The Trouble With Gender Flips
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Full Text:

Back in the summer of 2016, when the female "Ghostbusters" remake hit theaters, aggrieved fans of the original regarded the new film as a politically motivated assassination. Replacing their childhood comedy idols with women was a kind of narrative murder, committed by a cabal of Hollywood moguls and humorless feminists. This summer's own splashy female reboot, "Ocean's 8," channels such histrionics with a deliciously literal twist. As the orange jumpsuited Debbie Ocean (Sandra Bullock) attempts to talk her way out of prison -- a scene that mirrors the opening parole hearing of Danny Ocean (George Clooney) from the 2001 "Ocean's Eleven" -- she reveals that Danny is her brother, and that he's dead.

Maybe. Now that every modern film franchise is destined for eternal reincarnation, no character is ever for-sure dead anymore. So as Debbie mounts her own fantastical heist - lifting $150 million worth of Cartier diamonds off a celebrity neck at the Met Gala -- she keeps one eye on her brother's tomb, half-expecting him to crawl out. We spend the film anticipating his appearance, too. Even when Debbie is on screen, Danny is in the back of our minds. And even when a Hollywood franchise is retooled around women, it still revolves around men -- the story lines they wrote, the characters they created, the worlds they built.

In the two years since that "Ghostbusters," the gender-swapped remake has expanded from one-off stunt into full-blown genre. This summer produced three such films. Joining "Ocean's 8" is the Melissa McCarthy vehicle "Life of the Party," which cribs its premise from Rodney Dangerfield's 1986 comedy "Back to School" -- a midlife crisis inspires a parent to join his or her kid at college and high jinks ensue. There's also "Overboard," with Anna Faris as the working-class single parent (played by Kurt Russell in the 1987 original) who exacts revenge on a wealthy playboy after he falls off his yacht and forgets who he is (Eugenio Derbez takes on the Goldie Hawn role).

More are on the way. A female-centric remake of "What Women Want," starring Taraji P. Henson, is coming in December. A "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" redo, "The Hustle," with Anne Hathaway and Rebel Wilson tagging in for Michael Caine and Steve Martin, is slated for next summer. Gender-flipped adaptations of "Lord of the Flies," "Splash" and "What About Bob" are in various stages of development. Even KFC mascot Colonel Sanders has now been rebooted as a woman.

The gender-swapped comedy satisfies a couple-of-the-moment entertainment industry imperatives: It allows Hollywood to reanimate lucrative old properties ("Ocean's Eleven" was, of course, itself a remake), while recasting them with diverse casts and woke politics. That's resulted in a boom in comedic parts for women, but they come with
baggage. These reboots require women to relive men's stories instead of fashioning their own. And they're subtly expected to fix these old films, to neutralize their sexism and infuse them with feminism, to rebuild them into good movies with good politics, too. They have to do everything the men did, except backwards and with ideals.

Some of the rankest sexism of the past several decades of Hollywood comedy can indeed be slickly resolved with a gender swap. The very idea of writing over these movies with hot-pink graffiti supplies a thrill. The few roles for women in the originals were as love interests (Julia Roberts in "Ocean's" is the crown jewel in Danny's heist) or helpmates (Annie Potts as the "Ghostbusters" receptionist). But compared to the awkward white male geeks and leering white male boors that constituted underdogs in many of these films, women now fit more cleanly into the disadvantaged position, whether they're fighting for respect from the scientific establishment ("Ghostbusters"), seeking lost educational opportunities ("Life of the Party") or suffering under the conditions of low-wage work and single parenthood ("Overboard").

Even "Ocean's 8" conjures the current corporate-feminist imperative of women seizing capital, like a kind of equal-pay initiative for female thieves. Debbie pumps up her girl gang on the evening of the heist by telling them: "Somewhere out there, there's an 8-year-old girl lying in bed, dreaming of being a criminal. Let's do this for her."

Then there's the sex stuff. Eighties comedies routinely built bits around men harassing, stalking and sexually humiliating women. By giving women the sexual upper hand, these remakes neutralize the most offensive aspects of the originals. When Mr. Russell kidnap's an amnesiac Ms. Hawn and convinces her she is his wife in the 1987 "Overboard," he threatens her and amuses himself by gesturing at raping her. But in the remake, it's the playboy played by Mr. Derbez who attempts to initiate sex with an uninterested Ms. Faris, the woman who has tricked him into thinking he's her husband.

Similarly, when Mr. Dangerfield arrives on campus in "Back to School," he barrels into a sorority house, throws open a shower curtain and leers bug-eyed at a naked and screaming sorority girl. ("Take it easy, honey! I didn't see a thing!" he says as he whips the curtain closed, before opening it once more to add, "You're perfect!") Compare that with Ms. McCarthy's mid-divorce mom in "Life of the Party," who hits it off and gets it on with a college boy at a frat rager, breaking a taboo without actually becoming a creep. Because middle-aged moms are coded as sexless, Ms. McCarthy's character needs merely to nudge the sexual envelope in order for her antics to feel unruly.

And when the women of "Ghostbusters" gently sexually harass their ditsy hunk of a receptionist (Chris Hemsworth in glasses), it lacks the malicious edge of Bill Murray effectively stalking Sigourney Weaver under the guise of busting her ghost. Because real women are physically and socially vulnerable to men, granting sexual power to them on film feels harmless and a little cute.

One gets the sense that these movies aren't just fixing up old plots; they're working as symbolic correctives to Hollywood's mistreatment of women writ large. But the increased social acceptability often comes at the expense of the story. When the "Ghostbusters" scientists shamelessly hit on Mr. Hemsworth, it strains credulity. And when Anna Faris's
single mom Kate hauls the womanizer who recently physically assaulted her into her home to live with her three girls, the choice feels actively insane.

Though these remakes are often referred to as "all female," they typically retain men in a key role: that of the antagonist. (Well, two: For some reason, men get to direct all of these movies, too.) The female Ghostbusters contend with male university and government officials, supernatural debunkers and an embittered occultist nerd who recalls the internet neckbeards who protested the film itself. The criminal crew in "Ocean's Eleven" set out to swindle casino mogul Terry Benedict (Andy Garcia), and "Ocean's 8" wraps its plot around a male mark, too: Claude Becker (Richard Armitage), the smugly slick art dealer who pulls Debbie into an art fraud scheme (and a relationship) and then turns on her. But while Benedict proves a formidable opponent, Becker is an underwritten egotist. That helps serve a female empowerment message, but not the plot. Late in the film, James Corden turns up to investigate Debbie and crew and all but walks away with the movie, revealing another ironic twist to the choice of a male rival -- it robs an actress of what can be the reboot's juiciest role.

As much as these gender-swapped films free women from old Hollywood expectations, they box them into a new one: Their female protagonists must be admirable. No such requirement was placed on the characters of Mr. Dangerfield or Mr. Murray, who gained admiration from audiences through their thorough commitment to offending. For women, the demand often manifests itself as typically feminine behavior -- acting nice, and looking it. In "Life of the Party," Ms. McCarthy gets a makeover; in "Ocean's 8," the female oddballs slip into gowns to strut down the steps of the Met. And of course, the women ought to be good to other women. Ms. McCarthy's female rivals in "Life of the Party" are cardboard-cutout mean girls easily converted into allies, and the rifts that emerge in Debbie Ocean's girl gang are effortlessly smoothed. Even the self-involved actress Daphne Kluger (Ms. Hathaway) is instantaneously redeemed midway through.

There is a slight moral miscalculation here: that in order for a film to be considered feminist, it has to show women fighting men, and not each other. But life pits women against one another, and eliding that is just as ridiculous as staging all intra-female conflicts in kiddie pools full of Jell-O -- it ignores what women are actually like. One of the most intriguing facets of "Ocean's 8" is its implied bisexuality, and the hinted tension between Debbie and her partner in crime (if not more), Lou (Cate Blanchett). The subtext would have been more interesting as text; it would supply a true conflict and depth of character for the two stars and make the film feel truly transformative. But for all the female characters jammed into these films, they can shy away from revealing the complexity of female experiences.

It's hard not to watch these female ensembles and yearn for the heights of "Bridesmaids," or more recently, the coastal California social satire-murder mystery "Big Little Lies," both of which lean into conflict between women instead of shying away. These stories acknowledge that women have problems that originate within and between themselves, not just in their relationships with men. In short, they let women be interesting. And when their feuding crews of women do team up, it feels earned instead of assumed. (Both stories were also originated by women.) Besides, comedy requires the upending of social expectation, and the funniest parts of these projects are the moments when the
characters wrestle free of feminine demands -- not by "acting like men," but by acting out as women.

"Bridesmaids" was Ms. McCarthy's breakout film, and though she has since become a star, her subsequent roles have failed to match the unbridled inappropriateness she embodied through her bridesmaid, Megan -- a woman who shows up to a ritzy engagement party in a golf cap, announces her intension to "climb" a male guest "like a tree" and proffers a "Fight Club" theme for the bachelorette party. Compare that to her "Life of the Party" character, who is well-meaning, universally loved and (naturally) less funny. When women are moved to the center of the frame, they're expected to act more womanly -- even when they're playing roles originally occupied by men. It's interesting, and a little sad, that the highlight of Ms. McCarthy's recent career has involved her straight-up playing a male character, channeling the impotent rage of former press secretary Sean Spicer on "Saturday Night Live."

The meta conversation around these gender swaps has focused on the manboy backlash, but now a feminist resistance is brewing, too. When a female "Lord of the Flies" project was announced at Warner Bros., the writer Roxane Gay tweeted that it "makes no sense" as "the plot of that book wouldn't happen with all women." So far, many of these female reboots have drummed up female support that matches or exceeds the passion of their male detractors. It can feel as if it's a kind of feminist imperative to buy a ticket. But as the novelty fades, these movies will begin to be assessed not on their politics, but on their merits.

The men of "Oceans Eleven" got to do one thing the women of "Ocean's 8" do not: star in a good movie. The construction of Debbie's supposedly masterful heist is so sloppy that the one rule she sets for it -- no men in her crew -- is limply betrayed in the climax, when a male member of the franchise shimmies in to execute its most strenuous element. Upon second viewing, the '80s "Ghostbusters" and "Overboard" aren't lofty critical achievements, either, but at least they're originals, which gave them the room to become phenomena. Note to Hollywood: When women complained that they aren't afforded the same roles in Hollywood that men are, they weren't speaking literally.

**CAPTION(S):**

PHOTOS: PHOTO (PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHIEU BOUREL) (AR1); From top: "Ocean's 8," a splashy female reboot, still manages to revolve around men; in 2001's "Ocean's Eleven" the main female character was little more than the love interest. Above from left: "Life of the Party" casts Melissa McCarthy in Rodney Dangerfield's role from "Back to School"; and in this year's "Overboard," Anna Faris takes on the Kurt Russell role from the 1987 film of the same name, right. (PHOTOGRAPH BY WARNER BROS.; WARNER BROS. PICTURES, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS; MGM; DIYAH PERA/MGM) (AR10); When 1984's "Ghostbusters," above, was remade with women in the main roles, top, some fans of the original were aggrieved. Now the gender-flipped reboot has expanded from a one-off stunt into a full-blown Hollywood genre. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY HOPPER STONE/COLUMBIA PICTURES; SONY PICTURES) (AR11)

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