

## THE LASSO OF TRUTH

### *A Critique of Feminist Portrayals in Wonder Woman*

SOPHIA FOX

FOR GENERATIONS, WONDER WOMAN HAS BEEN A STAPLE OF BOTH THE COMIC BOOK INDUSTRY AND POPULAR FEMINIST DISCOURSE. HER DEEPLY FEMINIST CREATORS, WILLIAM MOULTON MARSTON, ELIZABETH HOLLOWAY MARSTON, AND OLIVE BRYNE, WOULD SURELY BE PROUD OF HOW THEIR CHARACTER HAS MAINTAINED HER RELEVANCY IN AMERICAN LIFE. HOWEVER, THE RECENT WONDER WOMAN MOVIE SEEMS TO ABANDON THOSE ROOTS, AND EXPOSES A BLEAKER SIDE OF MODERN FEMINISM. THE RISING COMMODIFICATION OF FEMINISM AND THE STUBBORNNESS OF DEROGATORY REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN CINEMA ARE EVIDENT IN THE FILM, IN SPITE OF ITS IMMEDIATE ADOPTION AS A FEMINIST VICTORY.

## “The marketing power of celebrities has, somewhat inadvertently, been applied to the feminist movement.”

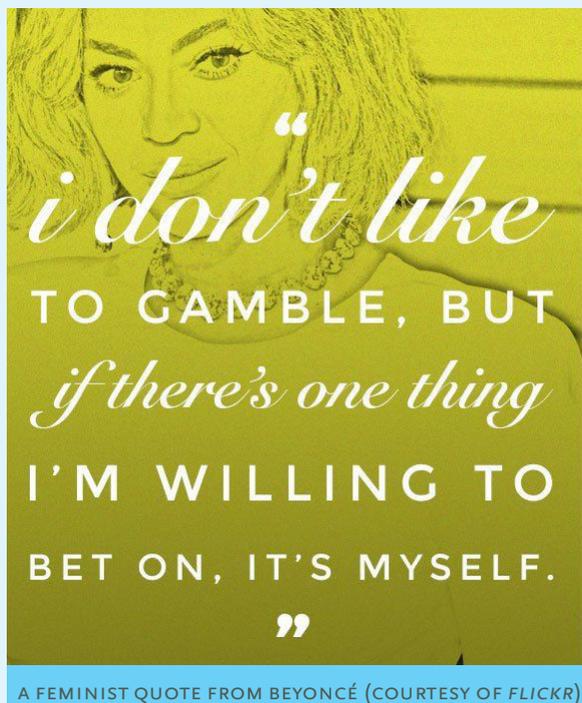
38

Wielding her Lasso of Truth and flying in her invisible airplane, the Amazonian enigma that is Wonder Woman still holds the position as the most prominent female superhero of all time. The brainchild of William Moulton Marston, his wife Elizabeth Holloway Marston, and his live-in mistress Olive Byrne, Wonder Woman was born of a uniquely feminist mindset. As Harvard professor Jill Lepore argues in her novel, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, the larger-than-life fictional character acts as a link between the various stages of the feminist movement. Exploding back into popularity in 2017 with a feature film of the same name, Wonder Woman, as depicted on screen as well as in text, can be read as a comment on modern feminism just as much as a link to the movement's past. The depiction of Wonder Woman in 2017 illuminates the desirability and popularity of feminism, as well as its commodification and the lack of progress surrounding representations of women in Hollywood.

One key aspect of the 2017 *Wonder Woman* movie is the ways in which it shines a light on the rising popularity of feminism. Due to celebrity endorsement, feminism has gained immense popularity, both among supporters and dissenters, in the past few years. 2014 in particular was seen as a watershed year for the feminist movement. As Charlotte Alter described in her article for Time Magazine, “This May Have Been the Best Year for Women Since the Dawn of Time,” feminism took center stage at nearly every level of American society. Malala Yousafzai made international headlines when she became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, Janet Yellen became the first woman to head the Federal Reserve, President Barack Obama established a task force to address sexual assault on college campuses, Maryam Mirzakhani became the first woman to win the Fields Medal for Mathematics, and Disney's *Frozen* became the highest grossing animated movie in history (Alter, 2014). All of these achievements, however, have taken a backseat to two other moments in 2014: the beginning of Emma Watson's #HeForShe campaign (and the subsequent wave of male actors who pledged their support), and Beyoncé's influential performance at the Video Music Awards. The latter of the two has produced images that, to this day, are often evoked in support of the feminist movement: Beyoncé backlit by a giant video screen simply displaying the word “feminist.”

In similar ways, celebrity endorsement has become the dominant conversation of modern feminism. The marketing power of celebrities has, somewhat inadvertently, been applied to feminism. Just as the Kardashians sell makeup products, Beyoncé has helped to sell an ideology simply by attaching her image to it. People may recognize the names Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem, but reading their works has become far less important than being able to boldly proclaim oneself a feminist, just like their favorite celebrity.

Due to the overall rise in the popularity of modern feminism, claiming the title for oneself is met with less resistance than in the early years of the movement. This glorification of the title of “feminist” does not, however, indicate a total abandonment of content-based feminism. Less restrictive access to birth control, abortion rights, increasing presence of women in traditionally male-dominated fields, and most recently, low awareness of prevalent sexual harassment and assault are all issues that



A FEMINIST QUOTE FROM BEYONCÉ (COURTESY OF FLICKR)

feminists champion. Within the movement itself, people are adopting a focus on greater intersectionality, especially racial inclusivity, as the new standard for feminism. The continuation of issue-focused feminism is perhaps best encapsulated in the Women's March, one of the largest marches in U.S. history, which extended to several other countries and continents, and focused on a wide range of women's issues and their potential future under the Trump administration (Garfield, 2017). The main difference between the past of the feminist movement and its current form is that feminism in the later years of the 21st century is not centered around one particular issue, or group of issues, so much as ideals and self-assigned labels. A feminist can still be defined by the words of Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as "A person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes" (Adichie, 2012). It can just as easily be described as a woman who believes in herself and wants to be called a feminist. Thanks in large part to celebrity endorsements, feminism is no longer solely defined by the issue, or issues, at its center.

But how does this relate to Wonder Woman? To address this question, it is critical to understand that Wonder Woman herself is the ultimate feminist. As Jill Lepore describes in her book, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, the character was forged in the fires of the early feminist movement by William Moulton Marston and his lovers, Elizabeth Holloway Marston and Olive Byrne. As Lepore states, "[Wonder Woman is] the missing link in a chain of events that begins with the woman suffrage campaigns of the 1910s and ends with the troubled place of feminism fully a century later. Feminism made Wonder Woman. And then Wonder Woman remade feminism, which hasn't been altogether good for feminism" (Lepore, 2015). It is easy to assume that the new *Wonder Woman* movie was a way of bringing an old character into the modern age, but this notion is incorrect. The three creators of the Amazonian princess were deeply embedded in the feminist movement of the time, and the character they made is an intentional culmination of these ideologies. Feminism did in fact make Wonder Woman, and Wonder Woman in turn molded the later ages of the feminist movement.

This ability to both revise feminism, as well as show the movement for what it is, is on full display in the new *Wonder Woman* movie. The current age of feminism is one of massive popularity and titles, and the movie exemplified that reality. Even before its release, *Wonder Woman* was largely heralded as a feminist triumph. The fact that it is

the first major superhero movie with a female lead in the current age of superhero franchises, and that the film performed exceptionally well at the box office, was enough for feminist to claim it as their own (Woerner, 2017). *Wonder Woman* made feminism in this case; most people did not feel the need to see the movie to pass judgement on it, the title of "Wonder Woman" seems to have automatically made it a feminist movie. Even the Bechdel test website engaged in this behavior, giving the film a passing grade before it was released (although it did later prove that evaluation correct). The *Wonder Woman* movie itself was popular because of the popularity of feminism, and in turn, feminism gained more popularity because of the constant discussion of the film as a feminist triumph. This cyclic relationship between feminism and *Wonder Woman* demonstrates both the popularity of feminism, as well as *Wonder Woman's* permanent place within the movement. The fact that the *Wonder Woman* movie was heralded as a feminist success long before it was even released demonstrates the preemption of labels, rather than substance, in modern feminism.

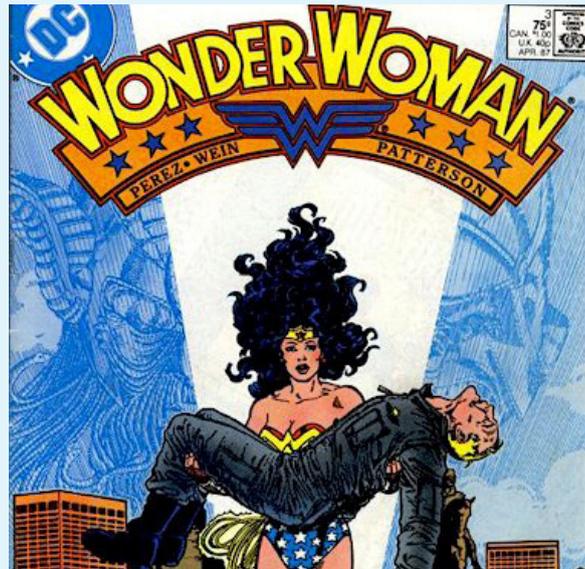
Another aspect of modern feminism highlighted by the film is the commodification of the movement. As the movement itself has gained popularity, the prevalence of feminist products has too. A symbol of the Women's March was the 'pussy hat' a pink knit cap with cat ears, conveniently available for purchase on Amazon (Garfield, 2017). Buttons with phrases such as 'this is what a feminist looks like' are also common, and even certain websites, like Wildfang.com, sell almost exclusively feminist products. It seems that people do not just want to be feminists, they want to proclaim that they are. The *Wonder Woman* movie did not escape this phenomenon, but rather actively engaged it. In preparation for the film, DC celebrated the 75-year anniversary of the creation of *Wonder Woman* by releasing a line of *Wonder Woman* themed products. *Wonder Woman*, in the context of the 2017 film, was also licensed to thinkThin protein bars, a move that was widely criticized (Loughrey, 2017). The *Wonder Woman* movie was not just made; it was actively sold through other products targeted at women. Although this is similar to the tactics DC uses with its other superhero movies, the image of *Wonder Woman* as a feminist icon was often used in branding.

While the film itself ultimately fails to live up to the feminist hype surrounding it, the marketing of the film relies heavily on its being accepted as feminist. DC, after the lukewarm receptions of *Suicide Squad* and *Batman vs. Su-*

perman, needed a movie that could bring them commercial success. Based on the current moment in feminism, they saw their opportunity with *Wonder Woman*, and focused their marketing campaign accordingly (Thilk, 2017). The film trailer focuses heavily on the relationship between Diana Prince and her mother, while minimizing the role of the men that feature prominently in the actual film. Additionally, the trailer devotes time to a relatively minor scene in the film where Diana expresses discomfort with traditional women's fashion, a moment that actively comments on gender roles but does not really matter to the plot as a whole. To close out the subliminal messaging of the trailer, a scene of men referring to Diana as a 'young woman' is directly followed by a scene of her fighting other men and winning (Jenkins, 2017). The overall statement of the trailer is clear: this is a movie about a strong woman, so you should pay money to come see it. In fact, the majority of the marketing campaign and press coverage of the film focused on Gal Gadot herself rather than her character. DC was criticized for not producing as wide of a marketing campaign as they have for their past several movies, but the popularity of Gal Gadot herself gave the company plenty of free press (Thilk, 2017). The narrative became Gal Gadot, the beautiful former model and Israeli soldier who was pregnant for some of the reshoots of the movie, as *Wonder Woman*. This focus on the actress, and her physical appearance, covers up the feminist history of *Wonder Woman* as a character for the sake of making the most profit possible. The success of this marketing tactic, making *Wonder Woman* just feminist enough to be widely popular, demonstrates how *Wonder Woman* has again shaped feminism in ways that are not altogether good-proving it to be a highly profitable brand.

Perhaps the most important thing the *Wonder Woman* movie says about modern feminism is that the representation of women in Hollywood, particularly the use of the virgin-whore dichotomy and downplaying female intelligence, has not seen much progress. There are a few glaring flaws with the movie, such as *Wonder Woman*'s perpetually and improbably perfect hair, the fact that almost every male character in the movie makes some sort of comment on her physical appearance, and the perplexing reality that no character ever uses the name *Wonder Woman* (opting instead to call her Diana Prince, an alias given to her by a man) (Jenkins, 2017). No matter how frustrating or unfortunate these plot points are, the more damaging issues with the film are the subtler ways in which long standing portrayals of women on the silver screen are reinforced. One of the most significant issues with the film is

its engagement with the virgin-whore dichotomy. As Molly Haskell explains in her book, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, "The whore-virgin dichotomy took hold with a vengeance in the uptight fifties...On the one hand, the tarts and tootsies played by Monroe, Taylor, Russell...were incapable of an intelligent thought or a lapse of sexual appetite; on the other, the gamines, golightlys, and the virgins played by Hepburn, Kelly, Doris Day, and Debbie Reynolds were equally incapable of a base instinct or the hint of sexual appetite" (Lepore, 2015). This manifests in *Wonder Woman* with Diana being portrayed as the stereotypical naïve virgin. As soon as Diana and her love interest Steve Trevor are left alone, the topic of heteronormative sex quickly ensues (Jenkins, 2017). Although Diana states that she is thoroughly read on the topic of sex and understands it from an academic standpoint, she fails to grasp other concepts such as marriage, and is at one point so thoroughly fascinated with a baby that she runs across a street to swoon over it (Jenkins, 2017). This scene, and her overall portrayal as a virgin, are problematic for several reasons. Painting Diana as an almost helplessly naïve woman makes her seem much more like the damsel in distress than the hero of the film, thus negating its importance as a female-led superhero film. Additionally, the character of *Wonder Woman* has traditionally been portrayed as queer, and not necessarily a virgin. Although the film makes a



A COVER FROM THE *Wonder Woman* COMIC (COURTESY OF FLICKR)

## “Marginal progress, in this case, is as useful as no progress at all.”

small nod to this history, it otherwise exchanges it in favor of stark heteronormativity, and characters that exemplify traditional gender roles (Jenkins, 2017).

Wonder Woman, for all her knowledge and grit, is painted as completely oblivious in the face of the constant sexual advances made towards her. Although the movie does complicate the archetype of naïve virgin with a half-baked romance between Diana and Steve, another digression from the spirit of the original Wonder Woman character, it does so in one of the least feminist ways possible. Diana and Steve consummate their barely developed romance in the middle of a warzone, a scene that is, at best, haphazardly thrown into the plot of the film. Marginal progress, in this case, is as useful as no progress at all. Yes, the movie has a female lead, and yes, she is not a perfect mold of the naïve virgin, but she is portrayed as sexually inept in ways that serve no positive purpose to the film as a whole. In spite of its feminist hype, *Wonder Woman* does little to advance the presentation of women in film.

Sex is not the only realm in which *Wonder Woman* exposes the lack of progress in presentations of women in film. The constant minimization of Wonder Woman's supposed intelligence falls in line with another of Haskell's observations of Hollywood. Haskell states that in the 1950's and 60's, "Audiences for the most part were not interested in seeing, and Hollywood was not interested in sponsoring, a smart, ambitious woman as a popular heroine. A woman who could compete and conceivably win in a man's world would defy emotional gravity, would go against the grain of prevailing notions about the female sex. A woman's intelligence was the equivalent of a man's penis: something to be kept out of sight" (Haskell, 2016). Again, *Wonder Woman* attempts, but ultimately fails, to defy this reality. Although Wonder Woman clearly explains, as she is sailing away from Paradise Island, that in addition to reading the twelve-volume academic study of sex she also speaks over one hundred languages, this intelligence is nowhere to be found in the rest of the film (Jenkins, 2017).

Diana's complete inability to understand the human world, ranging from revolving doors to assuming that all women are battle trained just as she is, portrays her as a

fool. Although these moments can arguably be seen as played for comedic effect, their prevalence throughout the film leaves little to be found humorous. Charging down the streets of London wielding a sword, demanding to be taken to the front at once, and insisting on defeating Ares shows a complete lack of comprehending social cues unbecoming to a character of her level of intelligence (Jenkins, 2017). Even Wonder Woman's characteristic crusade for truth and justice is portrayed as an extreme form of innocence bordering on stupidity. This portrayal, although in line with the traditions of Hollywood, completely disregards the historical foundations in which the character was created, and the people who created her. Although she is in many ways equal, or superior, to the men surrounding her in the film, Diana Prince is not allowed to be irrefutably better than them. The watering-down of her intelligence levels her with the gritty men she fights alongside, an ironic portrayal considering William Moulton Marston believed firmly in the intellectual and moral superiority of women.

One may ask why Hollywood ignored much of Wonder Woman's key characteristics. The answer lies in DC's bottom line: a truly feminist hero would not entice the typically male audience of superhero movies, and thus would not make as much money at the box office. As Charlotte E. Howell explains in her essay "‘Tricky’ Connotations: Wonder Woman as DC's Brand Distributer,"

Wonder Woman was indebted to "bohemianism, socialism, free love, androgyny, sex radicalism, and feminism." (Lepore, 2015). Overall, a pretty tough sell to an industry trying to make billions of dollars on a superhero movie. Moreover, in the 1970s, she became for many the face of the second-wave feminist movement, appearing on the inaugural cover in July 1972 of Ms. magazine and used as a key symbol in feminist debates.<sup>9</sup> ... Thus, franchise branding of Wonder Woman often seeks to minimize that which makes her character unique: her close ties to feminism, which are seen industrially as unmarketable, especially to male superhero fans (Howell, 2015).

Not only were Wonder Woman's roots sacrificed for the plot of a movie, they were also sacrificed at the altar of capitalism and male opinion. The *Wonder Woman* movie

does not just show the commodification of feminism; it actively engages in it. The film as a whole creates a strange dichotomy- it uses feminism to make more money, but rejects feminism in order to make more money. In the process, it perpetuates a degrading view of women while dodging criticism by having women as the lead role and director of the film. On the surface, *Wonder Woman* is a groundbreaking film and a success for the feminist movement. Upon closer inspection, however, it is little more than an exploitation of feminism, and a complete rejection of the roots of Wonder Woman's character.

In 2017, one of history's greatest feminist icons was finally brought to the silver screen. As the creation of William Moulton Marston, Elizabeth Holloway Marston, and Olive Byrne, Wonder Woman was created as a reflection of the feminist movements of the 1910's and 1920's. As Jill Lepore argues, she was taken up by later feminist movements and served as the link between the feminist movement's past and present. In the turbulent times of 2017, Wonder Woman serves as much as a representation of the past as a way to interpret the current moment of feminism. The wild popularity of the movie reflects the popularity of feminism as a whole, while its marketing campaign shows the recent commodification of the movement. The film itself, however, contains several troubling aspects that exemplify how little progress has been made in the representations of women in Hollywood. Overall, the new *Wonder Woman* movie both demonstrates and embodies feminism in its newest form.

## REFERENCES

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "We Should All Be Feminists." [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com), TED Conferences, LLC, Nov. 2012.
- Alter, Charlotte. "2014: The Best Year for Women Since the Dawn of Time." *Time*, Time, 23 Dec. 2014, [time.com/3639944/feminism-2014-womens-rights-ray-ri-ce-bill-cosby/](http://time.com/3639944/feminism-2014-womens-rights-ray-ri-ce-bill-cosby/).
- Barker, Andrew. "Film Review: '.'" *Variety*, Variety Media LLC, 30 May 2017, [variety.com/2017/film/reviews/film-review-wonder-woman-1202446320/](http://variety.com/2017/film/reviews/film-review-wonder-woman-1202446320/).
- "Bechdel Test Movie List." *Wonder Woman - Bechdel Test Movie List*, 4 Nov. 2016, [bechdeltest.com/view/7241/wonder\\_woman/](http://bechdeltest.com/view/7241/wonder_woman/).
- Berlatsky, Noah. "The Free-Love Experiment That Created Wonder Woman." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 18 Oct. 2014, [www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/10/wonder-womans-feminism/381579/](http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/10/wonder-womans-feminism/381579/).
- Caprino, Kathy. "What Is Feminism, And Why Do So Many Women And Men Hate It?" *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 9 Mar. 2017, [www.forbes.com/sites/kathycapri-no/2017/03/08/what-is-feminism-and-why-do-so-many-women-and-men-hate-it/#1981d54a7e8e](http://www.forbes.com/sites/kathycapri-no/2017/03/08/what-is-feminism-and-why-do-so-many-women-and-men-hate-it/#1981d54a7e8e).
- Caranicas, Peter. "'Wonder Woman' DP Matthew Jensen Re-Teams with Patty Jenkins, Chris Pine on TV Show." *Variety*, Variety Media LLC, 15 Nov. 2017, [variety.com/2017/tv/news/wonder-woman-matthew-jensen-patty-jenkins-chris-pine-1202614922/](http://variety.com/2017/tv/news/wonder-woman-matthew-jensen-patty-jenkins-chris-pine-1202614922/).
- Dockterman, Eliana. "Beyoncé: Lessons in Modern Feminism." *Time*, Time, 17 Dec. 2013, [time.com/1851/flawless-5-lessons-in-modern-feminism-from-beyonce/](http://time.com/1851/flawless-5-lessons-in-modern-feminism-from-beyonce/).
- Fernandez, Matt. "James Cameron Calls 'Wonder Woman' a 'Step Backwards' for Female Protagonists." *Variety*, Variety Media LLC, 24 Aug. 2017, [variety.com/2017/film/news/james-cameron-wonder-woman-praise-misguided-step-backwards-1202538440/](http://variety.com/2017/film/news/james-cameron-wonder-woman-praise-misguided-step-backwards-1202538440/).
- Garfield, Leanna. "The 11 Biggest Marches and Protests in American History." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 8 Feb. 2017, [www.businessinsider.com/largest-marches-us-history-2017-2/#the-womens-march-on-washington-january-21-2017-11](http://www.businessinsider.com/largest-marches-us-history-2017-2/#the-womens-march-on-washington-january-21-2017-11).
- Haskell, Molly. "Introduction, Chapter 1." *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, U. Of Chicago P., 2016, pp. xiii-4.
- Howell, Charlotte E. "'Tricky' Connotations: Wonder Woman as DC's Brand Distributer." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2015, [muse-jhu-edu.proxy.bc.edu/article/595612](http://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.bc.edu/article/595612).
- Jenkins, Patty, director. *Wonder Woman*. DC, 2017.
- Lepore, Jill. *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*. Scribe, 2015.
- Lepore, Jill. "The Surprising Origin Story of Wonder Woman." *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Oct. 2014, [www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/origin-story-wonder-woman-180952710/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/origin-story-wonder-woman-180952710/).
- Loughrey, Clarisse. "Wonder Woman Film Makes Questionable Advertising Choice by Partnering with Weight Loss Brand." *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 4 May 2017, [www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/wonder-woman-film-gal-gadot-advertising-thinkthin-weight-loss-brand-backlash-a7718191.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/wonder-woman-film-gal-gadot-advertising-thinkthin-weight-loss-brand-backlash-a7718191.html).
- Woerner, Meredith. "The World Needs Wonder Woman. Director Patty Jenkins Explains Why." *www.latimes.com*, 30 May 2017, [www.latimes.com/entertainment/herocomplex/la-et-hc-wonder-woman-patty-jenkins-20170530-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/herocomplex/la-et-hc-wonder-woman-patty-jenkins-20170530-story.html).
- "Wonder Woman – Official Movie Site – Trailer, Final." Edited by DC, Wonder Woman – Official Movie Site, Warner Bros, [wonderwomanfilm.com/](http://wonderwomanfilm.com/).
- Thilk, Chris. "Why the Marketing of Wonder Woman at Warner Bros. Is Coming Under Fire." – *Adweek*, Adweek, 17 May 2017, [www.adweek.com/creativity/why-the-marketing-of-](http://www.adweek.com/creativity/why-the-marketing-of-)

