

# A PERSON NOT A PIN-UP: SUBVERTING THE SEXUALIZED ASIAN ACTION HEROINE WITH *PACIFIC RIM'S* MAKO MORI

Megan Fowler, University of Florida

This paper considers the portrayal of Mako Mori's intersectional identity as a Japanese woman in Guillermo del Toro's film *Pacific Rim*. Mako resists many of the stereotypical portrayals of Japanese women in American media. In particular, *Pacific Rim* utilizes the many functions of language and Mako's complex sexuality as a means of distinguishing her from the stereotypical portrayals of Asian heroines in action and science fiction films. Mako manages to subvert overly sexualized stereotypes by wearing practical unsexualized clothing, completely inverting the male gaze, and being placed into a sexually dominant position. The characterization of Mako Mori in *Pacific Rim* provides an example of a complex portrayal of a Japanese woman and has larger implications for the treatment of women of color in American genre film, evoking a more culturally diverse world view via a transnational context. Through a close analysis of Mako's sexuality and language, this paper argues that *Pacific Rim* offers an alternative narrative to the white, hypermasculine, American-centric rhetoric of the majority of Hollywood blockbusters.

Mako's mere presence in *Pacific Rim* as a Japanese female lead in a Hollywood blockbuster automatically destabilizes the expectations attached to the traditionally white dominated genre. As Charlene Tung notes, "The mass and popular acceptance of the new heroine is predicated in many ways not only on her heterosexuality...but also on her whiteness" (109). Mako's racial identity immediately offers a challenge to the traditional action heroine in American film, a role typically filled by white women. However, beyond her visibility in the film, it is the emphasis on Mako's racial identity in her narrative arc that differentiates her from more caricatured roles for Asian women. Mako's real power as an intersectional heroine stems from the film's nuanced and respectful treatment of her Japanese identity. The strength of *Pacific Rim's* treatment of Mako's identity as both a woman and Japanese comes from her use of language and multilayered sexuality.

Mako's identity as a Japanese woman is exemplified through her use of language. Most importantly, unlike many action and science fiction films in which language itself has defaulted to English exclusively, Mako is allowed to speak subtitled Japanese throughout *Pacific Rim*. The inclusion of Mako's language in the film was a deliberate choice by the filmmakers, as Guillermo del Toro says in an interview with *Today Online*, "When you decide that a woman...can speak in their own language and be subtitled, that's a political choice" (4). Through Mako's use of her own language, del Toro deliberately subverts the linguistic imperialist assumption of English as the default language spoken in an international community (*Linguistic Imperialism* 65). American action and science fiction films commonly chose to use English as the only spoken language, even in multicultural communities, a choice which deliberately "Americaniz[es]...world culture" (Tsuda 453). Rather than contributing to this generic narrative, *Pacific Rim* challenges the hierarchization and hegemonic assumption of English as a privileged language, an assumption which frequently creates "linguistic and communicative inequality" by labeling non-native English speakers "incompetent and perceived to be inferior" ("Realities and Myths" 238; Tsuda 445; 447). The film thereby portrays Mako's use of language as a means of both deconstructing the privileged position of American and English speaking hegemony and positioning Mako as an equal protagonist in the film. *Pacific Rim* portrays Mako speaking Japanese frequently throughout the entire film, and it becomes a pillar of the relationships she forms with other characters.

Mako speaks her first line in the film in Japanese, a moment of establishment for her character. Not only is she allowed to speak her own language, but other characters also interact with her in her native tongue. Raleigh, the male lead, answering her in Japanese serves as the first moment that he truly impresses her, showing the importance her native language plays for her. Not only does this moment reinforce Mako's pride in her Japanese identity, the scene furthers a narrative of "equality in international communication" which can only be achieved via "equality among languages" (Tsuda 453). Tsuda further explains, "If a speaker of language A and a speaker of language B communicat[e] by speaking either one of the two languages, inequality in communication occurs" (453). Because Raleigh and Mako share exchanges in both of their native languages, the film deliberately puts the two characters on equal ground with one another. By extension, these personal exchanges portray equality within an international community on a broader scale by not privileging either character's racial or national identity over

the other. This equality shows a commitment by the filmmakers to portray their protagonists within a cooperative transnational community based around multilingualism and cultural pluralism.

In addition to her exchanges with Raleigh, Mako and her father figure Stacker Pentecost, the black British commanding officer of the team, also frequently speak to each other in Japanese over the course of the film. These exchanges highlight the importance of her culture to their relationship and emphasize that she has not been culturally assimilated away from that identity, a frequent result of linguistic imperialism (*Linguistic Imperialism* 13). In her climactic moment when she kills the first *kaiju* that has attacked during their time in the Shatterdome, Mako shouts, “For my family,” in Japanese, connecting her cultural identity intimately with her heroic journey. Mako’s Japanese heritage, rather than being a coincidental happenstance, is shown as a pillar of her character, a point of pride for her that she reveals through her language. This deliberate choice on the part of the filmmakers shows a commitment to representing a diversified international resistance in the film. By portraying a Japanese woman using Japanese throughout the film, and having non-Japanese characters speak to her in that language, the film suggests a multilingual world that challenges the dominant American-centric narrative of similar science fiction and action blockbusters.

Another key component of Mako’s relationship with language that has received criticism by popular film critics is her quiet nature. In a scathing review for *Vulture*, Kyle Buchanan cites that, “out of all the characters in this movie, Kikuchi’s character surely speaks the least.” This expectation for Mako’s character to be loud and brash in order to be considered strong stems from the tropes surrounding previous depictions of the action heroine. In his analysis of American action heroines, Jeffrey Brown describes the archetype of this figure as “muscular, gun-toting, ass-kicking characters” who often “chain [smoke] and [drink], happily downing several shots of hard liquor and swearing like a trucker” and perform such masculinized behaviors as shouting the “gender-transgressive challenge to ‘suck my dick!’” (43; 48; 49). These performances thus “render these women as symbolically male,” an act which has caused concern among scholars that these figures are “simply enacting masculinity rather than providing legitimate examples of female heroism” and “mak[ing] it clear enough that for these women to be tough they have to be masculinized (Brown 21; 43; 49). This action heroine archetype thus mimics the male figures who preceded her, writing, largely white and Western, masculinity on to female bodies and reinforcing that rhetoric as the only means to claim power available to women

in action film.

Mako, by contrast to this archetype, is much more quiet and respectful, softer and more feminized. However, the narrative does not equate these characteristics with passivity and weakness, allowing Mako to voice her opinions with resolve and determination when she does speak. Rather than using the tally of lines that a character has as a scale of the strength and importance of that character, it is important to consider the content of what Mako says when she does speak. Although she does not speak as often as her male counterparts, the film never characterizes Mako as too repressed to voice her opinion. She boldly tells Raleigh that she finds his fighting style reckless and does not believe he is the right man for the job only moments after meeting him. She also easily shows when she is displeased with something, openly making disapproving faces when Raleigh spars with his potential drift partners and criticizing his technique when he confronts her. The film portrays Mako as a variation on the archetype of loud, swearing hypermasculine action heroine, with a strength that alternatively stems from her quiet resolve. Even though she speaks less than her male counterparts, Mako still boldly makes herself known and asserts her opinions, using her words effectively when she does speak. Mako's more stoic demeanor stems from the value she places on respect and duty, characteristics of her cultural identity. Portraying Mako as a quiet but never submissive character contrasts sharply with the swearing, macho demeanor of similar action heroines, whose heroism is built upon and dependent on a Western construction of masculine strength. In this subtle way, the narrative of *Pacific Rim* offers a counter-narrative that places value on a transnational community rather than the heavily masculine and Westernized rhetoric of similar action films

While Buchanan's statement is undoubtedly hyperbolic, Mako's stoicism does have the potential to play on some unfortunate stereotypes of Asian women in film, such as "The lotus blossom baby (also known as china doll or geisha girl) [which] refers to the stereotypical representations of Asian women as shy, passive, and/or sexually exotic beauties" (Tung 113). However, not only does the film resist this eroticism through a mature treatment of Mako's sexuality, but it also purposefully validates Mako's reserved demeanor. Mako's seemingly obedient nature is both reinforced and subverted through her relationship with Pentecost. She tends to follow Pentecost's orders and make her decisions based on his authority, which might be portrayed as subservience or overly obedient in another film. However, *Pacific Rim* subverts this notion. When Raleigh criticizes Mako for following the marshal's orders when he refuses to let

her pilot the *jaeger* with Raleigh despite it being her greatest dream, he tells her that they “don’t have to just obey him.” Mako quickly dismisses the idea that she is being too servile, informing Raleigh what her relationship with Stacker is based upon, “It’s not obedience, Mr. Becket. It’s respect.” The film reinforces this idea when Raleigh steps out of line to convince Pentecost that he is wrong not to let Mako pilot, and Pentecost reminds him of his place. Though Raleigh shows some resistance, he immediately submits to Pentecost’s authority and does not bring up the issue again until he and Mako are the literal last resort against the *kaiju*.

Rather than having the hero go off against orders and be rewarded by the narrative as having been right along, *Pacific Rim* places importance on respect for the chain of command, something that is important for Mako both as an individual and culturally. In this way, the film narrative uses Mako’s quiet nature as a way of invoking her cultural identity while directly undercutting the assumption that this makes her a disempowered character. In addition, by both undermining the traditional narrative of aggressive lone white male acting on his own to save the day and through the character Mako’s stoicism, the film invalidates the notion that the more confrontational, Westernized, masculine way of speaking and acting typically portrayed by action heroines (or heroes) is in any way superior. Rather than a cast of all white, English speaking American characters battling the apocalypse in New York or Los Angeles, *Pacific Rim* offers a multicultural view of the human resistance that represents a broad and diverse transnational community. The film further emphasizes this transnational community through the relationship between Mako and her father figure Pentecost.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

The relationship between Mako and Pentecost embodies one of the central themes of the film, which is the diversity of the characters representing Earth in the battle for survival. Mako and Pentecost exemplify this diversity, representing two people of color who in the face of tragedy have come together to form a non-traditional family and serving as a microcosm of the

multinational team that form the protagonists of the film. In addition, their relationship represents solidarity between two characters of color. Pentecost literally acts as Mako's savior from their first meeting in the film, saving her from the kaiju that has killed her parents moments before. In the shot in which Mako looks up as Pentecost reveals his face by removing his helmet, he is bathed in light, casting him in an almost angelic glow (Figure 1-3). This scene depicts a rare moment in film, the romanticization of one protagonist of color from the point of view of another. In addition, the moment subverts the typical "white saviour" narrative; rather than depicting a pillar of white masculinity as "a saviour in a distant land," Pentecost represents heroic black masculinity through the act of not only saving but raising Mako (Shome 504). The look shared between the two, which expresses affection, admiration, and even awe, counters the more dominating gaze typically encountered in film. As bell hooks writes, "The shared gazes of [people of color] reinforces their solidarity" (*Black Looks* 130). This important moment for character relationships and plot in the film creates a community of people of color through solidarity built on subversive anti-imperialist undertones.

*Pacific Rim's* treatment of Mako's sexuality forms an important component of her role as both a woman and a woman of color in film, deconstructing the hypersexualized archetype of most action heroines. The primary way in which the film resists hypersexualizing Mako is through her wardrobe. Mako is not, as described by Jeffrey Brown, "a dominatrix [that makes] explicit the fetishistic nature of the action heroine's real toughness" who "wears revealing leather corsets with her hair perfectly coiffed and her perfect make-up" with "huge, gravity-defying breasts, mile-long legs, perpetually pouty lips, and perfectly coiffed big hair" (45; 51; 55). Instead, Mako wears clothing throughout the film that is functional and modest. She often dresses in a manner strikingly similar to Raleigh and her other male peers in the Shatterdome, frequently adorned in combat boots, black work pants, and outfits that reveal little skin. In one scene, she even wears a loose brown cardigan, comfortable and casual but feminine, signifying Mako as practical but real and not hypermasculine. Shimizu discusses the importance of clothing in relation to Asian women in American film when discussing the independent films of Helen Lee and Grace Lee, "...both practice a bringing onto the screen of more ordinary yet immensely complex Asian/American women....their characters would not be shocking to see on the street as would be the characters of Hollywood femme fatales if they stepped off screen" (248). Mako's everyday wardrobe aligns her more closely with these ordinary women than other hypersexed

action heroines, reinforcing Mako as a fully realized character. However, even when her clothing reaches into the world of sci-fi, the practicality is not dispensed for fetishism.



Figure 4

When Mako pilots the *jaeger* for the first time, she is outfitted in armor identical to her male peers, aside from the fact that the uniform has been fitted to suit her smaller frame (Figure 4). The armor does not have modified breast cups to outline her curves, does not have a cleavage window or any unnecessary exposure of skin, and is not skintight. Instead, Mako's armor remains indistinguishable from her peers, denoting the equality of her rank and significance to the program and the greater narrative arc. This lack of sexualization of Mako's clothing contrasts with representations of heroines in action films that are fetishized, outfitted specifically to serve as male fantasies or dominatrix figures. The positioning of these characters as caricatured pin-ups come to life objectifies them as nothing more than sexual objects of another's desire. The deliberate resistance of the film to present Mako in this hypersexual way allows the characters and audience to recognize her as a full, ordinary person with her own hopes, desires, and motivations. She maintains her personhood, rather than becoming an object meant to be looked upon.

Despite the fact that Mako is not overly sexualized, the film also refrains from desexualizing her character. She shares an undoubtedly sexually coded relationship with male lead Raleigh. Mako finds herself in an unusual position for a woman of color in mainstream Hollywood media. Typically, action films sideline Asian women into the role of demonized hypersexual figures rather than serious potential partners. *Pacific Rim* breaks from this with its serious if understated treatment of Mako as a potential love interest and sexual partner for Raleigh, deviating from a long tradition in which women of color's "bodies and being were there to serve--to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallogentric gaze" (*Black Looks* 119). The film manages to treat Mako's relationship with Raleigh as one of equals,

depicting the sexual undertones of the relationship as those of a mature woman actively expressing desire. *Pacific Rim* characterizes Mako as restrained and reserved but does not infantilize her or present her as chaste. Mako does not fall into the role of passive and demure sexual object, such as the “lotus blossom baby” eroticized through her passiveness or the dichotomous “virgin/cannibal”, in which the virgin façade belies a “cannibalistic monster lurk[ing] behind the pretty mask of the apparently benign love/sex object” (Tung 113; Caputi and Sagle 92). Instead, Mako takes an active role in her storyline as well as in her own sexuality, often positioned in what would traditionally be considered the dominant position in scenes with a sexual undertone.

However, this dominance is never demonized. Mako is not boxed into the role of “femme fatales [typically portrayed by] Anna May Won, Nancy Kwan, and Lucy Liu,” a figure to be feared rather than respected or the stereotypical figure of the queen/bitch, whose sexuality is marked as animalistic and bestial (Shimizu 248; Caputi and Sagle 101). Nor do these exchanges culminate in a relationship which is “doomed for no apparent reason and/or has tragic consequences,” the traditional outcome of many cross-racial romantic interactions in genre film, which see the couple either meeting a doomed fate or the love interest of color being cast aside in favor of a white love interest (*Killing Rage* 113). Instead, the metaphorical sexual exchanges between Mako and Raleigh play out as a natural expression of female desire, and Mako retains her status as a hero of the film in her own right. Not only does she take an active role in her relationship with Raleigh by inverting the traditional film gaze, but she also proves her equality with him in a scene intentionally coded as a sex scene.



Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

The narrative further emphasizes Mako’s refusal to become a sexual object by not only subverting the typical male gaze but inverting that gaze completely. In an early scene of *Pacific Rim*, just after Mako and Raleigh have first met, Mako accidentally catches a glimpse of Raleigh



shirtless as he changes in his own room. Upon seeing him, Mako quickly slams her door shut. The shot lingers on Raleigh standing in his doorway (Figure 5). The camera then quickly cuts to Mako peering through the peephole of her own door (Figure 6). Following this, the camera cuts to a shot of Raleigh slightly distorted, literally taking on Mako's perspective as she gazes through the peephole (Figure 7). This scene reveals that in the prior shot, the camera had metaphorically taken on Mako's perspective. Mako's looking deliberately evokes the erotic male gaze in an exact fashion, the scene playing as a textbook inversion of the typical gaze in film. By looking upon Raleigh in an explicitly sexual way, Mako becomes the active looker to Raleigh's passive object. The slow reveal that the audience is viewing Raleigh through Mako's perspective allows the camera lens, typically designated as male, to become explicitly feminized. By inverting the traditional roles in instances of sexual looking, the scene manages the power reversal Laura Mulvey presents as impossible for the film gaze, which is by default active and masculine. Mulvey says that, "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification....Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen...." (10). By inverting the gaze, the narrative places Mako in a position of power and authority sexually and emphasizes her active role in the plot of the film as a character that moves the story forward.

This simple scene gives Mako power on multiple levels within the text. As outlined by E. Kaplan in *Looking for the Other*, "...looking relations are determined by history, tradition, power hierarchies, politics, economics....Looking is power" (4). Mako claims this power for herself not only as a woman but also as a woman of color. She reverses notions of women and people of color as objects to be dominated, instead destabilizing the traditional hierarchy, which Kaplan describes as a power of the inverted gaze, "since this is a gaze to which [white] subjects have not traditionally been subjected" (xix). Mako's looking in the film acts as a tool of sexual and personal agency, utilizing an oppositional gaze available to the oppressed which acts as a site of resistance (*Black Looks* 116). The scene's inversion represents a reversal of power that destabilizes the structural oppression between male and female, white and non-white.

The inversion puts Mako into a position of sexual power, a position unusual for Asian women in Hollywood films, typically positioned as passive sexual objects. The sequence represents an explicit depiction of female erotic desire. As Linda Williams writes, "In the classical narrative cinema, to see is to desire" and "the woman's look...offers at least a

potentially subversive recognition of the power and potency of a non-phallic sexuality” (15; 24). Thus, Mako’s looking at Raleigh is an explicit expression of her sexuality and desire, a desire rarely expressed by women in action film whose sexuality typically relies on their desirability to the male lead and masculine audience the camera represents. Unlike her femme fatale counterparts, whose “bold, smoldering dark eyes...offer an obvious example of a powerful female look” but “must be punished in the end,” *Pacific Rim* allows Mako to share this powerful and heated look without oversexualizing her or compromising her status as a heroine in the film (Williams 17). Even in the instances in which other action heroines are able to manipulate the gaze by “exploit[ing] the male characters that ogle her, using her sexual allure to seduce, trick, and disarm men” and ultimately “punish[ing] the looker,” these heroines can only claim this power from their “position of being both object and subject” (Brown 224). Even when the heroines are not punished, power can only stem from some form of oversexualization and objectification. By contrast, Mako resists this objectified position altogether. She is subject, not object; she gazes, but is not gazed upon. Through this single scene, the film explicitly gives Mako a rarely depicted amount of sexual agency, without demonizing or punishing her for this expression. The rhetoric of the film becomes embedded with that sexual agency through the cinematography by having the camera take on her perspective in an erotically charged scene, feminizing the sexual gaze.



Figure 8

In addition to the inversion of the erotic gaze, *Pacific Rim* once again places Mako into a dominant position in a sexually coded scene with Raleigh. During the scene where Raleigh spars with his selected potential drift partners, Mako disapproves of his fighting technique, so Raleigh challenges her to spar with him. In an interview with David Fear for *Time Out New York*, Guillermo del Toro says of the scene, “That’s *exactly* how I shot it—like a sex scene.” The sparring sequence evokes a dance, and Raleigh and Mako match each other move for move.

Even more telling is that the match ends with Raleigh on his back, Mako pinning him with the phallic stick they have been using against each other (Figure 8). The scene establishes the equal dynamic the pair will share as drift partners throughout the film and ends with Mako in the dominant position. This sequence places Mako once more in an active position during a sexually coded scene, speaking to the true equality that the partners share, able to take on any variety of roles in their relationship. The choice to make Mako resistant of domination throughout the entirety of the film makes a firm statement about her agency as an Asian woman and a sexual partner that has a broader rhetorical resonance. The film allows her to dominate, but does not fetishize or exaggerate this role. Instead, *Pacific Rim* depicts Mako's sexuality as natural throughout.

Through the narrative importance placed on her character and the ways in which her storyline is embedded into the central themes of the film, *Pacific Rim* utilizes Mako Mori's character to subvert the tropes of most white, masculine, American-centric action films. Instead, the film offers a feminized, transnational approach to the genre with room for the perspective of a Asian woman. Through her use of language, the film places importance on Mako's Japanese identity, depicting her culture with value and respect and giving her racial identity resonance within the film's plot. The film's approach to Mako's sexuality manages to neither desexualize nor fetishize her character, giving the character value outside her desirability while still depicting female erotic desire and sexual agency in a way rarely seen in mainstream genre films. In his analysis of the typical hyper masculine and oversexualized action heroine, Jeffrey Brown postulates, "the tough action heroine is a transgressive character not because she operates outside of gender restrictions but because she straddles both sides of the psychoanalytic gender divide. She is both subject and object, looker and looked at, ass-kicker and sex object" (47). Mako Mori transcends these limitations, elevating the action heroine archetype to a place typically reserved for her male counterparts. Mako is subject not object, looker not looked at, ass-kicker not sex object. She offers a counter narrative that moves beyond these constructs. Seeing such representation in mainstream film provides the opportunity for similar characters to become accessible role models and express a broader transnational viewpoint in American film. Mako both sets the bar for further depictions of women of color in Hollywood genre blockbusters and reveals how very far the genre still has to go to present consistent respectful representations of Asian women. Hollywood would do well to create more action heroines that emulate her.



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