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Advantageous: Science Fiction in Cinema from A Woman's Point of View

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Betty Kershner, PhD. is a Registered Psychologist specializing in both adults and children, from infancy onward, and recently moved her office to West Toronto. She has worked with and consulted in a wide range of settings and is familiar with many types of concerns and solutions. She is able to offer assessments and treatment. Please Contact her here.

Advantageous, a 2015 film directed by Jennifer Phang, was developed from a short story by the director that she and the lead actress Jacqueline Kim turned into a screenplay. The film was supported by Sundance, where it won a special jury prize, by the San Francisco Film Society, which awarded Jennifer the inaugural Women's Filmmaker Fellowship and Grant, and by Kickstarter. *Advantageous* was filmed in New York City in donated spaces. It had limited screenings only in New York and San Francisco, and is available on iTunes, on DVD from Amazon, and on Netflix.

Ms. Phang was nominated for the John Cassavettes Award from Independent Spirit for the film.

The film started as a 20 minute short. Jennifer has said in interview that she was living in New York and San Francisco and seeing the discrepancies of opportunities for kids in different parts of the city. In both cities, she saw people in trouble and felt that we don't have to accept for things to be that way. She seems to believe in social responsibility.

Until very recently, Science Fiction has been strictly a male domain. Not just the protagonists, but all the writers and directors were men. This is beginning to change. In publishing, the written word, increasing numbers of women are writing science fiction and fantasy. In film, we have some great Sci Fi movies with female protagonists: Sandra Bullock stars in *Gravity*, with important roles for Jessica Chastain in both *Interstellar* and *The Martian*, also *Her* and *Ex Machina*, with artificial intelligence that is female: making the male protagonist love them and then either abandoning him or setting him up to die. These are the roles for a leading lady. These are still Science Fiction from a man's point of view, with both a male writer and male director.

As a genre, Science Fiction has tended to be post-apocalyptic: survival after catastrophe, confronted with extreme threat to life. It has been heavy on cannibals, zombies, and alien monsters. Fierce gun battles, marvels of technology and pyrotechnics ensue. Feminist Sci Fi was Ripley/Sigourney Weaver from *Alien* or Charlize Theron from *Mad Max Fury Road*: women who could out bad-ass the men. As Roger Ebert said, "*Alien* is a movie about things that can jump out of the dark and kill you".



Advantageous Theatrical Release Poster

A recent article in Psychoanalytic Inquiry certainly can be applied to Hollywood: “Understanding American’s Obsession with Guns” by Elisabeth Waugaman (whose husband Richard Waugaman is part of the New Directions program of the Washington Psychoanalytic, the home institute of our yearly presenter Bob Winer). Many Americans implicitly distrust national government and intensely fear the “other”. The Revolutionary War and Civil War created a suspicion of government that persists, accompanied by fear of the other “beginning with Native Americans and slavery, which has continued with fear of the Mafia after WWI, fear of the communists after WWII, fear of Muslims after 9/11, and fear of ‘illegal aliens’ after the most recent recession. American film developed while the country was still fighting Native Americans. The industry was influenced by war documentaries and strains to maintain audiences with ever-increasing violence and special effects”.

Women in Science Fiction, when they are there at all, are helpmate, seductress, or more bad-ass than the men.

Science Fiction in film became a serious and respectable genre with the explosion that was *Star Wars*. Looking at the roles of women in science fiction film since *Star Wars*, the Fall issue of the TIFF magazine *180* ran a sidebar listing 18 notable Sci Fi films from 1972 – 2013. *Alien* was the only one that featured a female protagonist, Ripley. Of those 18 films, there were only four that had a female character in a significant supporting role. In *Solaris* (1972), there is a dead wife who appears to come alive again. The protagonist is not sure if she is real or a recreation of his memories formed by alien thought control – or if it matters since either way she is there with him. It certainly would matter to his wife whether or not she was dead or real. The second film including an important female character, *Starman* (1984), features a female earthling helping a gentle extraterrestrial get back to his mother ship. Here we have the common stereotype of a sweet and trusting woman as helpmate. The third film, *Galaxy Quest* (1999) is a comedic send-up of Star Trek and includes stand-ins for William Shatner, Spock, etc. Only Sigourney Weaver reprises her own role, that of Ripley. Enough said about Ripley. The fourth film, *Under the Skin* (2013), stars Scarlett Johansson as a deadly alien seductress. There you have it. Women in Science Fiction, when they are there at all, are helpmate, seductress, or more bad-ass than the men. Sound familiar? Have we seen enough of these stereotypes? None of the 18 films listed in the TIFF magazine had a female director.

In my review of those 18 films by men, I found only one that focused on a protagonist's inner world rather than an action story line: *Moon* by Duncan Jones, otherwise known as Zowie Bowie – David Bowie's oldest son. This film seems to devolve in a straight line from the father's song: [Ground Control to Major Tom](#). I can't say much about it without spoilers, but I recommend it. It is a film that raises questions about personhood in a sensitive and profound way.

Jennifer Phang, the director of *Advantageous*, was born and grew up in Berkley California of Chinese-Malaysian and Vietnamese heritage. She was raised by her mother while her father was largely absent, working overseas. Her age or year of birth is not listed on any of the materials that I viewed, which I find interesting because even though Jennifer seems to be in her 30's, her film is very much aware of age ceilings that work against women. Perhaps she is protective of her future. Jennifer is being mentored by Emmy-winning producer/director Michelle MacLaren, of *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*. *Advantageous* is Jennifer's first science fiction, but she states that she "still had to make it a chamber piece", meaning that emotional turmoil is held in check. Her co-writer and star, Jacqueline Kim, is a musician who composed the piano piece that she plays in the film and is the lead singer and songwriter in a band. The young daughter, Samantha Kim, no relation to Jacqueline, was accompanied daily on the set by her mother. Samantha checked in with her mother continually to see if her mom thought that Samantha's character would react in the ways that Samantha was considering. Samantha, who is described as naturally extroverted and who was rope twirling state champion in 2015, portrayed Jules, the daughter in *Advantageous*, as self-contained.

The film is a character-driven story about what a mother will do for her child, the fierceness of a mother's love. It is science fiction that "is slow and quiet and doesn't have a lot of exciting action". It is about the break-down of human connection and the question of "how you can foster the relationships that are really important when there is so much working against it, so much pressure to do the things that must be done". The authors wanted to focus on the point when something really important in a person's life

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breaks down and you look closely at the choices that you made that got you to that point, and feel intensely what your life really is.

Jennifer Phang said in interview that she drew from her own experience as the daughter of an immigrant mother raising her alone: her mother's determination that the two of them would survive, and to provide Jennifer with the best opportunities. Her mother worked three jobs. Jennifer would come home and take care of herself while her mother slept.

She stated that this feminist science fiction was also feminine. Phang and her co-writer Kim refer to *Advantageous* as creating a new genre, "Domestic Science Fiction". They describe the film as "a long, quiet goodbye". Jennifer and Jacqueline consider the film feminist because it looks deeply at the challenges facing women growing up, where everyone, male and female, has their value determined by society but women feel that they have to be perfect in so many more ways than do men: the best mother, best daughter, sex object, entrepreneur, etc. Science Fiction offers a way of looking at and exaggerating the aspect that you want to focus on. The focus in *Advantageous* is on the cost of the demands on women, how much of a woman's value depends on appearance, and the age ceiling.

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Jennifer states that the mother and daughter in this film are particularly Asian. They seem easy-going but there is a lot going on underneath. Jennifer wanted to make a film about and with Asians, using Asian actors. She remembers as a child feeling that she had to be white.

She did not want a production like *Aloha*, where Emma Stone was cast notoriously as an Asian, or Roona Mara as a Native American, Tiger Lily, in *Pan*, Johnny Deep as Tonto in *The Lone Ranger*, Marlon Brando as a Japanese in *Tea House of the August Moon*. She wanted Asian actors to play Asian characters. The part of Gwen 2 was cast with someone selected to be of ambiguous ethnicity, so that everyone could identify with her. This film was something of a break-out in that it stars Asian Americans as ordinary people. Race is a factor, but not front and centre.

As Alan Yang said when he won his recent Emmy for Outstanding Writer of a Comedy Series (Master of None): there are 17 million Asian Americans and there are 17 million Italian Americans in the USA. "They have The Godfather, Goodfellas, The Sopranos – we got Long Duh Dong", a cartoonish stereotype from the film *16*

Candles. Only 5.3 % of characters in the top films of 2014, the last year for which there are figures, were Asian.

Now to the movie itself. *Advantageous* is set in 2041, a time of overpopulation, stiff competition, and social disintegration. How is a parent to gain advantage for their child? Gwen Koh is the underpaid public face for the Center for Advanced Health and Living, which is looking for a younger model. Her daughter Jules needs to attend special schools and camps if she is to have a chance in her future, and that costs big money. How is Gwen to get that money? She agrees to undergo a new procedure to transfer her consciousness into the body of a younger person. This will provide strong public appeal for the commercial product precisely because Gwen is so well known to and popular with the public. What emerges later, which is not broadcast, is that it is not really a transfer of consciousness. It is withdrawal of her memories only, creating a kind of clone while Gwen herself actually dies.

The film opens with an idyllic image of mother and daughter singing together, happy. We see a buoyant image of girls running: the high spirits and freedom of childhood. This is juxtaposed with billboards announcing the school admissions lottery. Mother, Gwen Koh, is rehearsing her lines, setting the stage for what is to come: “to empower the average person with a pragmatic approach to the unforgiving/impenetrable job market” while Jules works on her studies. A radio in the background announces that anxiety and depression have become the norm.

Sitting on a park bench, Jules tells Gwen that her ova are disappearing, that DNA is “opting out”, while glumly looking at a dead cricket. Crickets are considered good luck in some Asian cultures. Gwen listens to Jules’ dreams and reacts fiercely that there are ways that her dreams can be accomplished. Here and there throughout the movie, there are explosions set off by rebel groups: this appears to be part of “normal”. There is a building shaped like the body of a woman, which disintegrates progressively as the movie goes on.

She is advised to become an egg donor. Only her body matters.

When Gwen is told that she has lost her job, she lies to Jules about it, allowing Jules to believe instead that she has been given a raise. We hear the upstairs or downstairs woman crying and Gwen sees a child, a girl, huddled in the landscaping. Later, Gwen sees a girlchild who has just prostituted herself, which the radio tells us has become epidemic among children

male and female who need a way to get by. There is ample pressure on Gwen to find a way to help Jules. We hear that humans are being left behind by technology and we hear Gwen denigrated and sneered at by the Artificial Intelligence in charge of finding her a new position. She is advised to become an egg donor. Only her body matters. Jules is taught in school that women are going backwards. When Gwen attends a luncheon with other mothers, she is invited to send Jules to an exclusive “bonding camp”, Jules’ “only chance” to join the elite: a camp where children can form networks to promote each other. It is clear that the only motive is to survive, to take care of oneself and one’s family and keep out of the hopeless lower class that makes up most of the population: “Everyone’s just needy or desperate”. The only act of altruism we see in the film apart from Gwen’s ultimate gift to Jules, is Gwen anonymously leaving some food and drink for the homeless child sleeping in the bushes.

Gwen is urged to turn to Jules’ father for help. When she demurs, the other mother at the table is startled. Clearly, a woman without a man will not survive. Gwen is informed by Fisher that no job will be made available to her. The “recruiter” has decided that sending women back into the home is safer than putting desperate men out on the street. The Board will ensure that Gwen does not get another job offer, to manipulate her into choosing to undergoing the new procedure.

Gwen turns to her mother and we realize that there has been a long estrangement. It becomes clear that Gwen’s mother defers to Gwen’s father, and that her father withholds help. Gwen is adamant that she will not see her father, and that her father will never meet Jules. We are not given this back story, but must wonder about it. Her mother talks about Gwen’s terrible sin but does not name it. Does this have something to do with her father, and something to do with Jules?

Gwen seems to have a thing for married men. When we first see Gwen take a call from Fisher, near the very beginning of the film, he mentions “Cherbourg” and comments that Gwen is not carrying an umbrella. This brings a smile to her face. *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, a French film from 1964, was a musical that was considered the epitome of romance. It provided Catherine Deneuve with her breakout role. She played a teenage girl who worked in her mother’s umbrella shop and was in love, but knew that her mother would never approve of her choice because of the man’s lower social status. She and her young man consummate their love the night before he ships out on his compulsory military duty. Of course,

the Deneuve character becomes pregnant and does not hear from her lover, so allows her mother to persuade her to marry a kind and rich suitor. Years later, she and her former love run into each other and both feel keen regret, while remaining in the lives they have chosen. This is what Fisher references to Gwen, placing Gwen in the role that Deneuve had occupied: a mother who has made the pragmatic choice for the sake of her child. Side-stepping the romantic overture, Gwen tells Fisher that perhaps he is calling too soon. The implication is that this is a recent breakup, perhaps instigated by Gwen against Fisher's wishes, and that they had agreed to avoid each other for awhile.

We don't know why Gwen and Fisher have broken up: each seems fond of the other. At different points, each refers to Fisher's daughters, Fisher saying that one of them went to the school that has accepted Jules, and Gwen telling him that he would do for his daughters what she is doing for Jules. So it seems that Fisher is married and Gwen had an adulterous affair with him. Although he tries to help with advice and clearly feels badly about what he has to do in his professional role – to fire Gwen – he is not able or does not choose to offer Gwen the real help she needs.

Gwen turns to her cousin Lily and her cousin's husband Han. We realize that they are estranged, that they have not seen each other in years, and that Lily and Han do not even know that Gwen has a daughter, nor has Gwen seen their two sons. We learn that the cousin's husband, Han, is the father of Gwen's daughter Jules. These scenes feel strained to me. The couple cannot cope with Gwen's unannounced arrival and turn her away, not allowing her to tell them the urgency of her need. Han holds his son as if the boy is traumatized just from Gwen's presence. Lily tells Gwen that she is "doing it again", bringing more pain. Gwen concurs, "that is what I do, bring more pain". Gwen clearly has the role in the family of being the "problem", the one that everything is blamed on.

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Gwen turns to her mother. Why will Gwen allow her father to see Jules only "over my dead body"? What has her father done that is so unforgiveable? What has Gwen done? If the sin that Gwen's mother is talking about was the sin of sleeping with her cousin's husband, how would that lead to Gwen's adamant

future that does not depend on any man, no matter the cost to herself

refusal to allow her father any access to her child? Perhaps instead Gwen's sin had something to do with her father. Perhaps it was something in the family dynamic that was conveniently blamed all on Gwen. Perhaps her father was the first inappropriate man for Gwen to sleep with, the first incest like the semi-incest

with her cousin's husband, the first married man, the first man belonging to another woman, the first man in her life. Perhaps this is why Gwen is so severely estranged from her family. If so, this enactment of an Electra complex, this sexual abuse by a father, might provide Gwen strong motivation to give her daughter a future that does not depend on any man, no matter the cost to herself.

With no help available, Gwen makes the only choice open in hopes it will give her child a good life. Fisher is not able to talk her out of it, but does guarantee that Jules will be well provided for.

The role of music in the film is interesting. Music lets us know the status of people's feelings. We see it comfort Gwen and Jules when they play or listen together. They lose themselves together in music during their last Christmas celebration, a shared indulgence in contentment. Later, after the "transformation", Jules tries to use music to evoke her mother in Gwen 2, playing a piece that her mother enjoyed, but Gwen only finds it annoying. This shows us that the real Gwen is not really there in Gwen 2.

A weakness in the movie, in my opinion, is the lack of back story for Gwen 2. Perhaps that could be a sequel. We are told that she is a body donor who no longer has memories of her own and therefore will believe that Gwen's memories are hers. Why would someone become a body donor? It would not likely be for money, since the person is inert prior to the transfer procedure and is basically someone else after. Gwen 2 believed that her only purpose for living was to look after Jules. Perhaps money was paid to someone dear to the body donor. Perhaps, like Gwen, the body donor gave up their own life to improve the life of someone important to them, someone to whom the money would be paid.

Gwen 2 looks at Jules as she sleeps, as if she can sense the intense love that Gwen 1 felt for Jules, but it is only a feeling that she is aware of, not one that she shares. Perhaps it is a feeling unfamiliar to her: love and a burning wish to protect and nurture. We are not given a back story, but Gwen 2 must have come through

extremely harsh circumstances to have made the choice that she made. At the end, Jules chooses to see her mother in Gwen 2. She chooses to believe that Gwen 2 is beginning to sound like her mother.

The value of relationships is reasserted in this movie. Jules and Gwen 2 connect with each other. They bond with Lily, Han and their two sons (the younger of whom is the real life brother of the actress Samantha Kim, playing Jules). At the end, Jules is still friends with Ginger, whom we met at the beginning of the film and whom we are told will not have the money to get her into one of the fancy schools and will not become one of the elite. Jules holds on to this relationship that spans social status. Jules has learned to calm herself with both spinning and sitting meditation, and teaches it to others. Perhaps Jules, whom we are told is capable of doing “great things”, will lead others from her bonding camp to bring change to this society, break down the social classes and find a way to help others. Perhaps her mother’s sacrifice was not only for her daughter, but for the social good that this woman director and women scriptwriters, Jennifer Phang and Jacqueline Kim, want to promote. Their film-making, these two women, seems motivated at least in part by social conscience. And that may, at this point in time, be a defining characteristic of some women in film, as opposed to the traditional male action shoot-em-up.

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