

# RIDLEY SCOTT'S *GI JANE*: AN ARGUMENT FOR WOMEN IN COMBAT

It is my contention that Ridley Scott's film, *GI Jane*, starring Demi Moore, can be analyzed as a kind of argumentative essay in that it presents a thesis that it defends through the use of supporting arguments and supporting examples. In addition, I also believe it follows many of the basic critical thinking rules in the presentation of its message. In class, we read three very different argumentative essays written on the subject of women in combat. They are: "Most Oppose Women in Combat" by Suzanne Fields, "An Officer and a Feminist" by James M. Dubik, and "Arms and the Woman" by Lou Marano. Each of these essays illustrates a contrasting attitude towards the idea of women serving in combat in the US military. I believe Scott created *GI Jane* so that it would covers many of the issues raised by authors such as these in order to support his thesis: women should be allowed to serve in combat. What I would like to show is that Ridley Scott offers arguments and evidence through his film that directly support his thesis in ways that follow our course models. In order to do this, I will show how *GI Jane* takes into account both the pro and con arguments put forth in each of the three essays.

*GI Jane* deals with the idea of female integration into one of the most elite units in the US military, the Navy SEALs. Lt. Jordan O'Neil, played by Demi Moore, is given the opportunity to enter SEAL training as a test case. If O'Neil is able to successfully complete this rigorous program, then other women would be given the chance of full integration within the military. This would enable women to enter combat, a key element for those who hope to rise in the ranks of the

military. As O'Neil states: "operational experience is the key to advancement." So if women are not allowed in combat, this is the same as saying they can't be promoted to the highest ranks of the military. The reason the SEALs was chosen as grounds or a test case due to its strenuous nature. Scott makes it clear that everyone expected O'Neil to fail. The film shows how she meets this challenge. With her teammates, the Master Chief Argyle, and those high in power all against her, O'Neil had to prove her valor through her own determination.

Assuming that the three essays by Fields, Dubik, and Marano offer the most common views on the subject of women in combat, if Scott is offering a strong argument to support his message, he should deal with the points brought up by each of these. I will try to show that he does this.

Suzanne Fields writes in "Most Oppose Women in Combat" that women in combat would interfere with the bonding of males that is necessary for combat and they would cause "sexual confusion" on the battlefield. She also claims that female prisoners of war would be tortured in ways that would cause the male prisoners to lose their cool and thus give forth intelligence information. Lastly, Fields contends that women are not able to meet the physical standards of men and that is one more reason women should not be allowed to fight.

Dubik offers a different point of view in his essay "An Officer and a Feminist." He noted that his experience with female cadets at West Point and his experiences with his own daughters growing up did not fit his "stereotype of female behavior." The female cadets under his command were serious and accomplished what they set out to do. They took charge and gave orders and stayed calm under extreme conditions. Dubik concluded that women of the present generation and the generations to come do not match the beliefs that were taught to him while he was growing up. So he accepted the fact that society must change its assessment of women. Marano, on the other

hand, disagrees. In his essay, "Arms and the Woman: Would a Sexually Mixed US. Army Lose Its Wars?", he argues an army that is even partially made up of women will be defeated. He claims that this belief is as "unsexist" a statement as saying that an army of younger men will defeat an army of older men. He further states that the need for the physical advantage of males still holds true today and that, contrary to the beliefs of others, "sexual distraction" is prevalent when women are in the military.

After comparing the film *GI Jane* to these three essays, I believe that Scott considered almost all of the points they raise in creating his film just as if he were writing a logical essay. I will discuss them in order. To begin with, the essay by Fields noted that women are physically weaker and, as a result, are not held to the same physical standards as men. In the film, I found that there are many examples that explore the idea that women are too weak for combat. This notion was first suggested by the male reporter who was covering the story of the newly established program to integrate women into all aspects of the military. His statement was challenged by a woman, Senator DeHaven, who asked him how strong one has to be to pull the trigger of a gun. After this, the military top brass agrees to let one woman try to qualify for the US Navy SEALs. Of course, they do not expect her to succeed. Senator DeHaven personally selects a US Navy intelligence officer, Lt. O'Neil, to be the test case. And as we find out later, even she does not believe that a woman can meet the rigorous standards of the SEALs.

However, when Lt. O'Neil was admitted into the SEAL program, the brass decided that she would be judged by lower physical standards than the male trainees. In other words, they established a double standard as an insult to her. These double standards included the possibility of doing knee •pushups as opposed to regular pushups. On the obstacle course, O'Neil was given white steps to

enable her to deal with each obstacle. She was also given a thirty-second "gender norming" deduction on her obstacle course time limit. During field training, she was unable to pull her own body weight out of the water and onto a speeding boat. Master Chief John Argyle later asked O'Neil how could she possibly pull a man out of a burning tank if she could not pull her own body weight out of the water and onto the boat. Again, these are the same questions Fields asked.

Another argument in Fields' essay is that females taken prisoner might be tortured in a way that would cause the male witnesses to "break" and give forth information. This argument was brought forth in the film during the S.E.R.E. (survival, evasion, resistance, and escape) field exercise, when the members of the combat unit were taken as prisoners. Argyle took great liberty in beating the cuffed O'Neil, stating: "Do you think we should go easy on women all the time?" O'Neil had told her teammates not to let the captors use her to break them in order to gain intelligence information. But as she was continuously beaten, one of her male teammates yelled that he would give the information that Argyle wanted. Hence, I am reminded of one of Fields' main points: the male instinct is to protect women in distress. Needless to say, for her this is a major disadvantage of allowing women in combat.

On the other hand, in his essay, "An Officer and a Feminist," James Dubik, a former Ranger and former commandant of West Point, supports the idea of women in combat. I believe these positive arguments can also be seen in *GI Jane*. Dubik noted that as a typical Army officer he initially thought women were inferior to men, mentally as well as physically. In particular, he believed that women did not push themselves to their physical and mental limits. However, he said his view changed after he served as commandant at West Point and encountered female cadets. He noted that these women took charge of their lives and met their goals, regardless of what it took in terms

of discipline, pain and suffering. He stated that the women he saw were also able to succeed in highly competitive military environments under extreme pressure. This all came as a surprise to him.

I believe that this view of women can be seen in *GI Jane*, where Lt. O'Neil is shown to take her career seriously and wants to succeed within the Navy just like any other officer. She does not want to limit her goals just because she is a woman. It was also noted that she was a participant in the triathlon in the Winter Olympics so she is no stranger to competition at the highest levels. The question is whether she can deal with combat. Scott shows that O'Neil was also able to persevere in the extremely competitive environment of her SEAL training, but only after her first attempt failed. After washing out, she tries again after undergoing an intensive workout program. She finally completes the grueling SEAL CRT program on the same basis as the men. In doing so, she outlasted fifty percent of her class and outperformed many of her peers. She earned the position of team leader, wherein she gave orders both in the S.E.R.E. training exercise and later in an actual operation in Libya. In each of the circumstances, she took control and eventually gained the trust of the men under her command.

*GI Jane* may be only fiction, but Dubik noted that the seeing the "aggressiveness, achievement, and self-confidence" in the female cadets at West Point was new to him and went against the stereotypes that he had grown up with. What is more, these characteristics seemed to be second nature to the women cadets. In the film, we see O'Neil surviving in this grueling program even though often rendered her cold, wet, hungry, tired, and injured. O'Neil dedicated herself to her duties, did not give up, and ultimately found success. All her training finally pays off in combat. Scott shows her as she takes control of a situation during an operation in Libya in which she went

to the aid of the wounded Argyle, the very man who wanted to see her fail. She pulled him to safety, enabling the ignition of explosives to meet the advancing adversaries. After the mission, the SEALs are going home on an aircraft carrier and one of her men says: "Hey O'Neil, I'd fight a war with you any day." Dubik ended his essay by saying that he believed women such as these would eventually change all aspects of American life. I think Scott's message is exactly the same.

Finally, the essay by Lou Marano, "Arms and the Woman," is more complex and harder to understand than the previous two essays, yet it offers arguments that have also been considered by Scott's film. Similar to Suzanne Fields, Marano's main premise is that the integration of women into the military is a cause for disaster. He suggests that the benefits of integration might be witnessed early on while the unseen dangers are a long-term effect. He believes that the short-term benefit of women in the military is that of "autonomy of the individual." Women will have the freedom to choose combat. The long-term effect, he argues, will not be apparent until total war breaks out. He states that under the conditions of total war, women in combat will spell the defeat of the US military. But he admits that until this occurs, outcomes will probably seem successful as the United States enters an age of "brushfire wars." I admit that *GI Jane* does not deal with a full-fledged war in which the entire country is at war. It only shows a small conflict in Libya.

According to Marano, if more women were allowed into the military and if there was a large war, the U.S. would be at a disadvantage. But the question is whether or not the US will ever fight another war like World War II, which is the source of all of Marano's examples.

On the other hand, Marano argues that giving women equality goes against the very basis of "military leadership." He states that he was taught that the mission is of greater importance than the individual lives of the men under his leadership. Therefore, calling for "equal opportunities for

women in combat" just so women can have individual choices goes against that very principle. This is an argument that Scott clearly deals with. It is most forcefully represented by Senator DeHaven, a woman. As Marano stated, "What's good for individual careers isn't necessarily good for the country." The Senator called for equal opportunities for women in the military, but did not foresee O'Neil's success. Scott makes it clear that the Senator supported O'Neil as a test case just for publicity. In other words, she does not really believe that having women in the military would be in the best interests of the nation even though that is what she says in public. All she wanted was to get credit for supporting women's rights. In other words, Senator DeHaven along with all the military brass in the film would agree with Marano: what is good for the individual may not be good for the country.

Marano makes one further argument in his essay that is also addressed in the film. He claims that technology has not done away with the "physical advantage" men have traditionally had over women in a time of war. As I said before, I believe that this argument is also addressed in the film. As previously noted, the top military brass and Senator DeHaven never imagined that O'Neil would persevere as she did. They gave her a chance, but they thought it would be a chance for failure. Instead, she outperformed many of the men and succeeded. That was not an expected outcome. They believed that no woman could compete physically with elite Navy SEALs on an equal basis. But Scott goes further and makes the point that it takes more than physical strength to be a good leader in combat. So not only does O'Neil make the grade physically, she also shows her ability to command under extreme stress. For example, by overcoming her personal dislike of Argyle and rescuing him, she completes her mission and brings all of her men home safely. On the other hand, Argyle compromised the mission because he let his personal feelings interfere with his duties. Thus, Scott shows that Lt. O'Neil also possesses the mental as well as the physical

abilities required of an officer in combat.

The final point that Marano made was also made by Fields. He believes that "sexual distraction in military life" is a fact of life, and that males cannot be trained to be "buddies" with the females. He states that sexual tension will always be present and he believes this will prove to be dangerous in combat. I believe that Scott addresses this attitude right from the beginning of the film. Even though Lt. O'Neil is shown to be very capable as an intelligence officer, most of the male officers look at her in a sexual manner and regard her as inferior to them. Later, one officer stated upon her admittance to the SEAL training program, "just give me one night with her and I'll set her straight." A further example of this attitude occurred during an exercise in which a male trainee stated he was having a sexual fantasy in regards to O'Neil doing her pushups. As noted above, Argyle stated that "her presence makes us all vulnerable." So I think it is clear that Scott confronts all of Marano's arguments except the one dealing with an all-out war.

In conclusion, I find that Ridley Scott's *GI Jane*, like an argumentative essay, contains a clear thesis statement, supporting arguments and supporting examples. I have tried to prove this by showing that most of the major arguments of the three essays we read in class are considered in the film. I have tried to show that the three essays present opposing views on the subject, so it is clear that Scott has considered opposing positions as well as his own. Lt. O'Neil is faced with great obstacles in her successful completion of the SEAL training program, and these obstacles represent what many people, like Fields and Marano, actually believe about the idea of women in combat. I believe that the hardships that O'Neil is faced with and the determination that she musters to find success is Scott's way of addressing these criticisms and answering them. But it is not like Scott is alone in his beliefs. I have shown that his theme statement is most in sync with



the view that is presented by James Dubik, who is the only writer of the three who actually commanded troops in combat. So even though *G.I. Jane* is just a fictional work and Lt. O'Neil is not a real person, I believe that the film deserves serious consideration as a statement on women in combat.

Daniel Nordass

Spring 2001