

## “This Is the World We Made”: Queer Metaphor, Neo-Colonial Militarization, and Scientific Ethics in *The Old Guard* (2020)

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### Abstract

*The Old Guard*, an action and speculative film released by Netflix in 2020, is based on a comic book written by Greg Rucka and illustrated by Leandro Fernandez and was adapted to film by director Gina Prince Bythewood. Her adaptation of the violent and bloody graphic novel centers around a group of immortals—of whom half are canonically LGBTQ+ and of color—and their mission to save the world. The film directly questions the representation of queer characters who must die as a way to center the heterosexual hero—also known as the “bury-your-gays” trope. By not only focusing on the subversivity of queer love and the violence that is often predominant in action cinema, but also in subverting queer history by making it unable to die, unable to be killed, *The Old Guard* destabilizes how one might view speculative action cinema. Furthermore, this paper addresses questions of unethical scientific experimentation, as well as the representations and subversions of globalization and neo-colonialism in the ways of militarization, queer metaphor, and the rewriting of history. By investigating these representations, this paper argues that *The Old Guard* imagines a future without queer death, but it also simultaneously interrogates the ethics of neocolonial militarization and western sciences within action cinema through a BIPOC, female, and queer gaze.

## Introduction

*The Old Guard* (2020), directed by Gina Prince Bythewood and produced by Netflix, begins with the sound of bullet-shell casings dropping to the floor, a close-up shot of black combat boots, and glimpses of dead bodies amidst eerie silence. Another series of close-up shots centers on lifeless faces covered in blood—faces later shown to be those of the protagonists of the film. Boots tread amongst the bodies, checking to see if the people on the ground are really dead while a female voice comments on the gruesome scene via voiceover: “I’ve been here before, over and over again, and each time the same question. Is this it? Will this time be the one? And each time, the same answer. And I’m just so tired of it” (00:45-01:10). The echoing sound of the narrator’s voice amidst the uncomfortable silence suggests a solitude in death, a theme further emphasized when the screen cuts to black and the lyrics “we were born alone, and we die, alone” are sung (1:10). And yet, the words spoken by the narrator point beyond death and toward the possibility of rebirth. The narrator’s words mixed with the violent scene implies that the lifeless bodies on screen have dealt with death many times already, to the point where they experience an exhaustion with their endless rebirth. Indeed, as the audience soon learns, the protagonists are a group of immortals who cannot die, or rather, who continue to be resurrected, even when they die a most violent death. By highlighting their inability to remain dead, the movie places them in a queer position in relation to linear time. As we would like to suggest, the concept of immortality works here to queer—as in to make unstable—typical notions of violence within speculative action cinema.

*The Old Guard*, hereafter *TOG*, is adapted from the graphic novels of the same name, written by Greg Rucka and illustrated by Leandro Fernandez. The film adaptation investigates the ethics and morals associated with violence, death, and American militarism. *TOG* follows the story of a group of immortals who describe themselves as a covert “army of four” (38:05). The group, made up of queer-coded and LGBTQ+ characters, is led by the ancient Greek warrior Andromache of Scythia, known in the film as Andy (Charlize Theron): Andy is accompanied by Booker (Matthias Schoenaerts), Joe (Marwan Kenzari), Nicky (Luca Marinelli), and their most recent addition to the group, Nile (Kiki Layne); together, these immortals have fought for centuries, and continue to fight to protect the mortal world. During a counterfeit emergency mission set up by former CIA officer James Copley (Chiwetel Ejiofor) in South Sudan, their extraordinary abilities are exposed. As a result, Andy and her team must protect themselves by eliminating the threat posed by the CEO of a pharmaceutical empire, Steven Merrick (Harry Melling), who utilizes Copley to capture the immortals and who seeks to research and monetize

the immortals' power. After narrating the events leading up to the confrontation between Andy's band of immortals and Merrick's mercenaries, the film culminates in a crescendo of violence, enacted by the immortals against Merrick himself in an attempt to free themselves from unethical and dehumanizing scientific testing. In the end, Merrick is killed, which suggests a momentary victory, albeit a morally compromising one, of the protagonists over the militaristic and imperialistic system that the CEO represents.

*TOG*, as a speculative action film, questions many issues related to the traditional action cinema genre. First, it subverts the way traditional action films typically represent queer/LGBTQ+ characters by replacing the "bury-your-gays" trope—which kills off queer characters—with representations of queer immortality. Following a similar argument to J. Halberstam concerning the representation of retributive violence (cf. *Imagined Violence/Queer Violence*), our paper suggests that the violence enacted by LGBTQ+ and/or BIPOC superhumans like Andy and her team, who are routinely ostracized in the traditional American action genre, complicates viewers' understanding of what constitutes acceptable forms of violence and what does not. This is especially true because the movie addresses individual violence in the context of neocolonialism and imperialism, systems of cultural violence that often run as a backbone within Hollywood action productions.

Lori A. Crowe, argues that "[t]he motives, themes, dialogues, and images in superhero films are hypermasculinized, raced, classed, and violent, and the mass distribution of such representations have the ability to influence the way we think about the military, security, and war" (134). Crowe's argument is important because it points to the fact that traditional action cinema, a genre that superhero films are closely linked to, is oftentimes male-centric, hegemonically heterosexist, imperialistic and formatted as propaganda to support the military services. While a film like *TOG* subverts some of these narrative structures through the queer metaphor of immortality and LGBTQ+ existence, the hegemonic structure of American action cinema and the representations associated with it cannot be fully overturned by a film still produced within the same framework. However, insofar as it "challenge[s] the dominance of heterosexist discourses" (Beemyn and Eliason 165) by foregrounding a queer and female gaze and insofar as it relies on "a distorting, a making the solid unstable" (Corber and Valocchi 25), Bythewood's adaptation engages in an act of queering that works to subvert traditional action cinema. The existence of queerness and the action of queering is related to how violence is portrayed and how it must be viewed critically. By inventing a queer history reaching back to the beginning of "western" civilization through the character of Andy, and by subverting the kind of

homophobic plot in which LGBTQ+ people must die either as a form of punishment or as a form of sacrifice to make room for a heterosexual future, the film critiques “the world we made”—a line taken from Ruelle’s song of the same title—through violence. Our analysis of *TOG*, therefore, allows a nuanced debate about ethics and violence to take center stage.

### **LGBTQ+ Representations in *The Old Guard* (2020)**

Lisa Purse explains that containment strategies are used in action films to suppress and control women and/or BIPOC characters on the cinematic screen through “comic framing, marginalisation, [...] narrative closure and demonisation” (133). She adds that when this is done to a queer character, it is done “by removing [queerness] completely from the screen and thus from the space of action” (137-38). When containment strategies are employed alongside queer-coding, they often work to hide LGBTQ+ love, desire, and gender diversity by erasing it from the screen. Instead of using such strategies of containment and queer-coding, *TOG* turns them on their head by focusing on queer characters that love each other and profess their love as well as including characters that are coded as queer, rather than being identified as queer. Hence, although there are actual queer characters in *TOG*—specifically Joe and Nicky—there also exists an implicit queer-coding of the female characters Andy and Nile through their dress and gender presentations. In addition, the implied relationship between Andy and Quynh, fighting partners for several millennia before they were separated during the witch trials of Europe, further paints the leader of the immortals as a queer hero. Queerness in *TOG* is thus not contained; it is out in the open both because it depicts a homosexual relationship between two immortal men and because it depicts immortal women who defy traditional gender expectations and heterosexual desire and desirability.

Andy and Nile both portray nontypical understandings of heteronormative and patriarchal femininity that have traditionally been object to the “male gaze” within action cinema. Both Andy and Nile initially present as rather androgynous and even perhaps gender non-conforming in terms of their behavior, style, and stature. Andy has short hair, slight muscles, and spends the bulk of the film in a black tank top and black jeans, even though her counterpart in the graphic novel is portrayed as feminine in a rather stereotypical and sexualized way. This shift in the movie toward a more masculinized and androgynous representation of the leader of the immortals helps code Andy as queer, mainly, through her androgynous gender presentation, which later morphs into queer-coded homoeroticism with Quynh as her story progresses in both the film and graphic novels.

Nile portrays a slightly different form of gender non-conformity, one that is also related to her identity as a Black woman. She is more feminine than Andy, yet she also represents a constrained and contemporary military style. Throughout the movie, Nile's hair is braided tightly; initially, she is dressed in clothes that are reminiscent of her uniform during her time in the Marine Corps, but as the film progresses, Nile wears increasingly casual as well as colorful clothing. Her brightly colored clothing, compared to Andy's dark ones, eventually turns her into a counter-image of the masculinized leader of the immortals, yet it similarly allows Nile, the soldier, to diverge from sexualized and objectified femininity. Her presentation also works to juxtapose the old—the antiquity of Andy and her team—with the new, aligning her with a modernity that is also criticized within the film when it is also represented through capitalist greed associated with Merrick. Nile shows that fluidity is required within modernity, specifically as a Black woman existing within a postcolonial world, which highlights the contemporary setting of the film. Thus, she works as a character who actively queers the action film genre and its typical gender roles because she does not adhere to patriarchal notions of gender and therefore convolutes the boundaries that comprise it.

Initially the two women also exemplify a form of militarism that works hand in hand with traditional, hegemonic masculinity. Specifically, the film portrays both the women's bodies as "functional weapons" along the lines of Jeffrey A. Brown's reasoning that,

[W]hile the well-toned, muscular female body is obviously an ideal in this age of physical fitness, it is presented in these films as first and foremost a functional body, a *weapon*. The cinematic gaze of the action film codes the heroine's body in the same way it does the muscular male heroes, as both an object and subject [...]. Hers is not a body that exists solely to please men, it is designed to be *functional* (56; emphasis added).

Although Andy and Nile's bodies are designed to be functional (i.e., deadly) and not sexualized, they are still objectified, albeit for the purpose of male-coded militarization, not male pleasure. The fetishization of the weaponized female body works within the heteronormative ideals of patriarchy, while it also subverts the ways in which hegemonic femininity has traditionally been sexualized in action cinema. The film shows that the weaponization of Andy and Nile does not fully diverge from representations of femininity within the action genre, because they too must adhere to these masculine norms or else risk being contained. Yet, when one reads the two female heroes' immortality as a metaphor for queerness, we can see that their functionality is exploited by an even higher order of power: capitalism in the guise of "scientific research" for the betterment of humanity. Existing as superhuman beings to be tested upon and exploited, both Andy and Nile fulfill their roles as female action heroines by becoming weaponized, being exploited for this

weaponization, and then breaking free of both restraints to assume full control of their lives, bodies, and powers (of im/mortality) through the queer-coding of their gender presentations.

### The Sexually Queer Action Hero

In *TOG*, the sexually queer hero is used to disrupt representations of the “functional”—that is, weaponized—superhero body. Analyzing the relationship between Joe and Nicky as well as the implied relationship between Andy and Quynh exemplifies this disruption, as both relationships defy the heteronormative system that constitutes the backbone of traditional action cinema. Joe and Nicky’s relationship insistently and actively subverts the action genre; what is more, it does so while avoiding stereotypical, racial, and patriarchal notions of homosexuality. The crucial scene in which this subversion of the genre is found is when Joe and Nicky are captured by Merrick and transported to London to be experimented on. Stuck in an armored van, surrounded by soldiers in tactical gear, Joe checks to see whether Nicky has reanimated beside him. The soldiers hold Joe back and one of them even tells him to shut up, leading Joe to ask provocatively: “What are you going to do, kill me?” (59:00). This scene once more confronts the soldiers as well as the spectators with the fact that, in contrast to so many queer people before them, these queer characters cannot be killed. Yet even though they cannot suffer the deadly consequences of homophobia and anti-queer violence, they are not entirely safe from it either. When Joe insists again that he needs to check on Nicky after the latter has revived, the soldier retorts condescendingly: “What is he, your boyfriend?” (59:08-21). Noticing Joe’s reaction to the soldier’s homophobia, Nicky sighs dramatically as Joe begins his rant:

**Joe:** You’re a child. An infant. Your mocking is thus infantile. He’s not my boyfriend. This man is more to me than you can dream. He’s the moon when I’m lost in darkness and warmth when I shiver in cold. And his kiss still thrills me even after a millennium. His heart overflows with the kindness of which this world is not worthy of. I love this man beyond measure. He’s not my boyfriend. He’s all and he’s more.

**Nicky:** You’re an incurable romantic. (59:33-1:00:07)

Directly after this declaration of love, the two kiss as the soldiers watch in shock. After a few seconds, the couple is pulled away from one another and the scene closes. When Copley and Keane open the doors of the armored van in the next scene, they find all the soldiers in the car killed with Joe and Nicky still chained and their hands tied, humorously watching the surprise on their captors’ faces. Instead of repeating an anti-queer narrative in which the harassment of two gay men leads to their violent death, the scene implies that the soldiers’ attempt to stop Joe and Nicky from being together resulted in their untimely deaths. Violence,

here, is enacted by these queer heroes as a form of retaliation against homophobia.

Instead of being openly queer, Andy's relationship with Quynh is merely coded as such in *TOG*.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the comics, there is no outright declaration of love between Andy and her partner, Quynh, other than hints at their eternal promise spoken to each other after being captured and jailed as witches: "Just you and me...to the end" (50:19-23). When talking about Andy's and Quynh's history to Nile, Nicky describes how the two women came to be regarded as witches when they would not stay dead after enduring the torture inflicted on them during the witch trials. The separation of Quynh and Andy as a result of the witch trials is also shown to be one major reason why Andy has lost her desire to live forever. Andy and Quynh's queered position, therefore, does not only lie in their immortality and their revolt against patriarchal gender roles, which positions them as "evil" within the traditional logic of European Christianity, but also in their subtly coded homoerotic love. In Andy and Quynh's relationship as well as in Joe and Nicky's relationship, then, queerness is, first, the center, even when coded, and, second, used to challenge a long and ongoing history of homophobia and the violence related to it within the patriarchal, European system as well as the imperialist Euro-American system that it developed into.

### Queering Traditional Action Cinema

The "bury-your-gays" trope originates in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tragic literary narratives in which queer characters had to die to be punished for their alleged moral infringements or to show that there was (regrettably) no place for them in the world, let alone a happy ending. The trope dictates "that in a narrative work [...], which features a same-gender romantic couple, one of the lovers must die or otherwise be destroyed by the end of the story" (Hulan 17) and it happens "often violently, in service of someone else's character development" (Cameron 2). Haley Hulan remarks that "straight creators will often use *Bury Your Gays* as a tool for exploitation or for the perceived shock value that queerness's depiction can have for straight audiences" (21). This exploitation of LGBTQ+ characters and queer death as a shocking spectacle in TV series and films written and/ or directed by cis-gender and/or straight creators continues to shape LGBTQ+ representations and is still popular to date in cultural media, however, not without consequences.

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<sup>1</sup>It is only in Rucka's second graphic novel within the series *The Old Guard: Force Multiplied* that the homoerotic coding between the two women is solidified with a kiss.

One of the most prominent examples of “bury-your-gays” can be found in director Jason Rothenberg’s post-apocalyptic science fiction drama TV series *The 100* (2014-2020), where the character Lexa is suddenly killed off by a stray bullet meant for the protagonist, Clarke, her love interest in season three, episode “Thirteen,” immediately after the two spent their first night together. Although the episode caused viewing figures to rise, the queer death that abruptly ended “Clexa,” as fans named the two women’s “ship,” remained not without consequences. Immediately after the episode aired, “#LGBTfansdeservebetter” began trending and quickly metastasized into the website [LGBTfansdeservebetter.com](http://LGBTfansdeservebetter.com) which tracks gay and lesbian deaths as well as the use of the harmful, anti-LGBTQ+ tropes on television” (Hulan 23). Films like *TOG* showcase how not engaging with this trope, or better yet subverting it completely by allowing LGBTQ+ characters to live without being killed off solely for shock value, has proven to be highly successful amongst fans. In the case of *TOG*, 78 million subscriber households watched the film about queer and queer(-coded) immortals within the first four weeks on Netflix, making it the platform’s “most popular title of the summer quarter” in 2020 (Low).

*TOG* most prominently subverts “bury-your-gays” by making violent death non-permanent. Although the characters of the film do experience violent death multiple times, it is not done so for the betterment of heterosexual characters, and ultimately, the queer heroes do not *stay* dead. Likewise, their immortality and consistent reanimation further, rather than limit, their evolution as characters within the narrative frame of the film. The film not only offers positive LGBTQ+ representation—in the sense that the queer characters do not die and are painted as “heroes”—but it also completely overturns the harmful tropes that limit the development of queer characters, making them nonsensical. Bythewood and Rucka have thus created a highly interesting—though not entirely unproblematic—movie for LGBTQ+ representation in action cinema.

### **Neo-Colonialism and the Militarized Superhero**

Since *TOG* is an American action film that depicts scenes of global conflict, it is placed in a long tradition of genre films that promote U.S. militarism abroad and hence fosters the neocolonial violence associated with western military invasions. Relatedly, Lori A. Crowe argues that, according to the conventions of Hollywood action cinema, “[t]oday’s heroes often work for the US government, ‘serve’ their country on the ground and abroad, brandish military weapons and armor, do not hesitate to utilize violence, and espouse neoliberal values” (134). Although the immortals fit some of Crowe’s descriptions of the typical action hero—for



example, Nile is employed by the U.S. Marine Corps—the immortals simultaneously confirm and contest conventional celebrations of American neo-colonialism and militarism. Analyzing the heroism that Andy, Joe, Nicky, Booker, and Nile portray allows one to examine the complex positionality of these queer “heroes” within the unstable geopolitical system that the movie depicts.

First, there is Andy, an ancient Greek hero who speaks with an American accent and is described by Booker as a woman who “has forgotten more ways to kill than entire armies will ever learn” (58:28-30). Andy is quite literally linked to the origins of western<sup>2</sup> civilization, but she is also a warrior/soldier who has killed more people than she can remember. The inherent violence of the west is also represented in Andy’s weapon, called a labrys, which is a double-sided ax. Her usage of the labrys consistently links Andy to an antiquity that is filled with violence, an antiquity that cannot be separated from the actions Andy performs with the weapon. The double-sided weapon, along these lines, also symbolizes Andy’s liminality, and her straddling an ethical and moral line as well as past and present. Andy’s usage of the weapon is also intertwined with the violence that she enacts in *TOG*, showing that she cannot fully detach from the violence of western culture that she represents as an ancient Greek warrior. Another integral aspect of Andy’s persona is that she refuses to work with one geopolitical power more than once to stay invisible as well as to avoid linking her team to one nation or political movement specifically. This shows her wish to work independently of the power structures that exist in the world of *TOG*, neocolonial structures that dictate who is a victim and who is an aggressor within the film due to histories of colonization. However, by not aligning herself, Andy inevitably also enacts violence in support of her own conceptions of “right and wrong,” that is to say, according to her own moral compass, which she then uses to justify the deaths of many soldiers that she and her team kill.

Joe and Nicky, lovers and partners from two separate sides of the “Holy Wars” around 1000 AD, share a past that is rooted in western European as well as Middle Eastern history; the division between the west and the east also constitutes a conflict between the two. Although explored in more detail in the graphic novels, their love story in the film is only described by Joe as one in which “the love of my life was of the people I’ve been taught to hate” and by Nicky as “we killed each other...many times” (45:28-36). The declarations of the two men emphasize how war is used to divide people in an effort of religious

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<sup>2</sup> As an intentional deviation from standard grammar and rules of English, we choose to not capitalize west/western as a way to decenter and de-emphasize the west.

(Muslim vs. Christian) and cultural (orient vs. occident) control. Booker, the youngest member of the immortals before Nile joins the team, was part of Napoleon's army and, like the others, died fighting enemy forces before resurrecting as an immortal. For Booker, Joe, and Nicky, their initial deaths demonstrate that only after resurrecting could they free themselves of the cultural, religious, and/or national restraints attributed to the geopolitical wars and violence of their past lives. Like Andy, the other immortals are consistently involved in one war after another, because they choose to fight for whoever they believe to be on the right side of history, thus remaining in geopolitical struggles throughout their immortality.

The character most obviously linked to a neocolonial cause is Nile, the newest member of Andy's team and a former member of the U.S. Marine Corps. In her opening scene, the viewer is presented with a military conflict set in Afghanistan, in which the Pashtun people are identified within the film, harkening to the very real situation of neocolonial invasion that marks U.S. military history since 2001. Similar to other American action films, *TOG* utilizes the "third world aesthetic" (Ullmann n.pag.) to portray the lived realities of people in conflict zones, but they only use this aesthetic to portray the military invasion of Afghanistan and not other places the immortals visit like Marrakesh or South Sudan. Important, then, is that the film presents the US neocolonial conflict with a "yellow filter" that "intend[s] to create a space that would make their intended viewers (i.e., viewers like themselves) associate it with poverty, 'pre-modernity', [and] lawlessness" (Fan qtd. in Ullmann n. pag.). It is through this opening scene in Afghanistan too that the link between the U.S. military and the pharmaceutical CEO Merrick is established, the connection between the two is shown in a quick shot at the Marine base camp in which the U.S. military's weapons are revealed to be produced by Merrick Industries (26:47). This sequence indicates how UK and U.S. entities of power do not work alone but are interrelated within a system of imperialism and neocolonialism that exploits the marginalized bodies of the "Other," here both the Afghan people and Nile, an African American woman fighting in Afghanistan.

While all the immortals were linked to some form of military in their first life, what is shown within *TOG* is that the immortals must *de-link* from these structures to survive after they have been resurrected. Notably, Nile, who could have continued to serve in the Marine Corps and (if undetected) have risen in the military's ranks as a type of super soldier, leaves the U.S. military to join the immortals. Because Nile has gained immortality and is thus relegated to the queer position—meaning she is pushed into the periphery and becomes subjectified—she can no longer be associated with the U.S. military. She is "outed" for her reanimating

powers and must leave her unit almost immediately due to these powers, a plot development that harkens back to the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policies that operated within the U.S. military until 2011. Due to their queered positions, the immortals, like Nile, are also pushed to the periphery of their respective military cultures and are forced to hide to avoid capture and torture. All heroes are forced to disassociate from their militaristic history and are propelled into a present in which hiding, running, and forced invisibility are the conditions if not for survival, then for a life free of abuse. Yet, instead of completely turning the notion of neocolonial militarism on its head, *TOG* is also complicit in its destruction of other cultures through representation—that is, through the production of cinematic aesthetics that are relegated to “third world” cultures, painting them as if they are in need of aid from western nations. The world within *TOG* is also one in which our heroes cannot survive without running from the structures that wish to confine them. By centering queer heroes who work to defy the structures while also being entangled with them, the film shows the nuance attributed to the immortals’ inevitable connection with western history and violence.

### **Violence and Queer Immortality as Metaphor**

A significant question that overshadows the representation of “heroism” enacted by the immortals then is: can violence be ethical depending on who enacts it in specific situations? This is a question we do not attempt to answer comprehensively with this paper as it is neither possible to give a generalized answer nor does it serve any purpose to our overall argument. However, when applied to *TOG*, this question exposes systematic and systemic uses of violence as tools of power, which shape cultures and societies based on humanist and heteropatriarchal ideas. Oftentimes, what western culture considers to be ethical is based on the laws and social rules put into place by those in power, which have historically been white, cisgender, men. The question further opens the debate to more complex and nuanced views on collective ethics, including individualized morality as well as violence as a form of queer liberation.

Martha McCaughey and Neal King argue that films that represent female-enacted violence cannot simply be regarded as “hegemonic (bad) or subversive (good)” because “one’s victorious fantasy will send another away unsatisfied in a manner unlikely to be captured by intensive interpretation” (19). Following their argument, our paper interprets the representation of female and queer violence within *TOG* to be neither wholly subversive nor hegemonic, but we instead position retributive violence on a spectrum. Halberstam maintains that “[i]t is by imagining violence that we can harness the force of fantasy and transform it into

productive fear” (*Imagined Violence/Queer Violence* 246). By employing violence for the purpose of “revenge,” a trope often used in cinema to allow queer, BIPOC, and other intersecting marginalized communities to subvert power structures, one can analyze how *TOG* queers—in the sense that it destabilizes and disrupts the solidity of meaning—typical notions of violence by reclaiming and reversing these actions. Another question that arises, then, is: how does the historically marginalized queer hero subvert the intertwining systems of capitalism, western militarism, and imperialist science which are prevalent in the world the movie depicts?

One answer to this question is found in *TOG* when the group of immortals have been imprisoned by Merrick and try to escape the torture of his scientific testing. In the scene in question, the group has been blasted with a smoke bomb, causing the immortals to be separated. While Nicky and Joe try to regain consciousness, they are confronted by Merrick’s bodyguard, Keane. A fight ensues between Nicky and Keane, in which the bodyguard kicks Nicky down while Joe is still unconscious. The camera focuses on the two opponents engaging in hand-to-hand combat and, ultimately, Keane overpowers Nicky and shoots him in the face. The sound of the gun goes off as Joe awakens and screams in horror at the violence committed against his lover. For the audience, his reaction conjures the dread that the “bury-your-gays” trope commonly produces in mainstream films, as both the viewer and Joe must fear that this might be the time Nicky does not reanimate. This scene shows the brutality of hegemonic violence enacted on queer bodies and it is only later when Joe and Keane meet again that a subversion of this anti-queer violence occurs. In a final and vengeful fight, Joe wins hand-to-hand combat with Keane, and pauses, which is when a close-up shot focuses on his bloody and tired face; Joe grabs Keane’s shirt collar and says: “You shot Nicky. You shouldn’t have done that” (1:43:47). Right thereafter, he pulls Keane over his shoulder and drops him onto the floor, effectively breaking his neck and exacting retribution for what Keane did to his lover minutes earlier in the movie.

This brutal scene shows that Halberstam’s idea of represented vengeance is integral to reading instances of hegemonic violence enacted against queer bodies such as this one. Keane, the hyper-masculine, hegemonic opponent—who does not fulfill the heroic role in a movie that ultimately favors the outlaws over those remaining within established power structures—is turned into a victim by the queer hero. This role reversal of the hegemonic hero vs. queer-coded villain into the hegemonic villain vs. the queer-coded hero is not portrayed as fully acceptable or, indeed, as completely positive in *TOG*, instead, its logic follows Halberstam’s assessment that “role reversal never simply

replicates the terms of the equation” (*Imagined Violence/Queer Violence* 251). We can interpret this queered violence as one that “transforms the symbolic function of the feminine within popular narratives and simultaneously challenges the hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right under the sign of masculinity” (251). Joe’s enactment of ruthless vengeance as the queer hero, who in other scenes has been shown to be romantic and poetic in his love for Nicky, works to obscure the clear binary dynamics that pit masculinity against femininity, queer against straight, and hero against villain. By killing Keane and enacting the vengeance he deems necessary to protect his relationship with Nicky, Joe’s revenge queers the representation of heroic violence within *TOG* due to his marginalized position. His killing of Keane is not conventional violence utilized on-screen to promote the heterosexual vs. queer binary and hierarchy that runs like a backbone to traditional action cinema, but it instead works as a complicator of this hierarchy by making fluid the power dynamics at play.

### **Temporality and Immortality**

When one compares plots that lead to the frequently untimely violent deaths of queer characters in older films to the plot of *TOG*, it becomes clear that the temporal logic of the film is rather unconventional, as is the movie’s portrayal of what one might imagine of queered or queer time. In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), Heather Love maintains that “[t]he history of Western representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants. Those who are directly identified with same-sex desire most often end up dead; if they manage to survive, it is on such compromised terms that it makes death seem attractive” (1). Death, she continues, is inevitable when researching and understanding the past of queer history and thus the future that can be found in it (1). In *TOG* non-permanent death helps to integrate a sense of “backwardness”; the movie imagines time existing within the past and future simultaneously, producing a queer temporality. For Andy and her team, along with the promise of death also comes the concession of linear time, in which their reanimation *contests* a queer history riddled with violence and “final” death, that is, death with no chance of revival. This is especially true because the queer heroes of *TOG* are both victims of violence and harbingers of it through revenge, yet they do not stay dead as opposed to the non-immortal victims of their violence.

One such complication of linear time within the film occurs, then, when it is revealed that the immortals are not truly “immortal” at all and will simply stop reanimating or healing at a random moment in the future, no matter how long they have lived. Rather than standing outside time or being untouched by human temporality, these heroes are placed in a

queer temporality, which we interpret to mean that they are positioned in a liminal space between the past and present as it moves into the future, with the threat of final death always hanging in the air. Because they occupy the liminal space of queer temporality, their heroic existence works as a symbol in which premature queer death is subverted by the illusion of immortality, due to the ongoing threat of “final” death occurring at any time. When the immortals finally come to the realization that they can die and eventually become mortal, they leave the queered positions they had previously occupied through their immortality and solely exist as LGBTQ+ and queer-coded characters who grapple with the threat of “true” death. However, this loss of immortality does not erase the queer temporality of their pasts, but merely implies a shift in their lived experiences as queer characters.

The process of reanimation is representative of the queer temporality of LGBTQ+ lives and non-permanent deaths in the movie. Most noticeable here is the fact that the horrific and violent nature of the immortals’ deaths is undone by the quick healing of their bodies, but not erased. Despite reanimating, the aftereffects of their deaths are clearly visible in their torn-up clothes, in the blood-splattered across their skin, and in the pain the immortals experience during the healing process. This representation of the aftereffects of the violence enacted against the queer hero’s body differs vastly from many versions of violence depicted in the traditional action genre, in which hyper-masculine male protagonists—such as Tom Cruise’s character in *Mission Impossible* (1996) or The Rock’s in *The Fast and the Furious* franchise (2011)—hardly seem to be affected or hurt by bullets or punches. *TOG*’s depiction of a brutal and painful process of resurrection and of superhuman bodies that are hurt, even if they do not give out, turns its immortal queer heroes into victims of the kind of violence that is commonplace in LGBTQ+ narratives: the ongoing direct and indirect physical and psychological violence that makes it painful, dangerous, and even deadly to exist as a recognizably queer person within a hetero- and cis-normative world.

The symbolism of immortality in *TOG* works to introduce imperfect heroes, heroes who are queer and commit terrible acts of violence to survive as well as to exact revenge. Yet, these imperfect heroes must suffer for their difference—for their marginal status—which is what both complicates and subverts the representation of violent queer histories and futures in the movie. As Love explains: “For groups constituted by historical injury, the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it” (1). The challenge the immortal heroes face is that of coming to terms with their violent pasts—the many violent deaths and rebirths they have suffered. In order to do so, they must engage with this

past while continuously trying to survive in a world that wishes to destroy and exploit them due to their queered position as immortals.

### **Scientific Ethics: The Morality of Western Sciences**

*TOG*'s queer-coding of its immortals links to the movie's representation of western sciences and humanism because within this logic the immortals' bodies are not considered "normal" bodies and are thus portrayed as "objects" to be tested on by the powers at hand. The colonial, humanist, and rational(ized) history of western sciences informs our analysis of *TOG* and therefore allows us to pinpoint its legacy within the film. As a Eurocentric and anthropocentric concept, humanism has created a binary logic of identity and otherness, implying a universality of humankind: humanism promotes "an ideal of bodily perfection and a set of mental, discursive, and spiritual values" (Braidotti 13) that needs to be protected at all costs. On the basis of this ideal, the male body and maleness have become the center and the norm, and all that is not male as well as white and/or European has been pushed to the margins. This naturalization of whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality becomes vital when we look at the scientific practices portrayed, and the scientific ethics explored in *TOG* because it is precisely the people who have been pushed to the periphery that are being exploited and therefore *must* struggle to disrupt the system or otherwise be confined, if not destroyed by it.

Within scientific ethics the question of good vs. evil often arises in relation to the harm that research or the results of unethically obtained science can do in the world or to certain groups of people. This question of harm opens debates about scientific ethics to intersecting discourses of scientific, political, societal, and philosophical nature. Because *TOG* centers on a group of outsiders who are either queer, female, non-white, or intersectionally positioned, who intervene internationally in areas of conflict, and who are persecuted both by the warlords they fight as well as the ruthless CEO of a capitalistic, pharmaceutical company, we need to differentiate between laws, ethics, and morals. Courtney Weinbaum et. al explain that "[l]aws are geographically based *and* biased by local cultural norms" (3; original emphasis), meaning "each country, state, and locality can pass its own laws legalizing or banning any behavior" (3). Ethics reflect the values of a collective or cultural group and "may or may not agree with local laws" (3). In comparison to ethics, morals are defined as "a person's lifestyle or self-conduct (esp. in sexual matters) considered regarding morality; a set of personal standards relating to right and wrong conduct" ("Moral" n. pag.). Thus, a small but vital distinction can be made between ethics and morals, a distinction that confines ethics to a larger scale of a collective—that is, "the greater good"—and morals to a personal and individual realm. Due to the complex geopolitical situations

portrayed in *TOG* and because the protagonists are centuries, if not millennia, old and come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds while having lived in many more cultures still that they have seen change over time, the debate regarding collective ethics and individual morals frequently clashes in the film.

In *TOG* the question of good vs. evil—and the many gray areas in between—is present throughout the film, not only navigating larger ethical debates but also appealing to and questioning the viewer's own moral compass. When Nile, the newest member of the immortals, questions *why* the immortals spend their unending lives saving people through violence, who will die shortly after anyway, the cultural dimension of this ethical dilemma becomes evident:

**Nile:** So, are you good guys or bad guys?

**Joe:** Depends on the century.

**Nicky:** We fight for what we think is right. (44:08-40; emphasis added)

Nicky's response pushes to the forefront the main issue at hand with the immortals' use of violence; they judge its necessity on their own terms while acting in a world that is constantly changing. Nile, the only immortal who comes from the time in which the movie is set, functions much like the polar north, in that she centers the group's moral compass by reminding them what is temporally considered "moral" in the twenty-first century. Nile's shifting morality, and her influence on the group of immortals, reflects her lived experience as a U.S. American soldier. Her position as a center for the immortals exists because she embodies the duality of being both an ex-Marine having worked for the military and a newly resurrected immortal warrior who is thrust into the position of the superhuman and threatened with dehumanization through scientific testing. While she struggles with this dual role at the beginning of the film, she ultimately dedicates herself to Andy and her team, as she comes to realize that the military is willing to deprive her of all human rights to weaponize her newly found immortality. Nile stands for a particular kind of modern, individualized female (and racialized) agency within the film; her choices and the choices she leads the other immortals to make are grounded in her positionality as a Black, female, and queered hero born and raised in a postcolonial world. Developmentally for Nile, her choices and shifting morality occurs due to a change of mind and a forced change of perspective and realization by turning into the prey herself when she assumes her immortal powers. This is important because it contrasts with the initial representations of the immortals in that through the years, they seem to have lost their way regarding morality, due to their liminal placement and queer temporality.



When Andy realizes that she is in the process of losing her immortality, the implication is that this has occurred because she no longer believes humanity is worth saving. As she tells Nile, right before a final confrontation with Merrick:

**Andy:** I think you showed up when I lost my immortality, so I could see what it was like; so I could remember.

**Nile:** Remember?

**Andy:** Remember what it...what it was like to feel unbreakable. Remarkable. You reminded me there are people still worth fighting for. (1:44:45-45:47).

Andy believes that she has lost her immortality because she has lost her belief in humanity, something that Nile's introduction into the group makes her aware of. This is especially evident when Nile confronts Copley near the end of the film prior to saving the other immortals from Merrick. Copley shows Nile a bulletin board of articles and notes that connect all the "good" that Andy and her team have done throughout the centuries. He says: "She saves a life, two, three generations later we reap the benefits," to which Nile responds: "She's in it, she can't see it" (1:29:20-55). The exchange between the two shows the outside and "modern" perspective of people like Nile and Copley that helps justify the immortals and the work they have done; despite the violence they enact. The immortals' violence is shown in this instance to display the complexity of individual morality, and it is only through the character of Nile that they, as well as the spectator, are made aware of this struggle.

### Unethical Testing and Postmodern Terror

The scientific testing depicted in the movie is not entirely fictional. Unethical experimentation on individuals as well as on specific marginalized groups has existed ever since the emergence of natural philosophy and science. These experimentations have been and are usually still justified by scientific ambitions of "curing" and "saving" humanity with the help of racialized "science" that was created by the west. In *TOG*, Merrick stands in for the kind of person who is willing to harm individuals for his own personal gain, using the allegedly "universal" justification of wanting to "save" humanity in the name of science. In a meeting with one of the scientists working for him and Copley, the following conversation reveals this ideology:

**Merrick:** What do you see?

**Scientist:** The Nobel Prize.

**Merrick:** And a fair few quid to boot. We brought a cancer drug to the market last quarter. It's already saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Yet, in development, it killed a quarter of a million lab mice. Now I didn't ask for their little permissions. I'm not gonna ask for yours. [...] There is a genetic code inside

you which could help every human being on Earth. We're morally obliged to take it. [...].

**Copley:** Mr. Merrick, this is about science, not profits [...] or sadism. (01:05:34-59)

Like Nile, Merrick refers to a personal moral code regarding his own actions, exposing science in *TOG* as heavily influenced and controlled by powerful individuals and the companies that invest their money into research. Moreover, the question remains, whether his explanation that “this is about science” is a valid justification for his actions, considering that western science has always been biased and frequently worked to uphold hegemonic power structures, instead of working to create a “better world.” John Grey remarks in this regard that “Western societies are ruled by the myth that, as the rest of the world absorbs science and becomes modern, it is bound to become secular, enlightened and peaceful—as contrary to all evidence, they imagine themselves to be” (118). Although Copley believes in the innocence of scientific research conducted by the “enlightened” west, the film shows that contemporary western science does not exist in a vacuum, meaning that it is influenced by corporate interests and capitalistic exploitation. This relates to what Walter Mignolo argues in “The Darker Side of Modernity” (2007), in which “the expendability of human life [...] and of life in general from the Industrial Revolution into the twenty-first century” (41) was and is integral to conceptualizing modernity, since knowledge systems such as western science were produced within and remain entangled with coloniality. Merrick’s placement in the film as a white, British, CEO of a pharmaceutical company brings this history front and center by presenting his position as that of a capitalistic and neocolonial villain.

While Merrick is clearly a neocolonial villain linked to the darker side of modernity, his actions represent a postmodern terror as explained by Halberstam: “What if we imagine a new violence with a different object; a postmodern terror represented by another ‘monster’ with quite other ‘victims’ in mind?” (*Imagined Violence/Queer Violence* 249). Merrick’s actions not only represent the capitalist violence of modernity, but they also represent postmodern terror through his journey of becoming a supreme, superhuman entity within the film, moving *beyond* the categories of capitalist modernity. Michael Peters in “Postmodern Terror in a Globalized World” (2004) explains that “[p]ostmodern terrorism seemingly has no limits, no inside or outside: it is transnational, truly global, highly mobile, and cellular. [...] It can also be small-scale yet ‘high-tech’, especially in the new areas of biotechnology and its application in biological warfare” (Peters, n.pag.). The postmodern terror associated with Merrick’s actions is explicitly shown when he introduces his company’s research project. In this scene, he eventually proves that he

is more than willing to violate the immortals' queer bodies to expand the human life span, while also pushing himself beyond everyone else in this endeavor. Merrick realizes that the immortals are a threat to the systems that bind them to him, and he wishes to exploit their immortality so that he will not lose his position of power and instead expand it. In his attempts to move towards (post)humanity by extracting life itself from the immortals, he becomes a threat to modern ethics within the west, not *just* the immortals who he tests on. Through the extraction of life, Merrick wishes to gain immortality without also gaining the queered position of otherness within the film. *TOG* implies that if Merrick were to gain immortality, he would use it to continue profiting off of the "Other" as he does with his pharmaceutical company on a larger and more powerful scale.

If one looks closer at the scientific practices portrayed in the film, one notices that Merrick's postmodern terrorism is also emphasized through the violation of ethical principles regarding human experimentation in his research. Out of ten *Ethical Principles for Scientific Research* discussed by Weinbaum et al., Merrick and his team violate seven in their research project: beneficence, conflict of interest, informed consent, disguised nondiscrimination, non-exploitation, privacy and confidentiality, and professional discipline (6). One example of such a violation can be found in a conversation between Merrick and Copley after he has captured Nicky and Joe:

**Copley:** You got the samples, blood, tissue, DNA.

**Merrick:** Well, you know the concept of proprietary data, and they are the product. They go in the vault. They stay there under lock and key.

**Copley:** For ...ever?

**Merrick:** We can't have them strolling back out into the world...into my competitors' laps. If this takes years, maybe decades, what does it matter to them? If we can unlock their genetic code, the world will be begging us for the key. (1:13:39-14:49)

Merrick is not only driven by personal greed and a strong desire for fame, he also wishes to place himself in a geopolitically monopolized position of power. Immediately after the interaction between Copley and Merrick quoted above, a conversation between Nicky and the scientist testing on him occurs. The scientist conducting the research truly believes that her work benefits "the greater good," and neglects socially established ethical principles in order to pursue her goals:

**Nicky:** You will not be able to give him what he wants.

**Scientist:** What? You think I am going too far? That I am unethical?

**Nicky:** I would say immoral.

**Scientist:** I believe this can change the world.

**Nicky:** A fine justification. I've heard this so many times before. (01:14:49-57)

What is striking in this scene is that the scientist refers to *unethical* behavior. Nicky, however, considers the situation to be *immoral* behavior. What Nicky perceives as a violation of his own moral compass as well as his own body, the scientist approaches from an allegedly objective, distanced standpoint. It is exactly this conflict of personal morality and collective ethics that complicates the idea of “the greater good” in the film. According to her own morality, the scientist working for Merrick compromises life by testing on Nicky to “save” humanity, while Andy and her team utilize violence for the “greater good” as they have fought and continue to fight in many geopolitical conflicts around the world. So, how are Andy and her team different from the scientists testing on them, when both groups act according to their individual morality?

In this case, the power dynamics at play position Andy and her team at the margin, yet through their violence the immortals find themselves able to break free of their confines, a fact that problematizes ideas of an overarching “ethics” of violence within the film through role reversal. The emphasis on the immorality and unethicity surrounding the violence enacted *against* LGBTQ+ bodies in the movie actively *queers* the representations of the immortals and the violence they enact against those who subject them to scientific misconduct. In line with what Halberstam remarks about the posthuman/cyborg body, one can also conclude that the superhuman bodies of the immortals are inevitably “queer: not as an identity but because [they queer]” (“Automating Gender” 14). What the film does, then, is portray how immortal heroes who are queer-coded, LGBTQ+, and exist within the queered position, question and destabilize the biases of western scientific practices as well as ethical principles that are influenced by colonial concepts of power in the west. The representation of violence within the film also depicts the complexity of morality and ethics within action cinema, through the juxtaposition of the immortals vs. Merrick and his team who wish to exploit them for their powers.

### Conclusion

Bythewood’s adaptation of the graphic novel *The Old Guard* is a complex film that does significant work to subvert normative and hegemonic representational practices within traditional action cinema. However, there are limits to *TOG*’s representation of violence, especially regarding the normalization of militarism and the revenge-induced killings the queer protagonists enact for the “greater good” and their own personal morality. Our argument concerns the negotiation between the binary divide of hegemonic vs. subversive representations of violence. The cinematic action genre profits off the harm and destruction of the undesirable and

queer/ed body which places the movie's heroes and other characters like them at the margins of history and representation. Yet, *TOG* also responds to this hegemonic violence by depicting queer retaliatory violence that perpetuates certain binary logics of the genre while also disrupting them simultaneously. *TOG* is subversive in the way it centers queer heroes and their strengths through the metaphor of immortality. They are represented as heroes to be revered and celebrated due to their superpower, a superpower that actively does not allow them to fully die within the film, thus subverting the "bury-your-gays" trope. Queerness, in this case is placed in a position filled with vindication that disrupts hegemonic power structures.

Our reading of *TOG* is based on the subversion of representational practices that depict queer and non-normative bodies as threats that need to be contained by scientific practices. The representation of violence, the discourses within the film that are used to justify violence, and the questioning of western ethics, are shown within the film to be subjective, which in turn causes the viewer to examine the ways in which violence is utilized either retributively or hegemonically within the film by LGBTQ+, queered heroes. By contextualizing the violence utilized within *TOG*, our analysis shows the complexity of discourses surrounding represented and "imagined" violence within action cinema. Thus, despite the fact that *TOG* attempts to disrupt typical notions of action cinema, it cannot fully detach itself from the legacy of violence within the genre it belongs to, making it a film that is highly relevant to discussions about systemic, ethical, personal, and moral forms of violence, especially in relation to the queer and queer-coded immortals who simply cannot and will not stay dead within the film.

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