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Goddess: Power, Glamour, Rebellion

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Throughout the history of Hollywood, the ‘screen goddess’ has been worshipped for her glamour, beauty, talent and power. This exhibition reveals the untold stories of the stars who defied expectations, demanded change and dismantled stereotypes. By celebrating the icons who defined and disrupted the ‘feminine ideal’, we honour their impact on screen culture and society. Through complex characters, collective strength and endless creativity, they have revolutionised how we see women on and off the screen.

In her words

When these women raise their voices, it's an act of rebellion and solidarity. In *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945), when Barbara Stanwyck says she's "tired of being pushed around... being told what to do... dancing to everyone else's tune", she could be speaking for the women that Hollywood labelled as stars. Since the beginning of cinema, women have been branded beautiful, glamorous, marvellous and magnificent. They've been admired and idolised; they've become goddesses.

But they've also been forced to question how they look and even who they are. Lea Seydoux asked, "Will I be good enough?" and Bette Davis could "never stand [her] face". Despite being "authors of themselves", as Isabella Rossellini puts it, or, like Glenn Close, wanting to "tell stories that have something... to say about women", they've been told their stories won't sell. They've had to defy expectations and the industry. Laverne Cox achieved success even though, as she says, "When

I was a kid... I never saw myself" on screen. Michaela Coel stated, "I tend to ignore the label and just keep doing what I'm doing."

By sampling talk shows, movies, acceptance speeches and interviews, Chiara Costanza has created a soundscape that features stars across time declaring, in one voice, that women be heard, not just admired. women be heard, not just admired.

Crafting the ideal

Marilyn Monroe's floor-length pink gown from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) is one of cinema's most famous costumes. From music videos to action films, this iconic look has been remixed and reinterpreted by countless celebrities.

In the female-centred superhero movie *Birds of Prey* (2020), Harley Quinn (Margot Robbie) offers an unruly reimagining of Monroe's scene-stealing costume. During a violent interrogation, Quinn hallucinates a sinister version of 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend', strutting the stage in this fuchsia jumpsuit before taking a bite out of the chorus line. The Australian actor was once pigeonholed as "the hottest blonde ever", but she fought to reshape how she was perceived. Reprising the role of Harley Quinn, Robbie produced and developed *Birds of Prey* to offer a more complex depiction of the character that invites audiences to revel in an anarchic female lead.

Alongside is a gown worn by reality TV star and *America's Next Top Model* (2003–18) contestant Winnie Harlow in a video that went viral on social media. An activist and spokesperson for the skin condition vitiligo, Harlow uses her platform to challenge dominant White beauty standards that still hold Monroe as the ideal.

Kitty (Elaine Crombie) costume from *Kiki and Kitty*

Amelia Gebler, Australia, 2017
polyester, sequins, turkey feathers, plastic earrings
Courtesy Porchlight Films

Harley Quinn (Margot Robbie) costume from *Birds of Prey*

Erin Benach, USA, 2020
stretch satin, satin lining, horsehair braid
Courtesy Warner Bros. Corporate Archive

Winnie Harlow gown from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* photoshoot

Jamie McFarland, USA, 2019
silk, synthetic lining, silk lining, polyester elastane
Courtesy Jamie McFarland

Pink fairy-godmother

In recent years, pink has become the colour of rebellion, unifying protests for women's rights across the world. Wearing a sequinned pink dress and swilling cosmopolitans, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara actor Elaine Crombie embodies the body positivity movement in this costume from *Kiki and Kitty* (2017). The comedy series follows the adventures of a young Black woman whose talking fairy-god vagina (Crombie) coaches her to be more confident. Crombie's bold and vivacious character celebrates the sensuality, agency and humour of First Peoples women.

This reading of Monroe's idealised femininity challenges the myth of a singular screen goddess, showing that beauty comes in many guises.

Monroe, Madonna, Harlow

A rare black-and-white wardrobe test shows the original costume Marilyn Monroe was meant to wear for ‘Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend’. Costume designer William Travilla was tasked with creating the “sexiest, most exciting, almost-naked lady on screen”. He used strategically bejewelled black fishnet fabric to create the risqué showgirl outfit. But when nude photos of Monroe were sold to *Playboy*, studio bosses feared a backlash. Her star was rising, and they wanted to protect their investment. The iconic pink satin gown, with its oversized bow, presented a more respectable image.

Over the decades, stars have reimagined the pink gown to challenge expectations of femininity. For ‘Material Girl’, Madonna restaged Monroe’s performance, casting herself as the blonde bombshell to comment on the materialism of 1980s America. More than 35 years later, Winnie Harlow went viral when she recreated the look. The model and

reality TV star, who has a unique skin condition that causes loss of pigmentation, challenges the industry's narrow definition of beauty.

In the years since studios marketed young actors as 'Apprentice Goddesses', stars have fought for the autonomy and agency to craft their own ideal.

Winnie Harlow in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* photoshoot
exhibition print
Albert Sanchez, USA, 2019
Courtesy Albert Sanchez and Pedro Zalba

***Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* wardrobe test**
facsimile
USA, 1953
Courtesy 20th Century Studios, Inc.

***ELLE* magazine featuring Winnie Harlow**
UK, May 2018
Albert Sanchez, USA, 2019
Courtesy Albert Sanchez and Pedro Zalba

Cinema magazine featuring Marilyn Monroe
Italy, November 1955

'Apprentice Goddess', LIFE magazine
USA, January 1951

***Material Girl* vinyl LP**
Japanese *Material Girl* cassette
Madonna, 1985

Channelling Marilyn

By remixing the famous scene and draping themselves in pink, celebrities have channelled Marilyn Monroe to cement their place in the pop culture pantheon. While Monroe's satin evening wear represented 1950s respectability, Madonna satirises the scene in her 1980s hit 'Material Girl' to show that women don't need men or their money. Wearing a bright pink jumpsuit, Margot Robbie defies her own blonde bombshell status in *Birds of Prey* (2020), a film she produced to celebrate an empowered girl gang. Megan Thee Stallion and Normani amp up the attitude and financial independence of Madonna's interpretation in 'Diamonds', the lead single from the *Birds of Prey* soundtrack that became an anthem. On the small screen, Serena van der Woodsen (Blake Lively) performs 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend' in a dream sequence in *Gossip Girl* (2007–12). Meanwhile, Kylie Jenner represents a new type of star, designed by reality TV and social media, not the studio system.

By honouring the scene, celebrities and stars hope to capture Monroe's mythic femininity,

but in recent years, the colour pink has been transformed from a pop culture phenomenon into a symbol of protest, worn to signify women's ownership of their sexual, reproductive and social rights.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes
20th Century Fox, 1953

Material Girl
Limelight Productions, 1985

Birds of Prey
Warners Bros., 2020

Diamonds
Atlantic Recording Corporation, 2020

Winnie Harlow
Instagram, 2019

Gossip Girl
17th Street Productions, 2007–2012

Kylie Jenner
V Magazine, 2019

Kiki and Kitty
Porchlight Films, 2017

Who would she be today?

In 1954, frustrated by her pay and the quality of roles she was being offered, Marilyn Monroe went on strike. She was scheduled to play another bombshell in another musical but was refused the right to read the script and discovered that her male co-star would earn 70% more than her.

Instead of giving in to the studio's demand that she return to work, Monroe courted the media by honeymooning with a famous baseballer and entertaining troops in Korea. The front-page news made her a superstar, which she used to renegotiate her contract and weaken the studio's control over her. We're used to seeing Monroe as a pin-up, but in Milton H Greene's photo she's wearing a power suit and staring directly at the camera, challenging us to underestimate her. When 20th Century Fox withdrew a lucrative bonus, Monroe founded a production company and negotiated new terms that gave her control over a film's subject, director and cinematographer. This defiant act contributed to the downfall of the studio system and gave

future stars more creative (and personal) freedom.

When feminist writer Gloria Steinem asked, ‘Who would she be today?’ in *Ms* magazine, one answer might be ‘A business-savvy actor who becomes an executive producer’.

Marilyn Monroe sitting in a cane chair
exhibition print
Milton H Greene, USA, 1955
Courtesy the Archives, LLC

‘If Marilyn Had Lived… Who Would She Be Today?’, *Ms.* magazine
Gloria Steinem, USA, August 1986

Uncovering Marilyn

There's a cheeky, heart-shaped embroidery on the rear of this ensemble worn by Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot* (1959). It's a playful detail in Orry-Kelly's design, which incorporated skin-toned silk among the sequins to make her look nude. The Australian designer celebrated Monroe's physicality. This boundary-pushing costume also shows how she took control of her image after renegotiating her studio contract, which led to more daring roles like Sugar Kane in *Some Like It Hot*. The censors weren't impressed with the film's racy costumes and cross-dressing, but it was released without the Hays Code's approval. The film's success helped accelerate the abandonment of the code in 1968.

Sugar Kane (Marilyn Monroe) costume from *Some Like It Hot*

Orry-Kelly, USA, 1959
silk, nylon, beads, sequins
Courtesy the Collection of Motion Picture Design

***Some Like It Hot* poster**

facsimile
USA, 1953
Poster collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Marilyn Monroe and Orry-Kelly during production of *Some Like It Hot*

USA, 1953
Core Collection. Production files, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

A Hollywood satire

In the 1930s, photographer Will Connell captured Hollywood stars at their most glamorous in headshots and publicity photos. While helping studios construct the image of their stars, Connell gained a unique insight into the moviemaking business. These surreal photos are from his first artist book, *In Pictures: A Hollywood Satire* (1937). Each photo is named after a stage in the production of a film. In ‘Career’ we see a man reaching for a woman’s wrist, suggesting that Connell saw something sinister behind the scenes.

Studios controlled far more than their stars’ roles and wardrobes. Through the morality clauses in their contracts, they also dictated their actors’ off-screen lives. Drinking and drugs were banned. Queer actors like Barbara Stanwyck and Robert Taylor were forced into sham ‘lavender’ marriages and studios ran competitions to name their stars, which happened to Lucille Fay LeSueur, better known as Joan Crawford.

By charting the production process through his images, Connell satirises the absurd overreach of the studios and highlights their control and coercion.

In Pictures: A Hollywood Satire

exhibition prints
Will Connell, USA, 1937
Collection of University of California Riverside, California Museum of Photography, Gift of Will Connell

From scandals to censorship

Hollywood had a racy reputation in the 1920s and 30s. As audiences had less money to spend on entertainment during the Great Depression, studios produced salacious films featuring sex, violence and drinking to lure them into cinemas.

Concerned that movies promoted loose morals, and scandalised by tabloid stories of stars behaving badly, religious and civic groups lobbied the studios to clean up their act. To avoid government censorship, the industry responded with the Motion Picture Production Code. Nicknamed the Hays Code after its enforcer, William Hays, it was a set of self-imposed guidelines that restricted sex, violence and profanity. It also prohibited depictions of adultery, homosexuality and drug use, and mandated the promotion of traditional values.

You can see one of the commandments printed in this booklet: ‘The sanctity of the institution

of marriage and the home shall be upheld. No film shall infer that casual or promiscuous sex relationships are accepted.'

The Hays Code led to less overt depictions of liberated people on screen, but it also forced filmmakers to find creative ways around the rules, like innuendos and double entendres that were hard to identify in scripts. In 1968, the code was replaced with the ratings system.

A Code to Govern the Making of Motion and Talking Pictures booklet

Motion Picture Association of America, USA, 1934, published in 1944
Motion Picture Association of America. Production Code Administration records, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Coochee-Coochee cover-up

Women's bodies have been controlled on screen since the beginning of cinema. The white tracks across *Coochee-Coochee Dance* (1896) obstruct the rhythmic hips and breasts of belly dancer Fatima Djamile. Though the humble belly button occasionally slipped past censors, during Hollywood's Golden Age some believed its visibility was a slippery slope that would lead to sex all over the silver screen. Until 1983, belly buttons were banned on American TV amid a debate about decency that mirrors the #FreeTheNipple movement on social media today.

Fatima's Coochee-Coochee Dance
James H White and Thomas Edison, USA, 1896

Bollywood bombshell

These *Filmfare* magazines celebrate Bollywood icon and Hindi cinema's 'tragedy queen', Meena Kumari. Pictured in a white dupatta (veil), the magazine promotes the upcoming release of *Pakeezah (*1972). India's first film in colour Cinemascope, *Pakeezah* was screened for over 50 weeks. But it was the film's fabled 15-year production and Kumari's star power that made it legendary. Originally conceived as a love letter by her husband, production halted when the couple split. Thirteen years after filming began, they returned to shoot the remaining scenes. Using footage from both decades, Kumari's appearance fluctuates as she battles alcoholism and the end of her marriage.

'A Star is Dead' proclaims *Filmfare* magazine, mourning Kumari's death just three weeks after *Pakeezah* premiered. Though she didn't live to see it, her star persona and popularity united India and Pakistan in 1973 after years of conflict. When *Pakeezah* was broadcast from India into

Pakistan, crowds gathered to watch Kumari on big-screen TVs arranged at traffic intersections.

Even at the end of her 30-year career, Kumari's style still inspired fans, who bought film tickets for their tailors and asked them to recreate the leading lady's costumes – a practice that continues in India today.

***Filmfare* magazines**
***Star & Style* magazine**
India, c. 1972
Courtesy Mohammed Rehan Shahabuddin Ansari

***Pakeezah* cinema ticket**
India, 1973

***Pakeezah* press booklet**
India, 1972

***Pakeezah* film stills**
India, 1972

***Pakeezah* film poster**
facsimile
India, 1972
Courtesy BFI National Archive

The modern face of India

Meena Kumari understood the power of costuming. Pictured on the cover of *Star & Style* magazine and in the film still above, she wears a kurta and lungi; a loose collarless green shirt and red chequered sarong. Traditionally worn by men, the ensemble sparked a fashion trend across India and the South Asian diaspora.

The white sari formerly signified a widow, but re-emerged as a symbol of female emancipation when it was worn by activists during the campaign for Indian independence. On screen Kumari harnessed the colour's political properties to represent a new, modern face of Indian femininity.

Honouring Dorothy Dandridge

This vintage silver gown transforms Halle Berry into her idol in *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999). Ever since she saw *Carmen Jones* (1954) as a teenager, Berry had looked up to Dandridge and eventually won an Emmy for her portrayal of the trailblazer. In 2002, 48 years after Dandridge was nominated for the award, Berry made history as the first Black star to win the Oscar for Best Actress. In her speech, Berry acknowledged Dandridge and "every nameless, faceless woman of colour that now has a chance because this door tonight has been opened".

Dororthy Dandridge (Halle Berry) costume from *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*
Shelley Komarov, USA, 1999
silk gauze, silk lining and glass bugle beads
Courtesy John H Davey, New York Arts and Sciences

***Carmen Jones* poster**
facsimile
USA, 1954
Edward Mapp collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

The first Black movie star

To be cast as the fiery lead in *Carmen Jones* (1954), Dorothy Dandridge knew she had to make an impression. The director wasn't sure she was fierce enough, but when Dandridge stormed into his office wearing the black and red costume pictured, she dispelled any doubts. The style, which she devised, won her the role and became the film's signature look.

When she was the first Black woman to appear on the cover of *LIFE* magazine, she wore the legendary outfit. Halle Berry recreated the iconic look for her role in the biopic, *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999), for which she won the Best Lead Actress Emmy.

Throughout her career, Dandridge overcame discrimination and fought racial stereotypes. She refused to play the maid and mammy roles available to Black women in the early decades of cinema. While the headstrong and unapologetically sensual Carmen Jones may have been labelled a "hip-swinging floosie" by

her rivals, the character made Dandridge a fashion icon and offered a new way to see Black women on screen. Dandridge became the first Black star to be nominated for the Best Actress Oscar for *Carmen Jones,* breaking down racial barriers and inspiring generations of Black actors to follow in her footsteps.

***LIFE* magazine featuring Dorothy Dandridge**
USA, 1954

Halle Berry in *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*
USA, 1999
Courtesy Photo 12 / Alamy Stock Photo

Costume design drawing for *Carmen Jones*
facsimile
Mary-Ann Knight, USA, 1954
Costume design drawing collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Costume design drawing for *Carmen Jones*
facsimile
Mary-Ann Knight, USA, 1954
Courtesy Collection Cinémathèque Française

Creating her own history

The closing credits of *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) tell the audience that "Sometimes you have to create your own history". Forced to do just that, director Cheryl Dunye plays a fictionalised version of herself in this landmark New Queer Cinema film, the first feature directed by a self-identified Black lesbian.

Dunye stars as 'Cheryl', a Black lesbian filmmaker living in 1990s Philadelphia. While working in a video store alongside her friend Tamara, Cheryl discovers a 1930s Black actor credited only as 'The Watermelon Woman' for her 'mammy' roles. She decides to make a documentary to uncover who the watermelon woman really was – eventually discovering that she was a lesbian named Fae Richards. Because there's a lack of information about Black lesbians in film history, Dunye has to write her own story, *The Watermelon Woman*, which blurs the line between documentary, fiction and reality. As you can see from the cover of *Hollywood Lesbians*, even queer film

history has overlooked women of colour.

By creating her own history, Dunye attempts to correct the past and makes space for Black lesbians in the future of cinema, paving the way for a new generation of younger filmmakers like Dee Rees and Lena Waithe.

***The Watermelon Woman* production stills**
USA, 1996
Courtesy Cheryl Dunye
and Alexandra Juhasz

Baseball cap and nametag from *The Watermelon Woman*
USA, 1996
Courtesy Cheryl Dunye
and Alexandra Juhasz

‘Girl Gets Girl’, *Premiere* magazine
USA, February 1996

Hollywood Lesbians
Boze Hadleigh, 1994

Watermelon women, mammies and maids

The ‘watermelon woman’ that Dunye seeks to uncover represents the kinds of roles that Dorothy Dandridge refused to take. Between the 1930s to the late 1950s, most roles for Black actors were as maids or ‘mammies’. Though Hattie McDaniel became the first Black actor nominated for an Oscar in the Best Supporting Actress category for her role as Mammy in *Gone With the Wind* (1939), these roles reinforced stereotypes of Black servitude and the actors who played them were largely forgotten. Halle Berry dedicating her Oscar to these “nameless, faceless women of colour” acknowledges their erasure from cinema history.

Breaking the binary

With its sumptuous costumes and regal characters, *Orlando* (1992) – Sally Potter's adaptation of Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel – queers the British costume drama to resist the homophobia of the early 1990s. Tilda Swinton stars as the time-travelling, gender-fluid Orlando. We first meet the young nobleman wearing this velvet costume with silk brocade and yellow stockings. Next to it is a costume worn by Quentin Crisp who plays Queen Elizabeth I. By casting the 83-year-old Crisp, Potter pays tribute to the gay icon, who she described as "the Queen of Queens".

In one memorable scene, Orlando awakens to discover she is now a woman. "No difference at all, just a different sex," a naked Swinton tells the audience. This transformation isn't shown as physical, but a fluid shifting of gender identity. Though Orlando embraces her new self, as a woman she's belittled by high society and has her title challenged and her lands threatened. In this beautiful but imposing ivory gown, her movement

is restricted, symbolising her loss of freedom and agency.

An unexpected mainstream success, *Orlando* is a landmark work in feminist and LGBTQIA+ cinema, and Swinton's gender-bending performance has helped define her persona, allure and influence ever since.

Queen Elizabeth I (Quentin Crisp) costume from *Orlando*
Sandy Powell, UK, 1993
brocade, silk, lace, cotton, composite metals, beads, pearls
Courtesy the Collection of Motion Picture Design

Orlando (Tilda Swinton) costume from *Orlando*
Sandy Powell, UK, 1993
silk, polyester, cotton, steel, metallic thread
Courtesy the Collection of Motion Picture Design

Orlando (Tilda Swinton) costume from *Orlando*
Sandy Powell, UK, 1993
silk, cotton velveteen, cotton calico, metallic thread, braiding, suede leather, leather, glass beads, plastic sequins
Courtesy Sandy Powell

A symbol of liberation

In 1992, when *Orlando* was released, it was illegal to 'promote homosexuality' in Britain under laws passed in response to the HIV/AIDs epidemic in the 1980s. Despite facing persecution, the author and raconteur Quentin Crisp – one of England's first openly gay figures – became a queer icon. This black-and-gold brocade gown worn by Crisp as Queen Elizabeth I recreates the monarch's famous dress, adorned with eyes and ears to suggest she was always watching and listening. Crisp's camp interpretation of Elizabeth I turned a symbol of authority into one of liberation. Later in life, Crisp would identify as transgender and use she/her pronouns.

Les Résultats du féminisme *(The Consequences of Feminism)*
Alice Guy-Blaché, France, 1906

Finding Orlando

Orlando (1992) spans 400 years and takes place across England, Russia and the Middle East. Director Sally Porter faced a unique challenge translating Virginia Woolf's 1928 era-spanning novel for the screen. For over five years, she and Tilda Swinton worked tirelessly on the script. But when they pitched the idea to funders, they were told that it was "unmakeable, impossible, far too expensive and anyway not interesting". To help financiers imagine their cinematic vision, the pair took a different tack. They hired period costumes and staged an impromptu photoshoot at a stately home. The 'look book' helped illustrate the visual approach to the film. You can see how the photos of a young Swinton led to the film's iconic subversion of the costume drama.

Legendary costume designer Sandy Powell also lent her creative talents to the film. The rapid lines of her costume sketches capture the anarchistic energy of the production and show how the costuming evolves as Swinton's

character embodies multiple gender identities across eras.

When Swinton guest-edited the magazine *Aperture* in 2019, she included the images from the look book. A year later, *Orlando* inspired the 2020 Met Gala theme, demonstrating the film's enduring impact.

Orlando costume sketches
exhibition prints
Sandy Powell, UK, 1993
Courtesy Sandy Powell

Look books created for _Orlando_ in _Aperture_ magazine
Aperture / Tilda Swinton, UK, 2019

Consequences of Feminism

In Alice Guy-Blaché's gender-flipping 1906 comedy, *Les Résultats du féminisme (Consequences of Feminism)*, men are relegated to raising kids, ironing and sewing while women smoke, drink and prey upon the 'weaker sex' with lurid advances. While Guy-Blaché doesn't literally put men in women's shoes, she playfully exposes what life is like for women in the early 20th century and proves that cinema has been critiquing traditional gender roles since its inception. By the end of the seven-minute satire, the men overthrow the 'evil' matriarchy.

Though Guy-Blaché swaps society's power structure for comedic effect, she was also responding to the growing public discourse around women's rights during the first wave of feminism. The gender-inverted rebellion embodies a persistent fear about feminism – that it's not about equality, but about waging war on men. By suggesting that men wouldn't tolerate being treated this way, Guy-Blaché asks why they expect women to.

Flipping dress codes and gender expectations

Ever since stepping onto the Oscars red carpet in a tuxedo reimagined as a velvet gown, Billy Porter has subverted and challenged Hollywood's rigid dress codes. For the 2019 Tony Awards, Porter wore this show-stopping red velvet and pink tulle evening suit. Among the 30,000 crystals on the train is an embroidery of a uterus to support women's reproductive rights. Porter often mixes extravagant moments with a message of inclusivity.

After rising to fame as a singer and Broadway star, Porter's portrayal of Pray Tell in *Pose* (2018–21) was widely praised for its depth and authenticity. Set in New York's ballroom scene, the groundbreaking TV series rejects the negative portrayals of LGBTQIA+ characters common throughout screen history and features the largest trans cast in scripted TV history.

Marlene Dietrich also caused a stir when she

shared cinema's first lesbian kiss while wearing a tuxedo. As the nightclub singer in *Morocco* (1930), Dietrich channels the sexual freedom of 1920s Berlin, where she started her career. She continued to reimagine this iconic costume throughout her life, later wearing it in white.

Both performers have used their star personas to transcend the binary and fight for women's and LGBTQIA+ rights.

Marlene Dietrich's white tuxedo
1959
wool, silk, cotton, mother-of-pearl and crystal buttons, elastic
Courtesy Deutsche Kinemathek
Marlene Dietrich Collection Berlin

Billy Porter's Tony Awards outfit
USA, 2019
velvet, tulle
Creative and fashion direction by Sam Ratelle
Ensemble by Celestino Couture in partnership with Scenery and the Theater Development Fund
Courtesy the TDF Costume Collection Rental Program

Tuxedo pumps worn by Marlene Dietrich
Delman, c. 1950
patent leather and silk grosgrain ribbon
Courtesy the FIDM Museum at the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandizing, Los Angeles.
Department of Recreation and Parks, Los Angeles

Cufflinks from Marlene Dietrich's personal wardrobe
14ct gold and ruby cufflinks
Courtesy Deutsche Kinemathek – Marlene Dietrich Collection Berlin

Billy Porter shoes
Orel Brodt and Swarovski,
USA, 2019
PVC and Swarovski crystals
Courtesy the TDF Costume Collection Rental Program

Billy Porter bag
Emm Kuo and Swarovski,
USA, 2019
Courtesy the TDF Costume Collection Rental Program

Billy Porter at the Tony Awards
2019
Jewellery by Oscar Heyman
Courtesy Everett Collection Inc. / Alamy Stock Photo

Will it be trousers for women?

When the openly bisexual Marlene Dietrich shared cinema's first lesbian kiss wearing a tuxedo, it was scandalous for women to wear trousers. As these fan magazines from the era outline, the US Congress hotly debated the emerging trend, while police in Paris reprimanded Dietrich for her fashion choice. Though she had previously played the Hollywood game and only ever appeared on the red carpet in glamorous gowns, that all changed on 12 January 1933. She left "spectators stuttering with amazement" when she posed in a tuxedo at a premiere. "Every newspaper in America carried a picture of Marlene in trousers," according to the article.

At the same time that Dietrich's deviation from Hollywood's expectations was sparking trends, Gladys Bentley was pushing boundaries. During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s, the entertainer performed proudly in her white tuxedo and top hat, singing raunchy songs at drag balls and queer speakeasies. As

one of the first openly lesbian-identifying public figures in America, she was a trailblazer and symbol of resistance during a time when gay people – and particularly gay people of colour – were persecuted and discriminated against.

‘Dietrich Declares Herself’, *Screenland* magazine
October 1993

‘Will it be trousers for women?’, *Movie Classic Magazine*
May 1933

Gladys Bently wearing a white tuxedo
facsimile
USA, c. 1946–49
Courtesy Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

Costume design drawing for Marlene Dietrich
facsimile
Horace Lannes, 1950
Courtesy Deutsche Kinemathek – Marlene Dietrich Collection Berlin

Between two worlds

Anna May Wong was tired of the limited and stereotypical roles Hollywood offered her in the 1920s and 30s. Though considered the first Asian American movie star, she was often forced to play the villainous 'Dragon Lady' or subservient 'Lotus Flower'. In a 1933 interview, Wong questioned why "the screen Chinese is always a villain... murderous, treacherous, a snake in the grass!" It was partly due to the anti-Chinese sentiment fuelled by the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited Chinese migration.

Though born in Los Angeles in 1905, Wong stared down discrimination on and off screen. As this magazine points out, she walked "the imaginary line that divides the races" – she was a movie star and fashion icon who still lost the few nuanced Chinese roles to White actors. Despite lobbying to play the lead character in *The Good Earth* (1937), Wong was passed over for German actor Luise Rainer, who won an Oscar for her 'yellowface' performance.

Wong never gave up though. She starred in over 50 films and became the first Asian American star of a TV show. Her contribution to early cinema has recently been recognised, with characters inspired by her appearing in the TV series *Hollywood* (2020) and Damien Chazelle's film *Babylon* (2022).

***The Lady from Shanghai* poster**
facsimile
USA, 1948
Poster collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Anna May Wong wearing a 'dragon lady' cheongsam in *Limehouse Blues*
exhibition print
USA, 1934
Courtesy photo-fox / Alamy Stock Photo

Anna May Wong on cover of *Films Selectos*
June 4, 1932

Anna May Wong on cover of *Films Selectos*
October 1, 1932

Anna May Wong and Marlene Dietrich Ramses Film-Fotos Collectable Cigarette Card #110
photographic print on card

‘Between Two Worlds’ in *The New Movie* magazine
July 1932

Daughter of the dragon

Anna May Wong's hypnotic eyes stare menacingly at the viewer from the poster for *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931). She's painted a sickly green and her unforgiving fringe and razor-thin brows harden her face. Despite Wong's beauty, the film further aligns her with the monstrous, framing her against a dragon tapestry to reinforce her connection to the deceitful, exoticised and hypersexualised 'Dragon Lady', a trope the film established.

In *Limehouse Blues* (1934) Wong plays Tu Tuan. Costume designer Travis Banton signified Tuan's villainous nature by snaking a dragon motif down her body, which you can see in the black-and-white photograph to your left. On this lounge suit, he beaded another stylised Chinese emblem into the silk to underline the link between Asian characters and villains.

Since then, the dragon motif has evolved into a visual shorthand for Hollywood's anti-heroes. You can see its symbolic use in this elaborate costume worn by Glenn Close as the puppy-

hunting Cruella de Vil in *102 Dalmations* (2000).

The ‘Dragon Lady’ stereotype is still associated with actors of Asian heritage, like Lucy Liu in *Kill Bill* (2003) and *Charlie’s Angels* (2000) and the related ‘Tiger Mother’ role Michelle Yeoh plays in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018).

Tu Tuan (Anna May Wong) costume from *Limehouse Blues*

Travis Banton, USA, 1934
silk, beads
Courtesy the Collection of Motion Picture Design

Cruella de Vil (Glenn Close) costume from *102 Dalmatians*

Anthony Powell, USA, 2000
wool, silk, silk lining, silk braid, suede leather, leather,glass beads, plastic sequins, metal, wood, paint
Courtesy Elizabeth Sage Historic Costume Collection

***Daughter of the Dragon* film poster**

exhibition print
USA, 1931
Courtesy Everett Collection, Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

Dangerous women

This poster for *Shanghai Express* reads: "Mysterious, seductive, tantalizing!" It's referencing Marlene Dietrich's character Shanghai Lily, but it could easily be applied to her co-star Anna May Wong's Hui Fei. Both film stars were at the height of their fame as the two scandalous courtesans. Thoughout the film they're both framed as femme fatales. Their eyes are captured in smouldering close-ups and they're bathed in shadow. But the film is also feminist: the two women save the passengers from anti-government rebels.

***Shanghai Express* flyer**
facsimile
USA, 1932
Courtesy Strand Theatre Collection,
Archives Center,
National Museum of American History

Fatal women

When women gain power, men get scared. You can see this in the mysterious, seductive and deadly femme fatale. The archetype can be traced from silent-era star Theda 'The Vamp' Bara to Amy Dunne (Rosamund Pike) in *Gone Girl* (2014). Using her sexuality and intellect to manipulate, control and co-opt power, she reflects prevailing attitudes to women.

During World War II, women gained newfound agency in the workforce. When men returned in the 1940s and wanted to re-establish traditional gender roles, the femme fatale appeared in film noir. Kitty Collins (Ava Gardner) might sing seductively in *The Killers* (1946) but it's framed as a deadly siren's call. When Rita Hayworth says "I've heard a lot about you" in *Gilda* (1946), it sounds like seduction and a scheme. After women secured better jobs in the 1980s and 90s, the femme fatale embodied men's fear of financially secure and sexually assertive

women, like Glenn Close eyeing her pray at the bar in *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and Sharon Stone unfazed by police questioning in *Basic Instinct* (1992). Some femme fatales represent fears of the exoticised 'Other'. Salma Hayek's snake charmer in *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) channels Anna May Wong's 'dragon lady' dance in *Limehouse Blues* (1934). The femme fatale's traits can also empower traditionally marginalised women, like Elektra Abundance's (Dominique Jackson) steely glamour in *Pose*.

All About Bette

This costume sketch by Edith Head perfectly captures Bette Davis' lidded stare. Her famous doe eyes project confidence reinforced by how casually she holds her cigarette. Davis had every reason to appear confident. After looking for a role to launch her comeback, she felt she had found it in *All About Eve* (1950). She earned an Oscar nomination for her turn as Margo Channing, an aging Broadway star fending off a younger rival. At 41, Davis seemed to embody the film's critique of how Hollywood treated older women. And in a way she did. She spent the following decade searching for her next star turn with very little luck.

Costume design drawing from *All About Eve*
facsimile
Edith Head, USA, 1950
Edith Head papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Hagsploitation

In 1962, Hollywood legend Bette Davis took out this ‘work wanted’ ad in *Variety*. Despite 30 years’ experience in motion pictures, the two-time Best Actress Oscar winner had to playfully remind the industry of her legacy and expose its attitude towards older women: “Mobile still and more affable than rumour would have it.”

Joan Crawford was in a similar situation. After almost 40 years on screen and her own Best Actress Oscar, by her mid-50s the job offers were dwindling. When Davis landed the titular role in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), she found a co-star in Crawford. The low-budget gothic melodrama was far from their glamorous roles, but the film plays on their celebrity pedigree and legendary rivalry.

Davis plays Jane, a former child star who’s grown into madness since her sister Blanche’s (Crawford) fame eclipsed hers. Wheelchair bound after an accident, Blanche is helpless

against Jane's envy and abuse. The surprise hit spawned 'hagsploitation', a genre of campy thrillers and horror movies that resurrected stars of yesteryear. The films provided roles, but they were grotesque caricatures of aging that persist in films like *Hereditary* (2018) and *Relic* (2020), whose characters have more depth, but still represent the limited parts for older women.

***What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* poster**
facsimile
USA, 1962
Courtesy Everett Collection, Inc. / Alamy Stock Photo

Joan Crawford and Bette Davis during production of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*
facsimile
USA, 1962
Core Collection. Production files, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Bette Davis advert in *Variety* magazine
facsimile
USA, 1962

Bette Davis on cover of *Cinema* magazine
April 30, 1949

Spotlighting change

Women have used the spotlight to push for change and defy industry expectations. Whether it's Jane Fonda sarcastically wondering, "how dare an actress think or be political?", Lena Waithe pronouncing "I'm unafraid to be complicated,", or Miranda Tapsell declaring "I am angry", these stars have kept fighting for equality and diversity on screen. This work centres women's experiences to show how far we've come and how far we have to go.

Josephine Baker declaring "my age belongs to me" and Frances McDormand deploring the expectation "that no one should age past 40", shows that ageism isn't new. At the 2023 Oscars, Michelle Yeoh proclaimed, "as the [years] get bigger, it seems the opportunities... get smaller". The Malaysian superstar also dedicated an award to "every little girl that looks like me", highlighting the importance of representation. You can't be it if you can't

see it. During her history-making Golden Globe win, MJ Rodriguez celebrated “the many Black, Latina, Asian… the many… beautiful colours of the rainbow”, while Lea DeLaria recalled “wanting to change things” after a childhood of homophobic bullying. As Cate Blanchett said, “We stand on the shoulders of the women before us… we have a responsibility to work… so that more women can stand on our shoulders.”

Weaponising glamour

Josephine Baker shakes, shimmies and twirls in front of a White chorus line, her smile beaming across the stage. In another scene, her eyes dart back and forth mischievously, proving she's just as playful with her face as she is her body.

Baker had crafted her carefree choreography in the US but found fame in Paris, where she moved in 1925 to escape racial discrimination. When she performed in a risqué skirt of bananas and a beaded necklace, she became a symbol of the Jazz Age flapper. Her provocative costumes and distinct dancing made her a fashion icon and she was the first African American woman to lead a feature film, *Sirens of the Tropics* (1927). Though the film and Baker's 'banana dance' conjured White colonial fantasies, her performances parodied the sexualisation of Black women.

Throughout her life, she fought discrimination, championed civil rights and shattered racial

barriers. When Germany invaded France in World War II, Baker weaponised her glamour to defend her adopted home. After spying on German officers, she smuggled top-secret messages in her underwear unsuspected. Back in America, she wouldn't perform for segregated audiences and was the only woman who spoke alongside Martin Luther King Jr in the 1963 March on Washington.

Sketches for Josephine Baker's stage costumes
Eric De Juan, 1949
watercolour and gouache on vellum
Courtesy Fashion Institute of Technology SUNY, FIT Library Unit of Special Collections and College Archives

Tribute to a trailblazer

Josephine Baker's legendary style has inspired countless superstars, including Beyoncé, Rihanna and Diana Ross. When Zendaya attended the 16th Annual Chrysalis Butterfly Ball, she channelled Baker's sartorial flair and paid homage to the icon in this form-fitting gown with dropped pearl sleeves. The glammed-up look is a far cry from the maroon hoodie her character Rue wears in *Euphoria* (2019–), but her performance still captured attention. Zendaya's portrayal of the troubled teenager helped her become the youngest person to win the Best Actress Emmy in 2020.

Pearl-embellished dress worn by Zendaya
Mario Dice, USA, 2017
silk and plastic pearls
Courtesy Mario Dice @mariodicedesigner

Zendaya on the cover of *Vogue Italia*
Italy, July 2022

Josephine Baker
exhibition print
Michael Ochs, 1951
Courtesy Michael Ochs
Archive / Getty Images

Goddess in the machine

Creative and production studio: Junior Major
AI artist: Jess Herrington
Software development: AX Interactive
3D artists: Pixel Ninja, Susan Kosti, Kati Katona

"As we enter a post-digital age, our perception of beauty is undergoing a transformation. In this interactive, we explore how the interplay of AI, AR and 3D graphics might allow for experimentation in how we adorn, mask or express ourselves." – Junior Major and Jess Herrington

Hollywood has long dictated our ideals of beauty, but what happens when those ideals are increasingly influenced by digital platforms and culture? From social media filters to generative AI tools, technology has the capacity to change how we look and how we see ourselves. As we spend more time in our virtual personas, what new forms of the goddess will emerge? The results could be striking, powerful, surreal or surprising, a

digital reflection of the goddess' limitless possibilities.

Led by Junior Major in collaboration with artist Jess Herrington, this experience invites you to try on a series of wearable artworks. Blending word prompts and sample images, Herrington created and reworked a series of looks using Stable Diffusion, a deep-learning AI model, as well as passing them through other AI systems (often reworking images back and forth, many times in some cases). Images were then adapted into 3D digital filters. The experience offers a glimpse into one possible future and speculates on how we might one day choose to express ourselves to the world.

Small stature, huge swagger

"Must I bow my head in shame?" Mae West croons in *Belle of the Nineties* (1934). She's playing wise-cracking vaudeville star Ruby Carter, but she could have been talking about herself. Crafted on nightclub stages, West perfected a larger-than-life persona that caricatured femininity and offered a vision of womanhood that celebrated desire as an expression of independence. She wore lavish ensembles of corseted gowns accessorised with oversized hats, ostrich plumes and diamonds. This costume from *Belle of the Nineties* sums up her showy excess.

As her footprints here suggest, West was tiny. The footprint sketches were used as a pattern for the custom platform shoes that she had studios create to make her look taller. Heavy and cumbersome, the shoes forced West to drag her feet in sweeping semicircles. Rather than slow her down, this hidden choreography became her signature swagger.

What she lacked in stature she made up for

with attitude. Forty years after her death, West remains a camp icon and a subversive inspiration for generations of drag queens like Charles Pierce and *Ru Paul's Drag Race* judge Michelle Visage, who both honour West's extravagant style, sexual freedom and razor-sharp wit.

Ruby Carter (Mae West) costume from *Belle of the Nineties*

Travis Banton, USA, 1934
silk velvet, rhinestones, ostrich feathers, painted hardwood
Courtesy Collection of Greg Schreiner

Two pairs of platform shoes worn by Mae West

c. 1940-50
leather and silvered leather, leather and gilt leather
Courtesy the FIDM Museum at the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandizing, Los Angeles. Gift of Kevin Thomas in memory of Dolly Dempsey

Mae West's footprints for shoe pattern

USA, c. 1940s
paper and ink
Courtesy the FIDM Museum at the Fashion Insitute of Design & Merchandizing, Los Angeles. Gift of Kevin Thomas in memory of Dolly Dempsey

The sexual gangster

Mae West landed herself in jail for creating "an outrage on public decency" after she wrote, directed and starred in the play *Sex* (1926). Her performance as an unrepentant sex worker outraged critics but the controversy made her a media sensation. Hoping to capitalise on her scandalous persona, Paramount convinced her to adapt her Broadway breakout *Diamond Lil* (1928) into a film. When she arrived in Hollywood, West demanded to be paid a dollar more than the studio director. She also wrote her own lines and designed her own costumes. The adaptation, *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), made the equivalent of US$140 million and earned an Oscar nomination.

Throughout her career, West weaponised her words by writing plots that criticised gender conformity and moral hypocrisy. Using witty double entendres and innuendos that were hard to identify in the written script, she flouted the censorship laws of the Hays Code. Her characters were sexual gangsters: assertive,

independent and voracious. They acted on their desires without shame or punishment.

This sexually empowered attitude was even more radical given that West was almost 40 when she made her screen debut; in an industry obsessed with youth, she rejected the expectation to grow old gracefully. She made her final film at 83, the outrageously camp comedy *Sextette* (1978).

Costume design drawing for *Belle of the Nineties*

facsimile
Adele Balkan, USA, 1934
Adele Balkan costume design drawings, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

***She Done Him Wrong* film poster**

facsimile
USA, 1933
Poster collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Mae West and Karl Struss during production of *Belle of the Nineties*

facsimile
USA, 1934
Core Collection. Production files, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Mae West

exhibition print
1970
Courtesy David Montgomery / Getty Images

Mae West in *Cinema Illustrazione* magazine

January 1934

‘Why I Am What I Am’ article, *Dare Magazine*

May 1950

Memoirs of a rockstar

In the opening scene of *Sakuran* (2007), glamorous oiran (courtesan) Kiyoha fly-kicks a rival and backhands the man who comes to calm her. She's restrained this time, but there's not much that keeps her down. Rebellious, smart and seductive, she's envied by her co-workers and her rich clients want to save her.

Kiyoha is played by rockstar and model Anna Tsuchiya, who is just as famous across Japan for drunken interviews and brawling as she is for electrifying live performances. Defying the expectation that Japanese actors be quiet and demure, Tsuchiya embraced her rebellious real-life persona to embody the unconventional and headstrong courtesan.

Director Mika Ninagawa's transgressive portrait of Japanese womanhood was made by a majority-female creative team in response to 2005's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, which was criticised for casting Chinese actors and romanticising geisha culture for Western

audiences. Ninagawa's film is a radical yet contemplative correction that celebrates female sexuality, agency and humanity, and offers a nuanced depiction of the life and loves of a courtesan.

***Sakuran* graphic novel**

Moyoco Anno, Japan, 2001

Geta shoes

Dangerous designs

These colourful kimonos bring the vivid artistry of Moyoco Anno's original manga to life in director Mika Ninagawa's adaptation of *Sakuran* (2006). Costume designer Yuko Sugiyama emphasises hallucinatory colours and patterns, using traditional Japanese dyeing techniques to give the kimonos period-accurate authenticity with a punk rock sensibility. Highly detailed and ornate, they're vital to the film's visual style and the emotional journey of the characters.

The kimono facing you is worn by the young protagonist, Kiyoha (Anna Tscuhiya). The energetic mix of red, baby pink, blue and purple, as well as the flying cranes, represents her youthful rebellion. As Kiyoha climbs the ranks of the courtesans, her outlook matures. The kimono facing away is from the end of the film. Kiyoha is draped in a deep, moody blue that's contrasted with aqua to reflect her growing wisdom, while the flowing gold and orange obi sashes represent her station as head courtesan.

The kimonos are the perfect accompaniment to the lush cinematography, which saturates the courtesans in luxurious and brash kaleidoscopic hues to bring a glamorous vibrancy to 18th-century Japan.

Kiyoha (Anna Tsuchiya) costume from *Sakuran*
Yuko Sugiyama, Japan, 2006
silk, silk/synthetic blend, polyester, metallic thread
Courtesy SAKURAN Film Committee
Courtesy Moyoco Anno/Kodansha

Foxy, fierce and fearless

Pam Grier revived her gun-toting, 1970s vigilantes in *Jackie Brown* (1997). The neo-noir film was developed as a star vehicle for the Godmother of Blaxploitation and written in homage to her foxy, fierce and fearless characters. The director bought the entire cast and crew Kangol hats – embroidered with Black Power symbolism and 'Mighty Mighty Afrodite' – similar to the 1990s fashion staple that Grier wears throughout the film. The beret references the revolutionary spirit of the Black Panther Party, while the insignia's punching motion reflects the raised Black Power fist and martial arts, both of which influenced Blaxploitation.

Mighty Mighty Afrodite hat from *Jackie Brown* *Jackie Brown* crew photo

USA, 1997

Courtesy Mary Claire Hannan

The Godmother of Blaxploitation

Capturing the frustration and energy of the 1970s, Blaxploitation films created space for Black women to be action stars with top-line credit. Though originally coined by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as a derogatory term, Blaxploitation films like *Coffy* (1973) addressed racial injustice and reflected the Black Power and women's rights movements of the era.

Coffy stars Pam Grier as "the baddest one-chick hit-squad that ever hit town". Grier blasted her way into Hollywood history as the first female action hero and inspired stars like Tamara Dobson (*Cleopatra Jones*, 1973) and Jeanne Bell (*TNT Jackson*, 1974). Though these posters represent the explicit content and stereotypes that the NAACP found troubling, they also take a stance, and modern versions like *Proud Mary* (2018) trade salaciousness for strength in their design.

While audiences and critics remain conflicted

about Blaxploitation perpetuating stereotypes, Grier has defended her star-making roles and credits the power of her characters to the women in her family. “I loved the fact that these women I was playing were forceful but without giving up their femininity or their sexuality.”

Pam Grier
exhibition print
Dan Wynn, USA, 1971
Courtesy Dan Wynn Archive and Farmani Group, Co LTD

***Gang Smashers* poster**
facsimile
Continental Lithograph Corporation, America, USA, 1938
Courtesy Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

***Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* poster**
USA, 1975
Courtesy Everett Collection / Alamy Stock Photo

***Darktown Strutters* poster**
USA, 1975
Courtesy Everett Collection / Alamy Stock Photo

***Jackie Brown* poster**
USA, 1997
Courtesy PictureLux / The Hollywood Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

***TNT Jackson* poster**
USA, 1974
Courtesy Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

***Coffy* poster**
USA, 1973
Courtesy Moviestore Collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

***Emma Mae* poster**
USA, 1976
Courtesy Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

***Proud Mary* poster**
USA, 2018
Courtesy Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

***Foxy Brown* poster**
USA, 1974
Courtesy Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

***Sugar Hill* poster**
USA, 1974
Courtesy Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

***Proud Mary* poster**
USA, 2018
Courtesy Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

***Cleopatra Jones* poster**
USA, 1973
Courtesy Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

***Velvet Smooth* poster**
USA, 1976
Courtesy SilverScreen / Alamy Stock Photo

***Cleopatra Jones* poster**
USA, 1973
Courtesy Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

***Sheba Baby* poster**
USA, 1975
Courtesy Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

***Foxy Brown* poster**
USA, 1974
Courtesy SilverScreen / Alamy Stock Photo

A vital vision

Laverne Cox channels Pam Grier in this powerful portrait. From her proud afro and pursed lips to leather jacket and defiant stare, Cox combines Black radicalism with the rugged sensuality of Grier's Blaxploitation persona to fashion a vital vision of Black femininity.

Through her groundbreaking role as Sophia Burset in *Orange is the New Black* (2013–19), Cox brings a complex and nuanced portrayal of trans womanhood to the screen. Burset fights transphobic attacks, forges friendships, creates community and survives solitary confinement, where she's stripped of her signature glamour but not her spirit.

On and off screen, Cox has used glamour as armour. "I needed to put on my face to get ready to be harassed on the street," she has said. The high-femme aesthetic embraced by Cox and many other trans women was, and remains, an approach to surviving and navigating the dangers of a transphobic society.

After years promoting LGBTQIA+ rights, Cox has contributed greatly to building mainstream trans visibility, adding to the long legacy of Black women who have fought for a better and more equitable world.

Laverne Cox photographed for *Paper Magazine*
exhibition print
Joshua Kissi, USA, 2020
Courtesy Artbute

Fighting back

Content warning: this story contains references to sexual assault.

Thelma (Geena Davis) wears this lacy ivory top, skirt and embellished denim jacket at the start of *Thelma & Louise* (1991) when she hits the road with her best friend. The pieces are highly feminine and frame her as a bootscooting, Southern belle. After Thelma is plied with tequila and assaulted, her adventure is derailed and her life is at a crossroads. When Louise (Susan Sarandon) avenges her, Thelma embraces life as an outlaw, represented by the grungy shirt and jeans.

The predatory behaviour of men in *Thelma & Louise* is exactly the behaviour that Cassie (Carey Mulligan) exposes in *Promising Young Woman* (2020). Like Louise, Cassie takes the law into her own hands to get justice for a friend who has been assaulted. She hides her quest for revenge behind a cupcake-pink palette that satirises expectations of innocence found in romantic comedies. By the

time she strikes, she's transformed the male fantasy of a buxom nurse into a nightmare. Unlike *Thelma & Louise*'s gritty, cowboy aesthetic, *Promising Young Woman* shows that, 30 years, later women no longer need to shed their femininity to find strength.

Thelma (Geena Davis) costume from *Thelma & Louise*

Elizabeth McBride, USA, 1991
cotton denim, cotton cheesecloth, synthetic lace, plastic pearls
Courtesy Esteemed Collection of World Record Auctioneer Dame Brigitte Kruse

Thelma (Geena Davis) costume from *Thelma & Louise*

Elizabeth McBride, USA, 1991
cotton, denim, synthetic
ACMI Collection

Cassie (Carey Mulligan) costumes from *Promising Young Woman*

Nancy Steiner, USA, 2020
cotton, denim, polyester
Courtesy Academy Museum of Motion Pictures

Gender avengers

Content warning: this story contains references to sexual assault.

Both *Thelma & Louise* and *Promising Young Woman* are landmark feminist films that take aim at gender inequality and challenge the patriarchy. Their centring of female friendship, strength and resilience have made them cultural touchstones. As these magazine stories suggest, they struck a nerve and forced viewers to scrutinise society's treatment of women.

Sadly, what makes *Thelma & Louise* still so relatable today is the women's realisation that they can't trust the law. The outlaw narrative is framed as a portrait of female freedom. According to Geena Davis, when it was released the media proclaimed, "This is the future". She believed it then, but later reflected "that things have not changed in any way".

Promising Young Woman proves this point. The candy-coloured revenge fantasy also shows the lengths a woman is forced to go to when the justice system fails her. Arriving during

the long-overdue reckoning of #MeToo, the film exposes the predators who hide behind respectability. The title deliberately inverts the all-too-familiar defence of men accused of sexual assault – “he’s a promising young man”. Considering how both films end, there is still a long road ahead.

***TIME* magazine**
June 24, 1991

‘Gender Bender’, *TIME* magazine article
Richard Schikel, June 24, 1991

Wardrobe reference Polaroid of Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis
facsimile
USA, 1991
Courtesy Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/UA photographs, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

***Promising Young Woman* set image featuring Carey Mulligan**
exhibition print
USA, 2020
Courtesy Roadshow Films,
Pty Ltd

***Promising Young Woman* set image featuring Carey Mulligan, Emerald Fennell and Laverne Cox**
exhibition print
USA, 2020
Courtesy Focus Features / Entertainment Pictures

‘Toxic Avengers’,
***Variety* magazine**
December 2020

Costume design drawings for *Promising Young Woman*
Nancy Steiner, USA, 2020
Nancy Steiner papers, Margaret Herrick Library,
Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

A long legacy

In this 1913 poster, the women of Roaring Gulch are wielding hat pins and raising fists. They're taking the law into their own hands as the town prepares to vote on suffrage. Realising that it's going to be a tie, they lock up their husbands to win the ballot. We may think feminist action heroes first appeared after the women's liberation movement in the 1960-70s, but they've been fighting on screen since the beginning of cinema. This film was made during the first wave of the suffragette movement, when women, ironically, had more influence in the film industry.

***When Roaring Gulch Got Suffrage* poster**
facsimile
USA, 1913
Poster collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Taking control

The women in *Thelma & Louise* and *Promising Young Woman* seek their own justice because society won't believe or listen to them. When the system fails, they fight back. The characters on this screen are part of that cinematic tradition, which stretches from exploitation films like *Foxy Brown* (1974) and *Ms. 45* (1982) to today. In that time, female characters have triumphed despite being disbelieved. Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) could have avoided killing the queen in *Aliens* (1986) if the men in the first film had listened to her warnings. In *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), Sarah Connor has to escape an asylum because no one believes she averted an AI apocalypse in the first film.

These future visions are grounded in the past and present. The women in *The Nightingale* (2018) and *The Drover's Wife* (2021) arm themselves against male violence and racism in colonial Australia. But strength is more than physical. *Law and Order: SVU*'s Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay) puts the "lights out" of her attacker but also fights for victims, while *Once Were Warriors* (1994) follows Beth (Rena

Owen) learning she can “survive anything” after tragedy. In *A Fantastic Woman* (2017), a trans woman battles a legal system that discriminates against her and in *Total Control* (2019–) Senator Alex Irving (Deborah Mailman) stands up to her political opponents, knowing her push for social justice is “bigger” than their rivalry.

Stunt superstar

In the middle of a fierce fight in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi) taunts Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) for being a "sore loser". Jen has a mythical sword and the upper hand. Wearing this elegant silk and cotton costume, embellished with flowers along the purple sleeves, Yu Shu doesn't look ready for battle. She has something her younger opponent doesn't though: experience. She triumphs in a legendary scene that's brought alive through gravity-defying stunts. The fluid choreography melds the poetry of traditional Chinese theatre with martial arts intensity, aided by stunt wires that were removed in post-production.

It's another extraordinary stunt scene in Michelle Yeoh's endless catalogue. In *Supercop* (1992), she lands a motorbike on a moving train. Co-star Jackie Chan once complained about the risks she took, because he would have to keep up. He "thought women belonged in the kitchen – until I kicked his butt," she later said.

Since then, she's saved James Bond, captained a *Star Trek* ship and mentored Marvel heroes, not just fighting on screen, but also battling for greater Asian representation in cinema. She was victorious when she became the first Asian actor to win the Best Actress Oscar for *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022).

Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi) costume from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

synthetic, metal
Tim Yip, China, 2000
Courtesy Tim Yip

Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) costume from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

cotton, synthetic
Tim Yip, China, 2000
Courtesy Tim Yip

Fragile females

Stunt women and the slapstick comedians of silent cinema were at the forefront of redefining the modern woman, proving that the ‘weaker sex’ could perform daring physical feats as well as any man. Some of the earliest stars to demonstrate their prowess were Helen Holmes and Helen Gibson. In *The Hazards of Helen* (1914–17), they leaped off buildings and chased down train robbers, saving the day and dispelling the myth of female fragility. You can see their death-defying stunts on the screen to your left, which also features Australian-born Bollywood superhero, Mary Ann Evans.

The glamorous whip-cracking star featured in these posters lit up screens as Fearless Nadia, who tamed lions and fought men on moving trains. In her breakout 1935 role as masked crusader Hunterwali, she fought injustice at a time when colonial British rule was being challenged. Her character was an Indian princess who gives up her status and privilege to fight for the people. But Hunterwali could

only be played by a White woman as Muslim and Hindi women were still prevented from playing physical roles.

Through their daredevil stunts, these women established a cinematic tradition that stretches from slapstick comedians to action heroes.

Hunterwali ki Beti (Daughter of Hunterwali) **cinema poster**

Printed by Prabhat Offset Press, Delhi, for Basant Pictures, Bombay (Mumbai), India, 1943
Lent by the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. Gift of Laurie Benson, 2012

Stunt Queen **cinema poster**

Designed by Brig Mohan, printed by Photo Offset Press, Delhi, for Basant Pictures, Bombay (Mumbai), India, 1947
Lent by the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. Gift of Laurie Benson, 2012

***11 O'Clock* cinema poster**

Designed by Sona Art, printed by 'Uni-Arts' Litho Works, for Basant Pictures, Bombay (Mumbai), India, 1948
Lent by the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. Gift of Laurie Benson, 2012

***Circus Queen* cinema poster**

Made by Prasad Process (Private) Ltd, Madras (Chennai), for Basant Pictures, Bombay (Mumbai), India, 1959
Lent by the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. Gift of Laurie Benson, 2012

Inspirational wuxia warriors

The gravity-defying stunts in films like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* are one of the wuxia genre's biggest influences, but there are plenty. These frenetic martial arts movies helped establish Eastern cinema, thrilled Western audiences and influenced filmmakers across the globe. You can see *Lady Snowblood*'s (1973) vivid visual style and blood-splattered battles reflected in *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003). The high-wire stunts and 'found-object' fight scenes in Hong Kong action films like *Wing Chun* (1994) are honoured in *Atomic Blonde* (2017) and *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022), where Michelle Yeoh channels the martial arts roles that made her a star.

The trope of stoic warriors with a moral code has also been translated to Western characters like *Game of Throne*'s Brienne of Tarth (Gwendoline Christie). Deadly women outnumbered against endless enemies is another characteristic, featured in *Hapkido* (1972), *The Last Legion* (2007) and *Ultraviolet*

(2006). Modern wuxia films often return to the past, like the Tang Dynasty in *House of Flying Daggers* (2004). The historical epic style can also be seen in Indian films like *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019). Wuxia's cross-cultural pollination led to greater diversity of cinematic styles and stories in both the East and West.

Walk out with a goddess

When the iconic characters in these screens walk away, it's an act of defiance – not surrender. In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), Lorelei Lee (Marilyn Monroe) asserts her control over men when she pulls the door closed and says, "Don't say another word". Nadira in *Shree 420* (1955) and Daryl Hannah in *Roxanne* (1987) also defy the obedience men expect of them by showing them the door. Similarly, Torrance (Kirsten Dunst) in *Bring It On* (2000) drops a barbed "buhbye" when she drops the boyfriend who's been holding her back. The power of women's voices extends into professional space too. When *Mad Men*'s (2007–15) Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss) tells her boss "Don't be a stranger", she's proving she's surpassed him. Meryl Streep's icy "Go" cuts like broken glass ceilings in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006).

These women are in dialogue, backing each other and backing themselves. When they walk away, they're transformed. In *Cruel Intentions* (1999), Annette (Reese Witherspoon) leaves

behind toxicity, as does Rhonda (Rachel Griffiths) in *Muriel's Wedding* (1994). "Goodbye" is a new beginning, slamming a door is taking a stand. Whether defying gender expectations, racial discrimination or the men who tried to control them, these goddesses have all stood up, raised their voices and reclaimed their story.