a character she embodies a “star and of pure white light.” Where Ramaswamy (2014) frames the novel Galadriel around her nurturing qualities and life-sustaining power, Kain (2022) suggests that the more recent film and television depiction of Galadriel replaces her softer traits with combative strength, raising questions around how her lack of family and home could possibly shape her heroism. Kain (2022) argues that recent depictions of Galadriel portray her as “[making] demands and acting tough, all bark and no bite.”

The representation of traditionally domestic roles and femininity in science fiction as well as fantasy films and television shows remains a difficult project to undertake, which seems paradoxical in a genre that offers so many possibilities and very few creative limitations. With all of these options, the literature still suggests that representations of female protagonists and characters within speculative fiction are just reproductions of masculine identities and not actually multi-dimensional in their approach, arguing that the taking on of “male behaviours and roles does not advance female agendas or perspectives” (Chieffalo 2021, 98). Critics acknowledge that home and gender have been historically paired with one another. This binary opposition is employed to legitimate oppression and dependence on the basis of gender; it has also been used to regulate sexuality (Duncan 1996, 128). However, there has been a significant effort to recognise “fluidity of home as a concept, metaphor and lived experience” (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 21) and reimagine the domestic space as a site for identity negotiation and the reclamation of power, not a supplant to self-actualisation in the narrative of

the heroine. For this reason, the study of how domesticity, in connection to femininity, has been positioned in conflict with heroism is critical in re-evaluating the representation of the strong female character in the science fiction and fantasy genres.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative interpretive approach towards the study of domesticity and heroism in female protagonists within the sci-fi/fantasy genre, focusing on Trinity in *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) and Galadriel in *The Rings of Power* (2022). The study engages with Critical Feminist Film Theory, drawing on Laura Mulvey's (1975) *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* and Judith Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble* to explore how these depictions of heroines inform a broader discussion on the feminine identity within a widely consumed and expanding media genre.

The two texts were purposively selected to allow for a comparative analysis across, rather than within, one genre. While both science fiction and fantasy are frequently treated as a single genre in existing scholarship (speculative fiction), each sub-genre draws on distinct conventions for constructing a heroine, where sci-fi's emphasis is on technology, and fantasy relies on magic and inherited power. Selecting one text from each of these sub-genres enables the study to examine whether the domestic/hero binary identified in the literature operates consistently across these differences or whether it may be shaped by specific sub-genre conventions.

Trinity and Galadriel were specifically selected for three distinct reasons. First, both are considered long-running female characters whose recent depictions (2021 and 2022, respectively) represent explicit attempts to revisit, adapt, or update earlier heteronormative representation, making both texts feasible selections for examining contemporary changes in the representation of heroism and domesticity. Second, both characters occupy the same position in terms of narrative structure, that is, each female character takes on a powerful central role within a male-dominated narrative universe, and each has a complicated or nuanced relation to home (Matrix vs reality for Trinity, and Valinor vs Middle-earth for Galadriel). Finally, as discussed earlier, Galadriel's most recent representation remains sparse when compared to the extensive literature on Trinity, making this pairing an opportunity to expand the existing body of criticism, which has not received sufficient attention.

Both *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) and *The Rings of Power* (2022) were accessed via Amazon Prime Video, in accordance with the platform's terms of use for personal viewing. The paper employs textual analysis (McKee 2003) as its primary close-reading method, which, unlike cinematic analysis that centres on the technical elements within the film, focuses on how meaning, representation, and discourse are constructed within the narrative. Both works were viewed, with key scenes rewatched and relevant dialogue transcribed. Particular attention was paid to scenes depicting each protagonist's

relationship to home, family, and relationships alongside moments featuring their heroic status.

Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze is applied to investigate how each of these protagonists is portrayed within moments of heroic action and domestic implications to consider whether their heroism is positioned as a spectacle for the male audience or as a representation of narrative agency in its own right. Butler's (1990) theory on gender performativity is also applied to investigate whether each protagonist demonstrates heroism in relation to male-coded actions such as combat or leadership alongside moments with feminine or domestic-coded behaviours such as familial care, nurturing, and interconnection. This was carried out to determine if each of these characters was capable of demonstrating both naturally and organically or if they stood in opposition to one another.

Analysis

Domesticity as an Illusion and Threat in *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021)

Tiffany in *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) provides a problematised conception of domesticity as both an illusion that is so far-fetched that it can only exist in a fictitious space, as well as a threat to the female lead's journey of self-discovery and empowerment. Here, domesticity takes the form of a mundane routine and suburban life, which has been intentionally produced to elicit a deep dissatisfaction on Tiffany's part. The creative decision to portray Tiffany's husband and children as part of the simulation implies that the ideals tied to family and homemaking are outdated or can never really produce happiness for a modern-day woman and heroine, and are therefore not real. By considering Butler's (1990) views on gender (and by extension, domesticity) as a performance, Tiffany is indeed a performance of domesticity, not domesticity itself, since the film quickly undercuts this and treats these qualities as fake and Trinity's heroism as legitimate. These contradictions reveal that the film gestures towards performativity but again forecloses it by asserting that Trinity's true self is arguably beneath the domestic facade.

The writers of the film go as far as marking her marriage as an illusion through the naming of her husband "Chad." Chad, in urban and contemporary language, refers to a hypermasculine persona often regarded as the alpha male (Dictionary.com 2020). Chad's role in the film is not just the staging of a heteronormative archetype identifiable to the audience but a hyper-performance. Chad's exaggerated bravado exists not to interrogate masculine performativity but to render domesticity as repellent in contrast (Butler 1990). Her marriage to the stereotypical figure is intended to serve as a distraction so that she does not reconnect with Neo, even through Chad's unimaginative, domineering, and emotionally distant form of endearment. Her children are clear symbols of the societal obligations she carries as a mother (although the term is used loosely here), and their presence prevents her from fully realising her potential,

further entrapping her in a world that is not real. “Motherhood” in Butler’s (1990) terms functions as a sort of regulatory identity, part and parcel of domesticity that is further reinforced through repeated acts. These behaviours constitute Tiffany’s identity but do not necessarily express them. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Tiffany’s portrayal is that all reference to this performative domesticity exists without a single reference to her home in the film. Tiffany’s home never forms part of the setting in any of the scenes in the film. The film withholds the exact location that would make domesticity lived and embodied rather than an abstract concept. In this film, home is a “concept” and “metaphor” (Blunt and Dowling 2006). By never offering any screen time for Tiffany’s home, the film refuses her authentic domesticity even a possibility and makes it simply a marker without any substance. This positioning of domesticity in opposition to Trinity’s true heroic destiny has several implications. First, the writers, whether inadvertently or not, perpetuate the narrative that domesticity and heroic traits cannot exist in the same strong female character. The question of whether they can imagine it or *want to imagine it* remains unanswered.

Mulvey’s (1975,808) concept of “woman as image, man as bearer of the look” better articulates the trajectory the writers of the film took in creating Tiffany, and much like a scapegoat, they deposit upon her all of the potential feminine and domestic traits which have been historically aligned to the concept of submission and suppression. Then, in a climactic moment in the film’s narrative, Trinity is faced with the difficult ultimatum, choosing a horrible and suppressed life or becoming who she is. Perhaps, in an attempt to regain the female gaze, Trinity’s disavowal of Tiffany is a metaphorical rejection and destruction of Mulvey’s (1975,808) “pleasure in looking,” making Tiffany so incredibly displeasing that no one, regardless of gender, may desire to possess her life.

Further to this, Mulvey’s (1975, 19) foundational claims suggest that classical cinema is structured around a division of “looking” based on gender, where the female in film is an “element of spectacle” but her very presence “freezes the flow of action” and “works against the development of a story-line.” Within this framework, the man is projected as an active agent, while the woman is reduced to a visual spectacle. Whereas in the earlier films Trinity was sexualised in tight leather outfits and her narrative arc was intended to support Neo’s ascension to messianic hero, *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) radically subverts these traditional binaries.

However, Mulvey’s (1975) concerns are not solely related to whether women are sexualised on screen, but how cinematic techniques (framing, camera movement and so on) encode who holds the narrative agency and who is merely looked at. This is especially visible in *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) through the Tiffany/Trinity split. In the Simulatte café, Tiffany is positioned between Neo (the reminder of a different, more liberated life) and her family (the illusion). Her staging is obviously no coincidence, and neither is her static performance, where there is minimal camera movement. Read through Mulvey’s (1975) theory, Tiffany is considered the ‘image’ here; she is the visual centre of the frame because she is denied movement and her

domestic position is also the reason for her containment. Her husband rushes her away from Neo because of their commitments (in this scene it is her son's practice), suggesting duty calls, but the audience can see precisely how Tiffany is simply passive in the moment.



The Matrix Resurrections. 2021. Directed by Lana Wachowski. California: Warner Bros.

The contrast between her fixity in the above scene when compared to the motorbike scene below is glaring. In the following scene, Trinity has woken up. This self is far more self-aware, confident, assertive, and the camera movement actively follows Trinity through the busy streets as she essentially rescues Neo from what would have been a terrible fight. Here, Trinity is not the spectacle; she is an agent. In the Simulatte café, Tiffany is immobilised by those who represent domesticity in her life, but in the scene below, Trinity maintains narrative agency to control the direction and speed of the narrative, ultimately inverting the position Tiffany earlier occupies. Why this contrast is so significant is because it suggests the film's treatment of domesticity vs heroism operating not just at a level of narrative content but also in cinematographic form. This distinction reinforces the broader positioning of domesticity as antithetical to heroism.



The Matrix Resurrections. 2021. Directed by Lana Wachowski. California: Warner Bros.

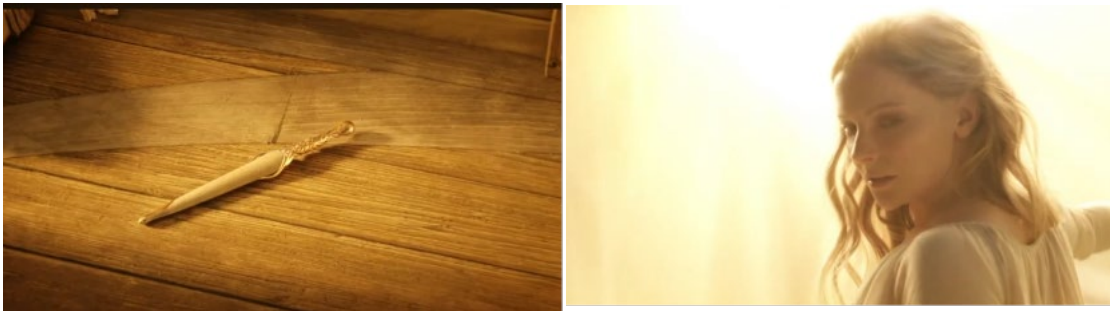
Domesticity and Galadriel in Crisis in *The Lord of the Rings: Rings of Power* (2022)

Domesticity is traditionally tied to notions of family, nurturing, and home. These concepts have been starkly contrasted with bravery, power, and agency as seen in Table 1 (Gender Values) through the depiction of Galadriel in *Rings of Power* (2022). The crisis that this paper identifies in the character of Galadriel is one in which power and strength seem to be produced as a result of alienation. Her independence can be read as a form of self-alienation. To be specific, no one understands her, no one has as much motivation for vengeance as her, and as a result, she must take on Sauron alone. She is repeatedly positioned as the most competent in any given scenario as she is surrounded by, as we argue here, “woefully incompetent” aids who are predominantly male (an inclusion that no doubt exaggerates Galadriel’s strength). In the first episode, her need to pursue Sauron and the Orcs comes at the cost of her own party’s well-being, and it is this determination that grounds her as both heroic and an unfeeling leader who is indifferent to those around her.

This performance is constituted, as Butler (1990, xv) terms it, through “repetition and ritual.” Galadriel is seen repeatedly giving orders, refusing counsel, choosing combat over reconciliation, and resisting authority figures around her. This is significant because these acts do not necessarily make her masculine in some essentialist sense, but actually because the Galadriel of the series is placed within some sort of performance register which the show codes as masculine (and she is not rewarded for following it). In other words, she is not written as uncaring by nature, but the characters and the narrative itself respond to her behaviour by intentionally withholding support and trust.

Her alienation can then be seen not necessarily as a flaw in her own character but the cost of performing outside of the gender role she is expected to occupy (Butler 1990).

This is most evidently seen in the scene in which Galadriel and her company are granted passage to Valinor. As the elves undergo a ritual of disrobing, relinquishing their weapons and armour and sing in anticipation, Galadriel cannot be more resistant to the process, especially the parting with her blade. There are at least three moments within the scene where Galadriel's eyes shift between the bright and divine lights of Valinor and her blade resting on the floor of the ship. The juxtaposition between Galadriel's blade and the opportunity to return home is largely significant here and has been situated as two very different futures. Even in terms of her staging, Galadriel, like Tiffany in *Simulatte*, is positioned between home and a life of heroism, with her hand stretched out as if being pulled away from the blade.



“A Shadow of the Past.” *The Rings of Power*. Season 1, episode 1, directed by J. A. Bayona. Aired September 1, 2022. Amazon Prime Video.

When she looks down at the blade, she recalls a conversation with Finrod, her brother, asking him (essentially) which light to follow or which path to take. Read through Butler (1990), this specific recollection functions as a kind of counter-ritual. Galadriel realises that by touching the darkness/fighting off evil/ leaving home she can realise her destiny and the recollection pulls her towards a different identity.

In addition to Galadriel's refusal to return to the domestic space, she also has no immediate familial ties to display any measure of affection to. This raises several questions regarding the intentional removal of these characters from the narrative, much like the “Bury Your Gays” trope found in media (Hulan 2017). The Bury Your Gays trope is relevant here, as members of the LGBTQ+ community were rarely seen on television, and when they were, they all ended up disproportionately killed off. It appears that “burying the husband” of a female protagonist is a necessary prerequisite to facilitate said character's rise to warrior-like status in the Fantasy film genre, as it removes any potential competition or distraction.

The scene below, in which Galadriel and Halbrand (Sauron) share a moment of intimacy as they reflect on fighting together, depicts a sort of romantic chemistry. Halbrand says that fighting at Galadriel's side was worth holding on to "binding it to [his] very being," and Galadriel affirms that she felt the same. They face each other, with close-up shots, making the moment equally warm and emotional with softer lighting than the usual combat scenes she is seen in. According to Mulvey (1975), this stages Galadriel, momentarily, as the object of desire. Interestingly, it is this very placement that endangers her as she is later awakened to the fact that Halbrand is Sauron. If Galadriel is to choose Sauron/Halbrand and pursue a romantic relationship, it will be to the detriment of all of Middle-earth and her own destiny.



"Udûn." *The Rings of Power*. Season 1, episode 6. Aired October 7, 2022. Amazon Prime Video.

In the reveal scene, Galadriel refuses Sauron's wish that she fight by his side and be his queen, and holds up the same blade she once refused to relinquish before entering Valinor. According to Butler (1990), Galadriel's refusal can be read as an intentional refusal to perform (domesticity); Sauron offers queenship, a specific role that will solidify her domestic identity. Her refusal, like her resistance to disrobe before entering Valinor, is again staged through the blade. The recurrence of this object across both refusals suggests a consistent pattern. Galadriel's heroism is not demonstrated through a positive self-definition, but through the retention of a weapon, precisely at the moment she is offered a relational or domestic alternative.



“Alloyed.” *The Rings of Power*. Season 1, episode 8. Aired October 14, 2022. Amazon Prime Video

Conclusion

Through an analysis of Trinity in *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) and Galadriel in *The Rings of Power* (2022), it can be said that domesticity stands in juxtaposition with heroic traits in the sci-fi/fantasy film genre. Both texts stage this opposition not solely through narrative structure but also through cinematic framing. Galadriel's resistance to domesticity and Trinity's rejection of it underpin what many contemporary sci-fi/fantasy film writers imagine feminist heroines should embody, without considering the possibilities domesticity offers. In both cases, domesticity is not just absent from the narrative; it is evoked, offered, and then abruptly foreclosed, whether it is Tiffany's domestic life as a simulation or through the potential intimacy of Halbrand and Galadriel, or her initial return to home.

The implications of this study go beyond the two texts analysed here. If domesticity and heroism continue to be represented as mutually exclusive, then this representational pattern can carry into broader cultural discourse about what forms of womanhood are worthy of praise, heroic status, and narrative centrality. Future scholarship might extend this analysis to texts that more intentionally attempt to reconcile what domesticity and

heroism within fantasy and science fiction narratives may look like, in order to assess whether such a reconciliation is narratively and visually possible or whether the genres' conventions structurally resist it.

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