Violent women in film and the sociological relevance of the contemporary action heroine

Kathryn A Gilpatric
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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VIOLENT WOMEN IN FILM AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL
RELEVANCE OF THE CONTEMPORARY
ACTION HEROINE

by

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Bachelor of Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
1999

Master of Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2002

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Sociology
Department of Sociology
College of Liberal Arts

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KATHRYN GILPATRIC

Entitled

VIOLENT WOMEN IN FILM AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL RELEVANCE OF THE CONTEMPORARY ACTION HEROINE

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN SOCIOLOGY

Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College
ABSTRACT

Violent Women in Film and the Sociological Relevance of the Contemporary Action Heroine

by

Kathryn A. Gilpatric

Dr. Kate Hausbeck, Examination Committee Chair
Associate Dean of Graduate College
Associate Professor of Sociology
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

This research examines mainstream representations and imagery of violent women in American cinema in a broad sense, and looks more specifically at the sociological relevance of the contemporary filmic action heroine. This research is not interpretive in nature but instead draws upon original data gained from an extensive content analysis spanning a 15-year period from 1991 to 2005. In addition, the research includes secondary source data gathered from movie industry statistics and industry reports in order to provide an empirically descriptive analysis of violent female action characters in contemporary American film.

While many feminist film theorists argue that female action characters are empowering representations who breakdown traditional gender barriers by exhibiting both masculine and feminine characteristics, this research argues that upon closer inspection these representations and images actually reinforce traditional gender norms,
roles, and values by subscribing to dominant social codes in order to be successful at the box office. The data derived from the content analysis and secondary sources point toward shifting business strategies, evolving production processes, and technological advances of the movie industry itself that have played a major part in the formation of contemporary female action characters produced for mass consumption.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In *The Hazards of Helen* film series (1914-17), Helen Holmes, the heroine, drives a car at high speed around mountain curves, outraces a speeding train, leaps from her moving car to the locomotive and brakes it to a halt. She rescues the detective strapped to the engine and captures the gang of counterfeiters. How often did the early movies portray such courageous, competent, resourceful women? When did they disappear from the screen and why?


The first action heroine was Helen Holmes in the silent adventure film series *The Hazards of Helen* that ran for over two years between 1914 and 1917. It is one of the longest of the film serial formats in cinematic history with 119 twelve-minute, single-reel episodes totaling over 23 hours (IMDB). Although it was successful at the time, it faded into obscurity. *The Perils of Pauline* was a serial that also had its debut in 1914; however, it portrayed the perpetual “damsel in distress” instead of the courageous and competent action heroine. The victimized Pauline had much more resonance with the American public than did the heroic Helen because *The Perils of Pauline* was revived in the 30s as a serial and again in the 40s and 60s as movies. The myth of the damsel in distress lived on; unfortunately, action heroine characters disappeared from the screen and did not re-emerge in any significant way until 1979 with the Lt. Ripley character in the movie *Alien*.

Film theorists widely agree that it was the success of *Alien* that kicked off the newest form of the action heroine (Clover 1992; Tasker 1991, 1993; Brown 1996; Inness 2004).
Since the creation of the Ripley character there has been a change in the filmic representations of the violent action heroine with movies such as the *Terminator* series; the *Lara Croft* series, and the *Kill Bill* sequels where we see women kicking-ass and blowing things up more and more frequently.

Within feminist film theory some argue that the new representations of tough women are empowering while others argue that they are simply women acting like men. A few take a more macro perspective and focus on the economic structures of the cinematic apparatus, while others choose the micro-path and pay attention to the way in which movies affect identity. This research argues that the violent action heroine is not an empowered woman acting like a man but instead repackages both masculine and feminine traditional gender codes into a more titillating and sensational commodity invented to sell an entertainment product, and that the production processes involved in her creation are a central component in ultimately understanding what this latest form of female imagery represents and how it came into existence.

Most feminist analyses of film are interpretive in nature, selecting a relative few films that best represent their theory, and most ignore industrial production practices altogether. However, the larger economic and production components need to be addressed since movies become cultural artifacts that embody not only filmic content but filmic form as well. Any “analyses that ignore the industrial component of film can be misleading or, at least, incomplete” (Geoff King 2002:2). Movies do not just come from the imaginations of the creators, they are made by a group of individuals all participating in production processes that exist in larger economic structures with business standards, rules of operation and networks of affiliations that are equally as important as the socially
constructed norms that help shape the representations of the characters within the film (Hesmondhalgh 2002).

Often interpretive film analyses imply that a particular film or filmic character represents a larger social reality and make generalized claims. But films are numerous and varied and each variety has its own audience; there are different genres, sub-genres, styles, and art forms all situated within a cinematic history than spans more than a century which has itself undergone tremendous technological and economic change. The interpretive film analysis, if it is good, sheds critical light on socio-cultural issues; but often the movie is used as an example to reinforce what the author already assumes about a particular social problem. Because movies include enough variety, one could always find a few films to fit any social issue. Scholarly film analyses, although often stimulating and intellectually insightful, are essentially academic movie reviews. On the other hand, the lay understanding of film, with its lack of critical examination, also makes the leap from the particular to the general. A common notion is that the new female imagery that we see in mainstream cinema represents a strong and independent woman which can be attributed to feminist gains in America, but closer examination reveals a more complex issue and implies that this perspective is not wholly warranted.

Instead, I offer research which is historical in nature and looks for patterns and trends over time by examining a large group of movies situated within a particular genre, all of which include a particular type of female character, in order to make sense of cultural phenomena of violent action heroines.
Research Questions

The broad question is, “Where does this newest female imagery come from?” which prompted this research in the first place. There are four specific sociological research questions developed to address the historical dimensions and present-day characteristics of the violent action heroine in American cinema. The first and second question ask, “What are the characteristics of violent women in action films today?” and “How are the images and representations of violent female action characters related to feminist discourse on gender roles, norms and values?” The third and fourth questions focus specifically on the violent action heroine as an important and sociologically relevant type of contemporary filmic representation. The questions ask, “What is the historical development that led up to the form of violent action heroine of today?” and “How is today’s violent action heroine shaped by modes of production related to the film industry?”

Theoretical Orientation

This study is an inductive approach that stems from first impressions of what was perceived to be a growing trend of violent action heroine characters in the movies and concerns over how this cultural phenomenon might reflect social values and stereotypical gender roles. The research is first and foremost feminist in nature; it responds to and expands upon feminist film theory and in so doing necessarily includes a psychoanalytic component due to the abundance of psychoanalytic feminist film literature. In addition, because female representations in popular culture are being examined, a British cultural studies approach was used as a foundational starting point. However, as the research
progressed, it became evident that material conditions and economic structures of the
movie industry itself were affecting the mass-oriented products of a “culture industry.” It
will become evident to the reader that issues of content and form take on a tension
throughout this paper. The findings of this research ultimately lead to a neo-Marxist
perspective which suggests that form dominates content in movies that are produced for
mass-appeal. This particular finding led to exploration of the business strategies and
technological applications of the movie industry which are dependent upon larger socio­
economic structures of what Douglas Kellner (2003) terms “technocapitalism.” All of the
primary and secondary information and data gathered situates this research in an
overarching theoretical interpretation based on critical theory, including postmodern and
Frankfurt school perspectives.

Methods

Two methods of research are employed to address the sociological research questions.
First, in order to determine the characteristics of the present-day violent action heroine
and to better understand how she fits within a feminist discourse, a content analysis was
conducted on a large group of films to obtain original qualitative and quantitative data.
The content analysis spans a 15-year time period from 1991 to 2005 and examines action-
genre films that contain a lead female character engaging in some form of physical
violence. This type of analysis is a systematic approach to collect data on physical
violence by female characters in action movies as a means of identifying, quantifying and
qualifying their historically changing representations.

Second, in order to understand the historical development of the present-day violent
action heroine and how modes of production have helped shape her character, a variety of secondary data sources are used, including existing data such as box office and trade statistics, and a review of film literature and industry standards.

Organization

Chapter 2 addresses the research question of how the violent female action characters are related to feminist discourse as it traces the body of feminist film theories that engage with the broader subject of violent women in film. It contains a chronological treatment of the evolution of early feminist film criticism through to contemporary feminist film theories. Chapter 3 outlines in detail the methods used in order to answer the four specific research questions and addresses issues of data reliability and validity. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the historical development and modes of production of the movie industry that led up to the present-day form of the violent action heroine. Chapter 5 is set up in two parts. The first part reveals the data and findings of the content analysis and provides a definitive description of violent female action characters including a demographic profile, patterns of behavior, and tendencies for violence. The second part of the chapter narrows to focus specifically on movie industry practices and box office revenues and explains how they have shaped the present day form of the violent action heroine. Chapter 6 is a culmination of all the primary and secondary data and information gathered as part of this research which is then used to develop a schema of violent women in film. The schema identifies several of the major theoretical constructs that have been put forward by various feminist film theorists and adds to it the findings of my research on action heroines. The result is a conceptual map which can then be used as a
tool to examine and understand different representations of violent women in film, their relationships to each other, as well as their relation to larger social structures. Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes the research, describes its strengths and weaknesses, and offers suggestions for future studies.

*Representation and Imagery*

Images and representations of women in the movies intersect with deep codes of culture and rely upon different layers of contextual code which employ a wide "universe of ideologies in society" (Hall 1993). The underlying codes are the means by which power and ideology are made to signify particular discourses, create maps of meaning and in Stuart Hall's terms "re-present" social reality.

Throughout this paper the terms "representation" and "imagery" are used at times interchangeably and at other times in conjunction. Although they may appear to be the similar, the distinction implicates varying degrees of structuring discourse, myth and iconography. In Stuart Hall's terms representations are signifying practices that re-present or stand-in for a person or an object in the real-world (1997). The real-world person or object is itself constructed within a discourse which involves systems of knowledge production, cultural practices and power structures. The re-presentation then re-articulates and circulates that discourse in a modified system of meanings (Hall 1997). Therefore, representations are reliant upon discourse in both spaces of production and consumption, and representations in film specifically are embedded in a narrative that informs consumption and meaning.
Imagery, on the other hand, is not always dependent upon words but instead can relay information through visual images alone. Imagery can and often does have textual or verbal associations, but it is not necessarily dependent upon it to convey meaning. Icons, in a Barthesian sense, appeal to myths. Roland Barthes defines the principals of myth: “it transforms history into nature” (1993:129) and it “transforms meaning into form” (p. 131). Therefore, the term imagery can be associated with both iconography and myth.

A collective sense of meaning is understood when using either of the terms “representation” or “imagery” and both terms rely upon socially constructed myths. In the case of this research one might think of the myth of the good mother, the good girl, the bad girl, the Madonna, or the whore. In today’s media-saturated society we recognize images because they come from a consumer culture that inundates us daily with imagery in advertisements, television, film, Internet, and so on. It is the ubiquity of the imagery that makes it iconographic and important to examine and understand. The relevance of the newest representations and imagery of women enacting physical violence on-screen is worthy of study in its relation to an American female mythos.

Sociological Relevance

There are several books that explore the new female imagery of violent action characters in film including Jacinda Read’s *The New Avengers* (2000); Neal King and Martha McCaughey’s *Reel Knockouts* (2001) and Sherrie Inness’ *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* (2004). However, all of these works are qualitative and interpretive and examine only a limited number of selected films that are representative of a particular theoretical perspective. In contrast, the content analysis used
in this research is a systematic approach that incorporates a large amount of quantitative
and qualitative data in an area of study that is over-saturated with interpretive analyses.
By looking at the violent behavior of women in film who co-opt traditionally masculine
aggressive behavior while still managing to maintain characteristics traditionally
associated with feminine roles, norms, and values, we can understand the elasticity and
the resilience of certain socially constructed gender codes.
CHAPTER 2

FEMINIST FILM THEORY: THE EARLY YEARS TO PRESENT

The signifier 'woman' always signifies woman: we recognize ourselves in any representation of woman, however 'original', because we are always already defined by our gender... we are never just spectators who gaze at 'images' of women as though they were set apart, differentiated from the 'real' us. Within ads are inscribed the images and subject position of 'mother', 'housewife', 'sexually attractive woman' and so on, which as we work to understand the ad, embroil us in the process of signification that we complete.


Once upon a time, date-friendly romantic comedies or steamy sex thrillers were the rite of passage for actresses working their way to the A-list. All a girl had to do was strut, smile, scream or show some skin. Now, however, if they want to break out, it's throw a punch, hone a karate kick or jump off a six-story building.


These two quotes occur nearly 30 years apart and deal with issues of cultural representations of women in the media. The feminist complaint used to revolve around the sexual objectification of women and socially-circumscribed gendered roles of wife and mother. Now we have female images and representations of the "kick-ass, tough girl" in the movies (Inness 2004). Many feminists have tried to explain the shifting filmic images of women over the decades and this chapter traces their various critiques, interpretations, and analyses. The feminist positions regarding representations of violent women in film generally and action heroines specifically are located within a broader
feminist discourse which ultimately influences them and this literature review will help shed light on how the images of today's violent action heroine are related to feminist discourse. In conjunction with the findings of the content analysis, this literature will also provide a foundation for a schema of violent women in film presented in Chapter 6. Several of the theoretically-constructed types of violent women addressed in the present literature review will be included in the schema along with the findings of this research which focuses generally on violent female action characters and specifically on the violent action heroine in order to provide a systematic and comprehensive way of understanding the various images and representations of violent women in contemporary American cinema.

*Early Feminist Film Criticism*

Before there was an academic area of study called feminist film theory, there were female film critics responding to the images of women they saw on-screen. In its first inception in the late 1960s, feminist film criticism looked at film as a means of understanding a cultural logic that marginalized, subordinated, and oppressed women. These feminists critiqued the Hollywood studio system for producing movies that reified cultural norms of the good wife and mother. The Hollywood studio system controlled actresses and the one-dimensional characters they played who were set up as social role models for women to emulate in order to fit the norms and expectations of a post-war society where women were expected to go back to the kitchen, take care of the family and allow the returning GIs to have their jobs (Rosen 1973).
The Hollywood studio system during the pre- and post-war eras was regulated by the Production Code Association, which was a Catholic dominated moral censorship board that put strict controls in place to oversee depictions of violence and sex in the movies. The production code was in effect from 1934 through to the mid-1960s, and throughout its 30 year reign of strict enforcement, the representations and imagery of women in film took on a distinctive style that had an impact on American society (Doherty 1999; LaSalle 2000). The ideology of what was properly feminine was reified through the constant bombardment of images of the sacrificing mother and wife, and the feminine pleasures of heart and hearth.

Before the Hollywood Production Code came into full effect in 1934, women on-screen were allowed to play prostitutes and businesswomen; they cheated on their husbands and sometimes got away with murder (Haskell 1987; La Salle 2000). They were tough, self-sufficient, and unapologetically sexually active; they were complex and real and in a sense more like the women we see on-screen today. But it was this “realness” that prompted the religious right in America to put pressure on the studio system to clean up the representations of women in the movies. With a tight clamp in place until the 1960s, female representations and images conformed to conservative and traditional social norms and values.

At the same time as the second wave women’s movement was growing in strength, the Hollywood Production Code was waning in its power. Several factors are attributable to the collapse of the studio system and the demise of the Production Code, including the Supreme Court anti-trust “Paramount Case” of 1948 which forced the studios to dismantle their production and distribution oligopolies; the Supreme Court decision of
1952 which protected movies under the first amendment; and also the invention of television, which was a direct competitor in entertainment (Twitchell 1992; Doherty 1999; King 2002; Benshoff and Griffin 2004).

These significant changes allowed a “New Hollywood” to emerge (see Chapter 4). New Hollywood in one context refers to a decade long period from the late 1960s through the early 1970s marked by a counter-culture of filmmakers including college-educated film students such as Steven Spielberg, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Warren Beatty, and Robert Altman. The power shifted from the studios to actors and directors which opened the door for experimentation with cinematic style and content. When the studios lost control and the Production Code lost its power, the images of women also changed dramatically. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Faye Dunaway played the outlaw Bonnie Parker in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), Katherine Ross and Paula Prentiss played the consciousness-raising women’s libbers in *Stepford Wives* (1975), and Natalie Wood and Diane Cannon were the frustrated and sexually promiscuous wives in *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969).

The response to these changing images ushered in a new film criticism, where instead of relying upon the conservative opinions and outdated positions of old guard film critics, such as Bosley Crowther of the New York Times, a younger, more scholarly group of critics emerged including Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris and his future wife, Molly Haskell. Molly Haskell was one of the first feminist film critics to publish a book on the subject of women in film. Her book is entitled *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1973) and it traces the changing roles of women in film from the 1920s through the 1960s (a second edition expands through the 1980s). As the title
suggests, Haskell is arguing against sexual stereotypes and sexual objectification of women in the movies.

During these formative years of new film criticism, critics were informed by the works of such second wave feminists as Bettie Friedan, Germaine Greer, Kate Millet and Simone de Beauvoir with their various critiques of the yoke of gender placed upon women. Two feminist film journals developed during the 1970s: Women and Film (later known as Camera Obscura) and Jump Cut, and feminist debates were also taken up in the prominent film journals Screen and Cahiers du Cinema. The first three books on the subject of women in film are: Marjorie Rosen’s Popcorn Venus (1973), Molly Haskell’s From Rape to Reverence (1973), and Joan Mellen’s Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film (1974). By the mid-1970s, feminist film theory had arrived and was responding to the radically changing female imagery of the New Hollywood. There are two major paradigms that have developed and dominated feminist film theory for the past two decades, these are psychoanalysis and British cultural studies.

*Psychoanalysis: The Male Gaze and the Spectator*

Feminist film criticism began to take on a more theoretical tone. One of the pioneers of feminist film theory was Claire Johnston. In her 1973 essay, Notes on Women’s Cinema, Johnston, informed by Roland Barthes structuralist theories, expanded concepts of female cinematic stereotypes to include larger structural ideological components of iconography and myths to be used as a methodological means of examining “how cinema works and how we can best interrogate and demystify the workings of ideology” (Johnston 2000:32). In these early years of feminist film scholarship, theory and methods
were based primarily upon the structuralism of Barthes and Saussure, the post-structuralism of Foucault and the psychoanalysis of Lacan.

Laura Mulvey wrote her seminal article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” published in *Screen* in 1975, in which she employed psychoanalysis to examine the relationship between film and the female viewer or “spectator,” and thus began the psychoanalytic phase of feminist film theory which was to dominate for the next decade.

Mulvey highlighted two important functions of film that were addressed countless times and in many different ways and by various film theorists, these are production and consumption. On the production side, Mulvey assumes a patriarchal structure that shapes not only the social world but also the unconscious (through language in Lacanian terms). Her psychoanalytic take on film addresses basic issues of gender difference and assumes that the female imagery in film does not signify a real woman, but rather becomes a sign of visual pleasure for the male viewer; in essence the female character in the movie is turned into the object of the “male gaze.” On the consumption or reception side is what she terms the “spectator” or female viewer in the audience who is put into a subjective position due to the orientation and effects of the male gaze. Both the production side (the patriarchal structure that informs cinema), and the consumption side (the subjectivized female spectator) are debated in feminist film theory throughout the 1970s and 80s, and in fact the psychoanalytic argument still crops up because it is so foundational for feminist film theory.

Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze draws upon Freud’s notion of the scopophilic instinct, which is the pleasure of looking at other people and turning them into erotic objects. She explains that the voyeuristic pleasures inherent in to movie-watching center
specifically on the erotic pleasure derived from watching women. The dominant structure of cinema is male-oriented and therefore voyeuristic pleasure is directed toward the male spectator and his gaze; in essence, female characters in the movie function to serve male fantasies...“their appearance is coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (1989:19).

Mulvey’s psychoanalytic approach involves the binary distinctions between an active male gaze and a passive female gaze and between subject and object. She also incorporates the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage, where the child first sees its own image reflection, and at that specific moment, the child creates an ideal ego or an idealistic other that is more perfect than the actual child who looks at his/her reflection in the mirror. Mulvey compares this mirror stage event to the film viewer who projects onto the characters on-screen the ideal ego; at once collapsing the viewer’s ego with the ideal ego. Mulvey equates the cinematic screen with the mirror. The viewer then identifies with the characters in the movie and in a sense enters the Imaginary (in Lacanian terms) a place of “recognition/misrecognition and identification” (p. 18). This central point to her work inevitably positions the female spectator in a subjectivized position, since patriarchal structures dominate the movie narrative and scopic regime. In other words, the narrative is male, the main characters are male, and the point of view is male, yet a female viewer is put in a passive position because the story, the characters and the point of view (or gaze) all originate from a male, dominant position. This is the plight of the female spectator she either: (1) identifies with the male gaze (and thereby participates in male domination), or (2) sees herself as a fetishized object of male erotic fantasy.
Mulvey’s critique is really directed at movie production and she suggests that traditional film conventions be changed, especially with respect to the three orientations of “looking” inherent in film: the male-orientation of the camera, the male spectator, and the male characters within the movie. A deconstruction of conventional film making would eliminate the dichotomous active/male versus passive/female orientations of seeing inherent in a male-dominated cinema.

As stated above, Mulvey’s article ushered in a decade long debate in film theory about the position of the spectator. The problem of male-dominated cinema was never really questioned, but rather was considered something inescapable, especially within the psychoanalytic model of a phallocentric language that is considered the keystone of culture. Instead of paying attention to the production side and challenging the structure of a male-dominated cinema (which in fact the early feminist critics did when they critiqued the old Hollywood studio system) feminists responded primarily to the consumption side of Mulvey’s theory and her notion of the passive female spectator.

**Debates on the Female Spectator**

The question of “who produces cultural representations and for whom… and of who receives them and in what contexts, has been a major concern of feminism and other critical theories… in the visual arts, that concern has focused on the notion of spectatorship.


The concept of the female spectator was challenged by feminists who did not like the universality or the passivity of the female audience implied by Mulvey. Many did not agree with the idea of a masculinized female spectator who identifies with the male protagonist, or did not agree with the simple and static notion of the passive, masochistic
female spectator. Instead they turned their attention toward the agency of the spectator and questioned whether an active viewer might find pleasure in her own right. These active-agency oriented film theorists began to look at other factors involved in voyeuristic pleasure.

Mary Ann Doane asks “... even if it is admitted that the woman is frequently the object of the voyeuristic or fetishistic gaze in the cinema, what is there to prevent her from reversing the relation and appropriating the gaze for her own pleasure?” (Screen 1992:230). Doane draws upon Joan Riviere’s first wave (1920s) feminist work that suggests women create a distance by putting on a “masquerade” of femininity. Doane uses this notion of masquerade as a tool for the female spectator to employ in which she can mitigate the two solutions of spectatorship offered up by Mulvey. She sees the female position as more mobile than that of the male spectator, where he is locked into sexual identity: “the female can at least pretend that she is other – in fact, sexual mobility would seem to be a distinguishing feature of femininity in its cultural construction” (Doane 1991:25). In essence, while the male has only one sexual standpoint by way of a patriarchal structure, constructions of the female are fluid and she can move between masculinity and femininity by putting on a mask. The wearing of femininity imposes distance and therefore allows the female spectator to separate herself from being repressed and powerless. Doane also draws upon Foucault to challenge a limited and simplistic notion of the female spectator who has no options as she is caught up in a monolithic, repressive, patriarchal power structure. She states, “In theories of repression there is no sense of the productiveness and positivity of power. Femininity is produced very precisely as a position within a network of power relations” (p. 235).
British Cultural Studies and the Agency of the Audience

British cultural studies built upon, responded to and re-worked Marxist notions of class struggle, capitalist mode of production, and historical materialism. They deemphasized economic determinism, the mode of production and the base/superstructure divide (Williams 2002; McGuigan 1992) and focused more on dimensions of power and inequalities (Franklin et al. 1991). In addition to its traditional Marxist foundation, cultural studies brought in Althusser’s structural Marxism and the role of ideology in the formation of culture, and also responded to the Frankfurt school’s attack on mass culture. British cultural studies challenges notions of the numbing and dumbing effects of mass culture, and contends that high culture is too bourgeois, while focusing on popular culture and subcultures as a means of resistance to dominant ideology (McGuigan 1992). Foucault’s poststructuralist notions of discourse as a power/knowledge nexus have also influenced cultural studies, as well as the poststructural psychoanalysis of Lacan. The psychoanalytic feminists took for granted a patriarchal-ideological structure and a Lacanian notion of a phallic symbolic order. The psychoanalytic strain in feminist British cultural studies continued to focus upon issues of spectatorship which eventually evolved into variations of meaning-making processes, especially under the influence of Stuart Hall’s (1973) model of “dominant, negotiated and oppositional” readings of popular culture.

In response to the male gaze, Jackie Stacey offers a British cultural studies perspective of spectatorship. Arguing against the gendered dualism of desire, Stacey believes that spectators bring different and more complex subjectivity to the movie viewing experience. She makes a distinction between spectators and audience, where the
spectator is a passive subject, while the viewer in the audience actively produces her own meanings (1999:198). In analyzing the movie *Desperately Seeking Susan*, Stacey argues that the desire put forward in the film is not male, but is female. One woman desires another woman; however, the desire is not based upon sexuality but is based upon envy of the carefree lifestyle of the other, in other words desire based upon rejection of traditional female stereotypical sex-roles. For Stacey, the female viewer can obtain pleasure by a form of vicarious identification with the female characters in the film. The spectator then becomes active in her own selective processes of identification, desires and pleasures in film viewing. Stacey states, “The rigid distinction between either desire or identification, so characteristic of psychoanalytic film theory, fails to address the construction of desires which involve a specific interplay of both processes” (2000:464).

In addition, Stacey conducted research on the consumption practices of the female audience. Her findings suggest different ways in which women engage in identificatory practices with movie stars, and importantly that women copy and co-opt certain styles, behaviors and mannerism of their favorite stars in order to help construct their own identities (1994b).

Feminists in cultural studies also argue against the dominant male view that women’s stories such as melodrama, romance fiction and soap operas were just pap (Modleski 1982; Ang 1985; Radway 1984; Partington 1991; Tasker 1991; Gledhill 1999). Instead they suggest that women read and interpret female stories in different ways including resistance against male domination, recovering and reclaiming a female history, and finding their own pleasure in stories written by women for women.
The emphasis in feminist cultural studies is often placed on identity practices, relationships between cultural objects and audiences/consumers, and active processes of meaning making. Angela Partington suggests that differences in tastes and preferences of melodramas are based upon the relationships of audiences and commodities and the conditions of meaning-making. The consumer skills of different class and gendered audiences end up re-producing the very same class-gender divide. Hers is a market-oriented approach; however, Partington suggests that at the same time women consume images they also use them to create a masquerade, and in that meaning-making process have “negotiated and resisted the ‘housewife’ identity” (1991:67). The individual is not a passive subject constructed by the text or cultural object; she is a participant in the construction of meaning for both herself and the cultural object. In this way, she facilitates the articulation of the discourses which represent cultural subjects and cultural objects (Franklin et al. 1991; Hall 1993).

The feminists in cultural studies often focus on the lived experiences of women and their interactions with popular culture, and this results in ethnographic research. British cultural studies feminists have examined how working class women take pleasure in watching soaps (Modleski 1982), how women can create identities by imitating styles and behaviors of movie stars (Stacey 1994b), and how popular fiction offers up bourgeois fantasies of capitalist consumption to working class women (Tincknell 1991). The research methodology of British cultural studies provides frameworks to examine not only lived experiences in an ethnographic sense, but also theoretical foundations which can be used to examine cultural representations, consumption practices, interpretations,
and cultural influences on identity (Hall 1973; Hebdige 1979; Gledhill 1991; McRobbie 1993; Stacey 1994b).

Tiina Vares (2001) conducted a study in which she examined five different groups of women and their responses to watching the movie *Thelma and Louise*. The groups included: women in martial arts, film buffs, female college students interested in gender, women in a peace group, and women in a battered women’s shelter. She wanted to find out what kind of pleasure these women got out of watching the movie. Vares determined that the women selectively produced meanings. The women not only had different reactions to the violence in the film, but they drew upon a specific type of language to describe the movie dependent upon their group orientation. For example, the peace group used politically oriented words and phrases to describe the violence in the film, and the film buffs tended to relate the movie to other movies they were familiar with.

Vares also noted that most of the women had previously seen the movie, so it was their second or third time, and she found with multiple viewings the interpretations of the movie shifts. She determined that the setting that the women watched the film was also important and affected the meaning-making process, e.g. viewing as a group in a research project versus watching in a theater for entertainment. The women in her research had different reactions, including pleasure, disgust, enthusiasm, and suspicion, and they had different definitions of what was and was not violent. Vares’ main point is that meaning-making processes are highly contextual and shifting. She concludes, “Pleasures...are the product of a contextual intersection between viewers and films in a particular social and historical context” (2001:240).
Other female pleasures. Teresa de Lauretis (1984) also addresses the different kinds of identification available to the female spectator. If the narrative of the mainstream film centers on the male protagonist and female characters only serve as obstacles or objects of desire within the diegesis, then how can the female spectator take any pleasure at all in watching the movie, when in reality they do find pleasure? De Lauretis suggests a more complex understanding where the female spectator goes through a series of identifications with the characters. Similar to Clover’s notion of identifying with both male and female characters in the film, de Lauretis thinks that masculinity and femininity oscillate within the diegesis of the movie and the viewer can identify with the story in its totality and not be restricted to a singular position of identification. Just because film “seduce[s] women into femininity” (1984:140) does not mean that female spectators cannot relate to other images within the movie and participate in the production of meaning through the cinematic narrative to work out issues of power, desire, and the gaze.

De Lauretis is most noted for her questioning of the position of the lesbian spectator. She believes the lesbian spectator could “concurrently recognize women as subjects and as objects of female desire” (2000:384). She notes that if the narrative and gaze of mainstream cinema is patriarchal, then it is also heterosexual, and mainstream films will inevitably marginalize the lesbian spectator.

By the 1990s simply focusing on the difference between the sexes was no longer enough. As feminists addressed issues of race, sexual orientation, post-colonialism, and third world problems, their theories overlapped into the area of production and consumption of cinematic images. As feminism moved forward, the psychoanalytic
framework could not adequately address issues important to women of color and non-Western women. Theorists such as bell hooks (1992, 1996), Tania Modleski (1991), Judith Butler (1990; 1999), and Trihn Minh-ha (1991) offered their polemics regarding representations of white, Western, hetero females in cinema and the resultant problems of audience identificatory practices.

bell hooks states, “There is power in looking” (1992:115). She argues that since the time of slavery blacks have been denied the right to look, just as children are taught not to stare or glare back in defiance of their parents. Whites have exercised control over the black gaze in the cinema as well. Drawing upon both Stuart Hall and Michel Foucault, hooks describes the relations of power that are foundational to cinematic representations of race and gender based upon a system of knowledge and power that reproduces white male supremacy. hooks notes that Black Cinema emerged in the early 1970s in response to this hegemonic system; however, those movies primarily focused on black male representations and were rarely concerned with issues of gender (hooks 1996). Black females then are misrepresented not only in white mainstream cinema but also in black films. The negation of the black woman in film, either by absence or by the violence done to her, makes the black female spectator develop an oppositional gaze. She is able to see beyond the imagery on-screen since she must develop this self-protective oppositional gaze as a means of resisting the negative and colonizing representations put forth for her to identify with. “Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallocentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of ‘woman as image, man as bearer of the look, was continually deconstructed” (hooks 1992:121). According
to hooks, what is needed is not just black film, but black feminist film which deconstructs existing grand cinematic narratives of whiteness and maleness and offers up new possibilities of black female centered narratives and positive representations for the construction of black female identities.

Tania Modleski (1991) critiques the white hetero-patriarchy of cinematic representations. She draws from Homi Bhabha’s notions of racist and colonialist discourse resonating in film and also includes Judith Butler’s ideas on the historical and cultural intersection of gender with race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality in her critique of mainstream cinema. In her view, gender, race and sexuality may all be performed, but it is the performance that is problematic. She suggests that race is performed and mimicked as evidenced by the putting on of black face in movies such as the *Jazz Singer* and *Birth of a Nation*, and the inclusion of a colonialist discourse goes beyond performance and mimicry to include fetishization. Richard Dyer (1997) explains that whiteness is both invisible and everywhere, and that in people do not refer to white as a race, because every race and color judged as a distinction from dominant group. Dyer states, “as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they function as a human norm” (1997:1). Modleski (1991) examines representations of blackness in film to include a form of fetishism equated with animalism and bestiality, while at the same time black representations include an imitation of whiteness, yet not quite white.

*Shifting Imagery and Diverse Theories*

By the 1990s feminist film theory had become extremely diverse and included not only the male-gaze/female-spectator psychoanalytic model and the reception/meaning-
making emphasis of British cultural studies but included various postmodern perspectives raging against totalizing theories, essentialism, universalism, and privileged discourse.

Judith Butler and Donna Haraway both question the naturalness of the female body by deconstructing notions of gendered identities. Judith Butler (1990, 1999, 2003) asserts that gender is a performance. She states, “...one way in which this system of compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced and concealed is through the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with 'natural' appearances and 'natural' heterosexual dispositions” (2003:420). These appearances and dispositions are habitualized through cultural codes and conventions which make them appear natural (Hall 1993). What gender norms do is “serve as a social policy of gender regulation and control” (Butler 2003:423). Haraway (2003) argues that science reifies the biological functions of the female grounding them in evolutionary terms to account for feminine strategies of foraging and reproduction, conflating mind and body to a simple category of biology.

Postmodern feminists deconstruct and reconceptualize gender, emphasizing that there is no one clear-cut gender theory or definitive gendered body. Instead, gender is part of a dynamic system which often times includes race, social class, age, sexual orientation, and region or part of the world in which one lives, all of which involve hierarchies. Gender cannot be understood in separate terms from the influence of these various power structures. Judith Lorber explains that “gender is not a homogenous category, but involves status, identity, and display” (1999:417). Lorber’s stance is against a heteronormative discourse which affects gender status, identity and display. She suggests that liberal feminism assumes a malleable sexual identity with individual agency, whereas psychoanalytic feminism sees male sexual domination as rooted in the unconscious and
not easily changed. In this sense, Lorber thinks postmodern feminisms have more in common with liberal feminism than with psychoanalytic feminism. "Postmodern feminisms and queer theory take the most extreme view of the fluidity of gender and sexuality, arguing that they are performances" and the individual can either conform or resist to social norms to varying degrees (p. 418).

These feminist perspectives embraced voices of difference such as post-colonialism, third-world feminism, and other marginalized perspectives, which further complicated the problem of the spectatorship and meaning making processes involved in film viewing. To add more complexity, the whole notion of gender was being questioned by postfeminists who, with their constructionist perspective, eschewed the binaries of psychoanalysis and its inherent problem of the female spectator, as they questioned what the term "female" meant in the first place. Any uniform or monolithic readings fractured under the pressures of multi-positioned spectators and turned meaning-making into a kaleidoscopic process of flexible and changeable gazing practices.

By the 1990s, representations of women in film were just as diverse as the feminist discourses that tried to explain them. A new type of female character appeared on-screen, one that seemed to transgress any fixed and traditional notions of masculinity and femininity – she is the violent action heroine. The most recent research on the new female imagery is diverse as well. Some theorists want to create a "space" between genders to analyze the new representations, deconstruct binary notions of gender, and embrace gender-fluidity (Hills 1999; Brown 2005). Others focus on the production aspect by emphasizing the late capitalist economic functions inherent in the cinematic apparatus and the ubiquity of mediated images in a postmodern society (Tasker 1998), and still
others emphasize the consumption side as to how the new imagery can be used by young women as a means of creating identities (Rowe-Karlyn 2003; McRobbie 2004).

_Third Wave and Girl Power._ Coming from a British cultural studies perspective, Angela McRobbie (2004) suggests that third wave feminism manifests out of a generation gap. The advances made by second wave feminist in terms of job opportunities, life options, and choices in lifestyle and identity formation created a different social space for young women at the turn of the millennium. They feel they have agency, freedom, opportunity and choice, and that many of the feminist issue of the past are no longer relevant. Angela McRobbie explains that there is an anti-feminist movement objecting to perceived repressive sexual mores of old-school feminists. Instead, young females celebrate sex and participate in leisure and everyday activities that normalize their sexuality, such as wearing T-shirts that say “Porn Queen” or “Pay to Touch” across their breasts (McRobbie 2004:259). Sexual norms are set through the media and with its ubiquity and its “hyper-culture of commercial sexuality” young women believe it is their choice and right to flaunt their sexuality (McRobbie 2004:259).

Popular culture plays with ideas of feminism in a postmodern sense and, by co-opting the discourses of previous feminist agendas, undoes its power. McRobbie gives as an example the Wonderbra billboard ad by Victoria Secret which shows Eva Herzigova “looking down admiringly at her substantial cleavage enhanced by the lacy pyrotechnics of the Wonderbra” … [In this sense, Ms. Herzigova is engaging in her own gaze and] “enacting sexism while at the same time playing with those debates in film theory about women as the object of the gaze” (p. 258). Young women who are constantly bombarded with images constructed for the male gaze co-opt the gaze for their own pleasure and
subvert its meaning and intent. With this conditioning, performing sexuality in ways that are imitative of the media imagery lends to women choosing to freely exploit their sexuality or to engage in lesbian chic behavior, which is not homosexuality, but is instead hommo-sexuality on display for the male gaze (de Lauretis 2000). Madonna kisses Brittany at the MTV Awards, Jennifer Aniston kisses Wynona Ryder in Friends, and Sarah Michelle Gellar and Selma Blair are awarded best kiss by MTV for their performance in Cruel Intentions. Kinser states, “Part of the genius of postmodern feminism is to co-opt the language of feminism and then attach it to some kind of consumer behavior that feeds young people’s hunger for uniqueness” (2004:144).

Postmodern feminism, cultural studies feminists, and third-wave feminists all examine ways that female identities are constructed through the mediated ideologies of culture. Popular culture is the arbiter of sexual norms, gender roles, conventions of sexuality, and provides a plethora of social role models to borrow from in order to construct diverse identities, which paradoxically seem unique while at the same time are imitations of a commodity produced by mass-culture. Fiske and Hartley describe the “bardic” function of the media as a distiller of culture. “The ‘bardic mediator tends to articulate the negotiated central concerns of its culture, with only limited and often over-mediated references to ideologies, beliefs, habits of thought and definitions of the situation …” (2003:67). Popular culture has always had an influence on feminisms, and most recently with the appearance of contemporary action heroines, there is a feminist debate about how the audience relates to the representations and images they see on-screen.
Contestation surrounding the female spectator raised questions about those images on screen where women acted violently. If the female protagonist was violent, then the dichotomous foundation of the passive female spectator and the active male gaze was shaken. How then could the female spectator be understood as identifying in a masochistic way with a strong female character? Within the debates on the female spectator arose four important theoretical constructs on violent female imagery that bring with them different subject positions of the viewers in the audience: the *femme fatale*, Final Girl, and Monstrous Mother and the Rape-Avenger. These constructs are also included in the schema presented in Chapter 6 in order to situate various images and representations of violent women in film within a larger context of phallogcentric logic and a patriarchal social order.

*Femme Fatale.* Mary Ann Doane reveals the nature of the sexual power of the *femme fatale*. She states, the power of the *femme fatale* “is of a peculiar sort insofar as it is usually not subject to her conscious will, hence appearing to blur the opposition between passivity and activity. She is an ambivalent figure because she is not the subject of power but its carrier” (1991:2). Her power is located in man’s fear of her sexual control over him and his own lack of control. Doane thinks the *femme fatale* represents man’s frustration at his lack of mastery and control – in this sense she symbolizes “epistemological trouble” by defying phallogcentric logic and comes to represent the “other side of knowledge” (p. 103).

The *femme fatale* wears her sexuality; she “uses her own body as a disguise” and Doane again likens this to the “masquerade” of femininity. Performing masculinity is
nothing new, we have seen it with Marlene Dietrich dressed in her tuxedo in *Blonde Venus* (1932), Greta Garbo passing as a man in *Queen Christina* (1933), and the tomboyish Doris Day slinging guns and wearing chaps as *Calamity Jane* (1953). Doane suggests that performing masculinity is simply another site of desire for men. The *femme fatale* with her acts of violence then can also be read as performing masculinity. For Doane, the female spectator can oscillate between a feminine and a masculine position while viewing the movie because, just like the *femme fatale*, she has a sexual mobility available to her, which is a distinguishing feature of femininity.

*Final Girl.* A different perspective of the spectator is Carol Clover’s theory of the Final Girl. Clover (1992) posits that over the course of the diegesis of the film the spectator (male or female) is directed to identify with both the male killer and the female victim/hero, which she terms the “Final Girl”. The typical slasher film begins from the point of view of the male killer as he stalks his prey. In a sadistic manner the camera’s point of view often allows the viewer to peer out of the killer’s eyes as his gaze is directed toward beautiful young women. As the film progresses, the point of view shifts to that of the Final Girl. The audience feels the fear of being stalked by the killer and the suspenseful point of view shot comes from the Final Girl’s often trapped or caged position – fear is gendered female.

Sadomasochistically, the audience identifies with her fear and peers out of the closet to see the killer searching for his hidden victim, followed by the climax as the Final Girl kills the killer. At that moment both male and female viewers identify with the Final Girl’s victory of overcoming fear. For the male viewer, this serves in the Oedipal
dissolution since the Final Girl represents the overcoming of fear or identification with the feminine and transition into masculine identity.

The Final Girl, as figurative male, also represents the overcoming of phallic lack; the break with the mother and the concomitant sexual repression attached to the mother figure; and Oedipal acknowledgement of the masculine and transition into adulthood. Clover states that the “Final Girl is (apparently) female not despite the maleness of the audience, but precisely because of it. The discourse is wholly masculine, and females figure in it only insofar as they ‘read’ some aspect of male experience” (Thomham 1989:242). The slasher film therefore not only arouses the phallic-stage, male, sadomasochistic fantasy, but also provokes masculine identification by setting up the Final Girl, the figurative-male double of the male teenager, with latent cross-gender characteristics as a means of working through the Oedipal crisis.

Monstrous Mother. While Doane and Clover focus on the sexual functions of women, Barbara Creed brings into the psychoanalytic paradigm the reproduction function of the mother. “All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (1986:44). The mythic mother can be benevolent or violent; she represents not only life and birth, but death and destruction. She comes in the mythic form of the Madonna, but also as the cannibal ogress, from the Hindu mother-goddess Kali, who with her long tongue licks up the lives and blood of her children, to the wicked witch who tries to bake and eat Hansel and Gretel (Campbell 1972).

The monstrous feminine is a psychic construct. Freud relates the tale of Medusa, whose gaze turned men to stone, and the analogy is brought forward in his castration
complex whereupon seeing the female genitalia, the male is scared stiff. It is the recognition of sexual difference that brings on the castration complex which inevitably aids in Oedipal dissolution. Issues of identity arise from the monstrous feminine in the form of the “abject mother.” The abject is associated with the mother’s genitals, the “phantasmagoric gaping, voracious vagina/womb” (Creed 1986:63) which disturbs us, and threatens identity and order. Therefore the abject image incorporates those things that we turn away from: the corpse, death, mutilation, bodily wastes, excrement, blood, vomit, pus, and slime. These reviling things are incorporated into horror movies in order to evoke a perverse pleasure of terror and desire for the undifferentiated, for the abject, which is before the Imaginary and before the Mirror stage (Creed 1986). The horror film conjures various forms of the abject monstrous mother: the vampire, flesh-eater, zombie, slimy monster.

Creed explains that the archaic mother is different from the Oedipal mother figure, since it is not represented in relation to the penis or a concept of the masculine. The archaic mother exists before sexual difference, she represents the black-hole of non-existence, of pre-birth, of death and a desire to return to the original oneness that is the womb – a “pre-verbal ‘beginning’ within a word that is flush with pleasure and pain” (Kristeva 1941:61). The horror film allows the spectator to lose one’s self in the abject imagery where the identity of a unified self is put into crisis. But as far as the spectator is concerned, Creed believes the monstrous feminine is constructed “within a patriarchal discourse which reveals a great deal about male desires and fears but tells us nothing about feminine desire in relation to the horrific” (1986:68).
Julia Kristeva’s work on the abject mother best explains this psychological attraction to and repulsion of the void of the womb and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. Creed’s theory of the monstrous mother is limited in its conclusion that the victim/heroine is a figurative male; however, the broader scope of her theory which draws upon Kristeva’s notion of the abject is a powerful and persuasive argument for audience attraction to images of violence and horror in film (Felluga 2003) and reaches far beyond Mulvey’s constraints of the passive female spectator.

Rape Avenger. Jacinda Read offers up another type of violent female imagery based upon feminist discourse. She suggests that the representations of women in film reacting to rape have changed over the decades as a reflection of the second wave feminist movement. Her historical analysis tracks the rape-revenge narratives in films from the silent era up to pre-second wave feminism of 1970 and contrasts them to post-1970s narratives to understand the affect of feminist discourse on the construction of female representations in film. Read (2000) points out that before 1970 the rape victim was portrayed as defenseless, her revenge was acted out by a close male figure, i.e. father, husband or fiancée. But as feminist discourse took hold, female representations began to include a more independent woman able to seek revenge on her own terms, what she terms the “Rape-Avenger.”

Read (2000) examines the victim/avenger and rape/revenge female representations in cinema as a means of uncovering the in-betweeness of the ideas of the feminine and the feminist. She believes there is a gap between feminism as a body of knowledge and feminism as it is lived and experienced by women. Read states that with the decline of the second-wave feminist movement, younger feminists do not have a first hand
experience of the movement ideology and are not familiar with feminist theories. Instead women today are reliant upon the meanings of feminism that are produced through the cultural artifacts it has engendered.

**New Female Imagery and Violent Action Heroines**

I'm more attracted by a female character because I think that now for 30 or 40 years the image of the male actor has been as a strong man, and is most of the time about force and strength. And I'm attracted by the weakness, how they (women) can fight when they don't have that. And the ways they have to find to be able to fight for something or say something - it's richer. It's much more interesting.

— Luc Besson interview in the *Guardian*, March 23, 2000

Luc Besson has made several films of women who are strong, independent and fight like men: *La Femme Nikita, Transporter 2, The Professional, The Fifth Element* and *Joan of Arc*. This new female imagery has drawn the attention of film critics and scholars who debate whether the tough-girl representations are empowering to women (McCaughey and King 2001; Rowe-Karlyn 2003); are sexualized aggressors that both invite and return the male gaze (Tasker 1998); or are transgressing characters that destabilize the notions of gender (Brown 2005).

Carol Clover and Barbara Creed were two of the first feminist film theorists to talk about violent female representations and have already been discussed. But it is worth reiterating that their views were still anchored in psychoanalytic terms and therefore reliant upon a theoretical framework of gendered binaries. Clover saw the Final Girl as representing the figurative teenage male attempting to overcome the sexual repression of his mother, and Creed saw the monstrous-female as a rejection of and attraction to the
abject. While it is nearly impossible to get away from gender binaries when discussing the action heroine some critics and scholars try to get rid of gender boundaries by bracketing them or creating a separate “space” for them.

Elizabeth Hills (1999) draws upon Gilles Deleuze’s notion of *becoming* to locate the female heroine as a form of “post-Woman” operating outside boundaries of gender restrictions. She has not moved beyond sexual difference, but represents pure difference by operating in a middle space between the binaries of male and female. Hills argues that feminist theorists need to find a different way of negotiating the representations of action heroines instead of relying on old ideas of a “figurative male” or women acting out male fantasies (1999:47). She suggests that we break old habits of trying to fit this imagery into categories of masculine and feminine and instead appreciate these heroic female characters as a new form of cultural representation with which to identify.

Martha McCaughey and Neal King (2001) suggests that the new violent heroine is empowering and reflects a cultural change in America that includes a health and fitness movement, anti-rape messages and sexual harassment policies which are proliferated through the media. On a broader level women’s economic independence from men combined with their entry into traditionally masculine careers such as police work and military service add to “a growing self-defense movement” (2001:5). In essence, McCaughey and King focus on the physical aspects involved in protecting oneself and the feeling of empowerment that goes along with it. This cultural change expresses itself through tough women in film.

Yvonne Tasker is one of the first feminist film scholars to examine the representations of action heroines. She takes a more realistic and useful cultural studies
approach by examining both the production and consumption aspects of the new female imagery. The action heroine includes such stars and roles as Pamela Anderson in *Barb Wire*, Sharon Stone in *The Quick and the Dead*, and Jamie Lee Curtis in *Blue Steel*.

Tasker, drawing upon the notions of star theory developed by Richard Dyer and furthered by Jackie Stacey, suggests that this imagery is attached with stars and is linked to other media and publicity sources including music video, fashion magazines, and advertising – it is intertextual and multi-media oriented.

Tasker’s writing at the time (1991) was prescient, coming before the advent of mass marketed stars who have also appeared as a sexualized aggressor such as Jennifer Lopez, Charlize Theron, and Halle Berry. Madonna is one of the earliest examples of purely sexualized aggression to go mainstream. Many of her controversial music videos had a sadomasochistic theme, such as *Justify My Love* and *Erotica*, and she became the icon for the dominatrix during the late 1980s and early 1990s – a character role she played in the movie *Body of Evidence* and also performed in her 1993 world tour “The Girlie Show.”

The iconography and fetishism of the dominatrix was brought to public attention through the various media exposures of Madonna’s notorious display of sadomasochism.

Jeffrey Brown (2005) suggests that it is the stereotype of the dominatrix as sexualized aggressor that runs throughout many of the new female images in cinema. He suggests that instead of reading the violent female as operating outside of gender norms, she should be understood in terms of co-opting both sides of the gender divide. “She is both subject and object, looker and looked at, ass-kicker and sex object” (Brown 2005:52) and “at a fundamental level every action heroine, not just those who are explicitly sexualized, mobilizes the specter of the dominatrix” (p. 50).
Brown suggests that the masculinized heroine which at one time was novel and new, as with Lt. Ripley in *Alien* and Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2*, has now been replaced with female masculinization as the main plot, as evidenced by Demi Moore in *G.I. Jane* or Geena Davis in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* – Demi Moore enacts masculinity by shaving her head and Geena Davis subsumes it by saying “Suck my dick.” In this respect, Brown believes cinema has taken the successes of the early action heroine characters like Lt. Ripley and Sarah Connor and run with them, repackaged it and turned the phenomenon of the tough-girl into the whole story. He also suggests that stereotype-breaking imagery of tough female characters who hold power while still remaining sex symbols has subversive potential because it makes fun of masculinity and conflates it with femininity.

Jacinda Read, discussed above, suggests that younger women have to rely upon popular culture to get an idea of what second wave feminism was all about. These feminist discourses often seem antiquated to young girls who no longer see or feel the social inequalities of their mothers and grandmothers. Angela McRobbie (2004) also addresses the issue of a generation gap between second-wave and third-wave feminists. The younger cohort embraces popular culture and uses it to construct their identities as a matter of routine. Third wave feminists identify with television and movie characters such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Xena the Warrior Princess* and *Nikita* as icons of female power, or “Girl Power,” also known as “Grrrl Power.”

Kathleen Rowe-Karlyn states, “In third wave feminism, popular culture is a natural site of identity-formation and empowerment, providing an abundant storehouse of images and narratives valuable less as a means of representing reality than as motifs available for
contesting, rewriting and recoding” (2003:21). Yvonne Tasker (1998) adds that Girl Power represents the angry female and the ability of girls to draw upon their femininity as a source of power and financial gain. Girl Power acknowledges and embraces both the sexual side of being female and the emancipation and independence of being a liberated woman in the manner of a feminist, without actually identifying as a feminist. For Rowe-Karlyn (2003), Girl Power manifested in popular culture provides a way for young women to negotiate meanings of femininity and feminism and affords a sense of agency and action in the real world through the use of tough-girl images in popular culture.

Rowe-Karlyn analyses the Scream movie trilogies in relation to third wave feminism. She suggests this horror series is aimed at female adolescents who have to navigate and negotiate the sexual politics of their world. Instead of appealing to male adolescents, this series deals with the daughter’s struggle to come to terms with her mother. In contrast to the Final Girl described by Carol Clover as the transfigurative male standing in for the young boys Oedipal crisis, Sidney, the heroine, does not play by the rules and uses her female power and sexuality to serve her own purposes – the character of Sidney represents Girl Power.

Others are more cautious and believe that we should not yet “applaud [the imagery] as a feminist development” (Clover 1992:64). Some identify the use of sex for promoting the film (Brown 2005; Coon 2006) and others take a more negative view of the representations of tough women in the television and film suggesting that they are not do not offer the audience realistic and empowering characters with which to identify (Magoullick 2006), or militarize women with the use of computer generated imagery that glorifies violence and destruction (Herbst 2004).
Summary

Feminist film theory has come a long way from its early days of being mired down in analyzing the good wife and mother roles and contrasting them to bad girls and gangster molls. Early feminist film critics were trailblazers at a time when Women’s Studies was an emerging academic discipline. Film critics did not have to compete with academics to come up with the most abstract, dense and intellectually challenging theory, but as popular culture itself has become central to everyday life movies have become a necessary and important area of study for feminists. Academia is filled with a plethora of differing subjective interpretations of movies, and feminist film theory has expanded from a specialty discipline to a large body of literature that draws from various sources of feminist thought in different academic disciplines as scholars weigh in on culture and its place and influence on society.

The various theories outlined above have contributed in different ways to understanding the representations and images of violent women in film. These theories suggest that violent women in film represent: issues of sexual control (femme fatale), overcoming sexual repression (Final Girl), narcissism and an attraction to the abject (Monstrous Mother) and a reflection of feminist discourse (Rape-Avenger). Most of these theories rely upon psychoanalysis and all of them deal with female functions of sex and reproduction. British cultural studies added to these theories and laid the foundation for various audience receptions, meaning-making and uses of images to construct identity. The most recent response to the new female imagery of the action heroine has built upon earlier theories and added marketing practices, intertextuality, and multi-media consumption as well as postfeminist notions of gender fluidity.
Feminist film theory would benefit from a comprehensive overview of the various types of violent female images that appear in American movies. The contribution of this research is to provide such an overview in the form of a schema by drawing upon the types already put forward by other feminists, and adding to the knowledge base of the present-day action heroine by conducting qualitative and quantitative research. While the majority of feminist film literature is based on interpretive analysis, my research includes content analysis to determine characteristics, propensity for violence, and other salient data pertaining to both form and content of the heroine in action films. The following chapter outlines the methods used for the content analysis and describes the research process in detail.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Heroine: 1. a mythological or legendary woman having the qualities of a hero. 2. the principal female character in a literary or dramatic work.

— Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary

Throughout this paper the term “violent action heroine” is used as a descriptor that refers to the definitions listed above. When we think about violent action heroines, filmic characters like Lt. Ripley and Lara Croft come to mind accompanied by visual images of Sigourney Weaver and Angelina Jolie. These violent action heroines play a principal role in action films.

There are many other types of female action characters that fight and shoot guns right alongside men -- they are recognized as “supportive characters.” Some come in at the last moment and save the hero by shooting the bad guy. Others are saved by the hero but also help out and engage in violence; they too are supportive characters. Additionally, there are other types of violent female action characters who portray “villains.”

These three distinct types of representations have been identified using the information gathered from the research. Collectively, the three types of violent female action characters are termed VFAC, an acronym created for the sake of efficiency. By analyzing these different forms and manifestations of female action characters we can come to understand the elasticity and resiliency of dominant social gender codes.
Violent women in action films also represent a range of moral characteristics from the bad girl to the good girl and from the self-sacrificing to the self-serving, all of which help situate the representations along a gendered continuum ranging from the stereotypical female victim to the newest imagery of the postmodern violent action heroine.

This research focuses on four specific sociological research questions aimed at understanding the female imagery and representations of violent women in contemporary American action films. The first and second question ask, “What are the characteristics of violent women in action films today?” and “How are the images and representations of violent female action characters related to feminist discourse on gender roles, norms and values?” The third and fourth questions focus specifically on the violent action heroine as an important and sociologically relevant type of contemporary filmic representation. The questions ask, “What is the historical development that led up to the form of violent action heroine of today?” and “How is today’s violent action heroine shaped by modes of production related to the film industry?”

The first two questions deal with representations and images of the violent women in action films as a broad category and rely upon data and information derived from three sources: first, a literature review of feminist film theory; second, original data gathered from a content analysis; and third, existing sociological data. The literature review is used to situate and build upon feminist responses to representations of violent women in film and also provides established theoretical models which are used to help construct the variables for the content analysis. The content analysis gathers original data for the research project by viewing action-films spanning a 15-year time period and coding
specific attributes of the violent female characters. Existing sociological data in the form of U.S. Census, labor, and crime statistics are compared to the data gathered from the content analysis in order to find out if the female action characters correspond to current demographics and reflect a form of social reality. This grouping of original and secondary data including the literature review not only tells us a lot about the violent female action character, but also provides an understanding of how she is situated within broader feminist discourse, and how she reflects gendered norms, roles and stereotypes.

The third and fourth questions focus on the movie industry, its changing modes of production and how these forces have influenced and shaped the development of the action heroine. The answers to these questions rely upon existing secondary data sources of box office and trade statistics in addition to a film and industry literature review. In essence, the data and information gathered in this part of the research addresses the formal qualities of the violent action heroine, where she came from, and why she has evolved. This area of research examines the post-Fordist movie production practices and postmodern cultural tendencies that ultimately end up re-packaging familiar imagery for mass consumption in order to broaden appeal and increase box office revenues.

Content Analysis

Most academic articles and books on the subject of violent women in film involve interpretive analyses of movies and characters and lack empirical evidence to explain what we see on-screen. Therefore this study employs content analysis to provide some empirically descriptive answers to the sociological research questions posed above regarding the violent women in action films in general, and violent action heroines in
particular. The data gathered from the content analysis is both quantitative and qualitative and is used to create a profile of the typical violent female action character and describe her tendencies of violence over the past decade and a half.

Content analysis is suitable for the historical dimension of this research due to its ability to elicit patterns over time. This method is also extensively used in communications and media studies and is apropos to film. Content analysis is generally descriptive in nature and lends itself readily to frequency distributions and historical trends which can be visually depicted in tables, charts and graphs (Neuendorf 2002; Krippendorff 2004a). The data gathered from this content analysis is not used to predict or determine causality; rather it is used for descriptive purposes only.

**Foci of Observation, Units of Analysis, and Definitions**

The foci of the observation in the content analysis are the demographic characteristics and the orientations of behavior of the Violent Female Action Character (hereinafter referred to as “VFAC”) played by the star or co-star of an action film. The acronym VFAC is used for purposes of efficiency and clarity and by definition the VFAC includes all of the significant female characters in the action film that engage in at least one act of physical violence. There are three types of VFACs: (1) the principal action heroine who is the central character of the movie and is not subordinate to a male-hero, also referred to as “violent action heroine”; (2) the supportive action character who is a helpmate to a primary hero or heroine and who is often depicted as the love interest to the male hero, also referred to as “supportive character”; and (3) the female villain who engages in physical violence. All three types of VFACs are analyzed, discussed, and described in
detail in the findings of the research outlined in Chapter 5. In total there are 158 VFACs comprised of 24 principal action heroines; 105 supportive action characters; and 29 female villains.

The content analysis has two units of analysis: the action films and the violent scenes within the action films. The rationale for this split is that in order to answer demographic and behavioral questions about the VFAC the entirety of the movie has to be taken into consideration, whereas observation and measurement of violence are specific to the violent scenes in which the VFAC appears. In total there are 786 violent scenes in the sample of 112 films.

Sampling

The specific time period of analysis covers American theater release dates between January 1, 1991 and December 31, 2005. This 15-year period allows enough time to ascertain characteristic patterns and trends of the changing demographics and behaviors of the VFACs. The year 1991 was chosen for several reasons: first, 1991 can be viewed as a turning point for violent women in action films with the major successes of *Thelma and Louise* and *Terminator 2* and there is an abundance of feminist literature written on these two films (Willis 1993; Rich 1998; Inness 1999; Tasker 1998; and Vares 2001); second, 1991 has also been noted as a year when filmic portrayals of men began to include more sensitive, family-values roles (Jeffords 1994; Pfeil 1995) and this shift coincides and contrasts with more aggressive female roles; third, from the early-1990s on there was more reliable box office and statistical data available; and fourth, prior to the 1990s there were few violent action heroines available to study and most feminist

The action-genre was selected as most appropriate given that acts of violence are the norm for this genre and also because the action genre has typically been dominated by male action heroes and has had little room for heroines in former decades (Sklar 1994). The research focuses on successful, mainstream, domestic movies in an effort to analyze the most “popular of the popular” (Denzin 1995; Trice and Holland 2001) which in turn provides an understanding of mass appeal in America. Therefore, the top-20 American box-office action films for each year of the 15-year period are included in the sampling frame (300 films); of those top-20, only films that contained a female action character engaging in at least one physical act of violence were included in the sample for the content analysis. The box office information for the sample frame of top-20 American action films was created using Internet Movie Data Base (“IMDB”).

In order to ascertain if the movie contains a female action character engaging in physical violence IMDB and other sources were used including Roger Ebert’s movies reviews, Rottentomatoes.com, promotional material, and personal movie viewing resulting in an original sample of 139 movies. The original sample of 139 dwindled down to 112 films. The reason for this decrease is due to misleading promotional material and movie synopses used to determine whether or not a violent female action character is present in the movie. For example, the synopsis for the movie *Ronin* (1998) reads: “A woman assembles a team of professional killers from all over the world to get a hold on a

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1 IMDB was formed in 1990 and the majority of box office related data and other general movie information have been gathered from this Internet source. It is deemed a reliable source since it is a self-reporting data base which relies upon movie producers and distributors for information about their own films. Subscription to IMDB allows for advanced search and sort functions.
certain case with some mysterious content. The case is in the hands of some ex-KGB
spies and there are many people and organizations that will do anything to get it”
(IMDB). And in fact, Natasha McElhone is shown holding a gun in a promotional photo
for the movie. Her character, Deirdre, is the front woman for a covert mission and she is
integrially involved in the plot. However, she never engages in any form of physical
violence; she does not shoot the gun or hit anyone; the function of the character is
essentially to inject a beautiful woman into an all male cast and provide a bit of intrigue
as to her connection with the mastermind of the mission. This type of misleading
advertisement and promotion occurred several times.

The sample as shown in Appendix A is first sorted by year, then by box office
ranking. As mentioned above, in order to be included in the sample the action film must
have at least one VFAC. The VFAC must also be a significant character in the movie and
billed as a star or co-star. In the event that the cast is listed alphabetically or in order of
appearance media-promotional material is viewed to elicit which actors are promoted as
the film’s main stars. In the event there is more than one VFAC in a film additional
VFACs are coded, as well as any female villains that fit the same criteria.

For coding purposes, physical violence is defined as fisticuffs, martial arts, hand-to-
hand combat, the use of any form of weaponry or any other material object to inflict
bodily harm or cause damage to property, such as driving a car into a building, flying a
plane into an alien, throwing a rock at a person, etc; or using any form of technology to
harm or destroy a person, life form, property or material object, such as programming a
computer to attack a city. Verbal aggression, intimidation, threats of violence, such as
waving a gun or indirect physical violence such as ordering others to commit violence are

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not included in the analysis – only physical acts of aggression and violence toward other beings or property are measured. The rationale for the somatic component in the analysis is that it can be measured more objectively than other forms of aggressive behavior, such as verbal aggression or authority over others in power relations. Also physical acts of violence are the characteristic elements which “challenge traditional representations of masculinity and femininity” (Inness 1999:179).

As stated earlier, the sample consists of action films; however, since most movies fall into multiple genres the selected films can be cross-listed with other genres such as horror, thriller, crime, adventure, etc.; however, they cannot also be cross-listed with family, comedy or animation movies. Examples of films that did not qualify include Spy Kids (family) and Charlie’s Angels (comedy). The initial rationale for the exclusion of these movies is that the purpose of this research is to examine representations of adult women engaging in serious physical aggression and not the parodies of tough women and children.

The sample does not include several well-known and successful movies containing violent female characters that are seemingly apropos to the research such as Basic Instinct, Silence of the Lambs, Dolores Claiborne, or Sleeping with the Enemy. The reason these movies are not included in the sample is because they are not categorized as action films; often times they are categorized as thrillers or dramas. No foreign films are included because the research is oriented toward mainstream American cinema. The movie must have been made either partially or entirely in the U.S. and have been released

2 However in retrospect, the comedy action heroine films should have been included in the sample. This sampling error is addressed at length in Chapter 5.
in the U.S.; this eliminates some martial arts films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Hero* (2002). In short, the research is aimed specifically at the penetration of female characters into the traditionally male-oriented action genre in order to determine how fixed or flexible gender roles, norms, and values are in what is considered the most successful, mainstream segment of the movie industry in contemporary American culture.

*Codebook and Coding Instructions*

The codebook consists of a set of variables that address issues specifically related to the first research question in an attempt to determine the characteristics and historical patterns of the violent women in action films. Basic demographic variables such as age, race, occupation, socio-economic status, marital status, and number of children are used to create a profile of the VFAC. VFAC realism was coded as a choice between (1) unreal, (2) real character with unrealistic qualities or (3) real. Real means a realistic human being who adheres to realistically plausible physical actions; unreal indicates an impossible or wholly fictitious type of being usually with some form of supernatural physical power; and real with unrealistic qualities represents something in between such as a human being who has extraordinary physical abilities. More problematic in the coding process is the variable for race/ethnicity. Initially, the variable included aliens and other life forms, since many of the female characters are unrealistic and futuristic. This overlap is confusing; therefore the race/ethnicity variable pertains to the actors rather than the characters they play.
In order to discover the VFAC’s orientations of behavior a group of more subjectively-oriented variables is used to determine gendered roles and norms including equality with male lead character, team support, VFAC status, fate of VFAC, love-interest, and fate of relationship. These variables address some of the gendered stereotypes and behavior patterns of female action characters. They answer such questions as: Does the VFAC follow a traditional storyline where she falls in love with the hero, marries, and lives happily ever after? Is the VFAC treated as an equal in the story to the male lead character? How often is the VFAC killed off in the story?

The codebook is shown in Appendix B along with coding instructions. It essentially has two parts which pertain to the two distinct units of analysis. As described above, one unit of analysis is the action movie itself; therefore, the demographic characteristics and orientations of behavior of the VFAC are ascertained by watching the movie in its entirety. The other unit of analysis is the violent scene and only scenes depicting a female action character committing acts of violence are coded. The start and end times are recorded to determine the length of each violent scene and this data is used to track increases in VFAC violence over the 15-year period. In order to find out if the VFAC is getting more aggressive over time, variables such as weaponry used and scale of destruction are employed. The motives for the VFAC’s violence are also recorded. Qualitative variables such as location of violence and a brief description of violence are included to more clearly define the events of each violent scene. This qualitative data is useful in finding broader patterns of violence. In addition, the codebook contains a section for purely qualitative descriptions of the female action characters, her violence, and the general themes of the movie. This qualitative data is used to address other
patterns in action movies including matters of race, moral themes, and social concerns. These qualitative results will be included in Chapters 5 and 6.

Two pilot tests were conducted to refine the coding instructions and clearly define the variables. Several design changes were made to the codebook in order to facilitate coding, data entry, and also to conserve on paper. The codebook instructions were changed twice to address problems with recording the time of violent scenes. These changes in instructions specifically relate to film-editing techniques that make it difficult to pinpoint the ending time of violent scenes and also frequent jumps in action sequences that make it hard to determine what constitutes a single scene.

Data Collection

As the primary coder, I watched and coded in their entirety all 139 movies that were included in the original sample and then eliminated those that did not meet the criteria to come up with the final sample of 112 films, as described in the sampling section above. Before official coding began two pilot tests were conducted to ensure a minimum 80 percent agreement for intercoder reliability. As described above, changes have been made to the codebook and instructions in order to achieve the desired results. A separate sample of 17 movies was created for intercoder reliability purposes and provides a 15 percent overlap-coding. The sub-sample consists of one movie for each year of the sample and one extra in years 1999 and 2004 chosen by coders' preferences. Six coders took part in the content analysis and each coder viewed between two and four movies each. Each coder was given a codebook specific to the movie they were to watch and the
VFAC(s) and male lead characters were identified. Each coder also received written coding instructions and a verbal explanation of the project.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability results are shown in Appendix C. Since there are two separate units of analysis, movies and violent scenes, two different sub-samples are shown in the Appendix. The first includes the 17 films described above and measures 19 variables on demographics and behavior of the VFAC; the second includes 105 violent scenes, which are a part of the 17 films, and measures 7 different variables pertaining to VFAC violence. Lombard, Snyder-Duch and Bracken (2005) suggest that a minimum of two different approaches are used to assess reliability. Due to the size difference between the two sub-samples, four different methods are shown. Lombard et al. also state that percentage agreement is generally considered a liberal measurement which is not suitable for assessing reliability; however it is included since it was the measurement used to establish the codebook. Percentage agreement was computed using a software program called PRAM. In addition, PRAM was also used to compute Cohen’s kappa for all variables. The kappa is widely used especially for coding behavior, but it is generally more appropriate with larger sample sizes; therefore a hand-computation of Krippendorff’s alpha, which is flexible and can be used with nominal data and smaller sample sizes, is included for the first sub-sample of 17 films. For the second sub-sample PRAM was also used to compute Scott’s pi since it is appropriate to nominal data and larger sample sizes. By employing the various reliability coefficients, all bases are covered. The kappa coefficient computes chance between coders’ choices of the data
available to them, and the alpha and pi coefficients compute chance according to the probability of choices available within the data set (Krippendorff 2004b). According to Krippendorff (2004a), a minimum acceptable level of reliability is a .80 coefficient, but those variables between .667 and .80 may be used for “drawing tentative conclusions” (2004a:241).

Intercoder reliability is strongest for variables that rely on information that is easily perceived, explicitly stated, or described within the movie such as marital status, number of children, sexual orientation, race, and life form, all of which have 100 percent agreement. Those variables that were the most subjective had the least reliability, including realism, education, enemy, love interest, love relationship, and equality; each of these variables fell slightly below the .80 alpha coefficient. The overall alpha for the first sub-sample is .899; however, this is due to the numerous variables that have 100 percent agreement.

The second sub-sample of violent scenes with 105 scenes and 7 variables represents 13 percent of the total 786 scenes in the research sample. The timing of each violent scene is described in detail in the codebook instructions so that the coders are able to pinpoint when the scene begins and ends with an overall accuracy of .819 percent agreement and .807 Cohen’s kappa and Scott’s pi. Each scene had to be coded within a two second margin of error. The most reliable variable is weaponry at .937 alpha because weapons used are easy to see in the movie and the variable clearly states that the highest level of weapon used should be coded, i.e. a bomb is a higher level weapon than a gun. The variable for initiator of violence fell below the .80 alpha coefficient. Although the coding instructions state that the person (or being) that makes the “first strike” is the
initiator, sometimes it is difficult to distinguish who engaged first and subtleties of what constitutes a “first strike” also come into play. Surprisingly, motives for violence, which is the most subjective variable in the second sub-sample has a .836 alpha coefficient. This is primarily due to the specifics of the coding instructions and citing examples of what constitutes feminine and masculine motives for violence. The validity of these gender-based categories is based upon literature review.

To strengthen the external validity of the variables several theoretical sources were drawn upon from feminist film theory and broader feminist literature. These sources shape and anchor the variables that appear in the content analysis that are more subjective in nature and related to VFAC behaviors. Several of the variables used to code VFAC violence such as type of weaponry used, target of violence, and relationship to VFAC are derived from categories used in FBI Uniform Crime Report. The race/ethnicity demographic variable is based on the U.S. Census.

By the very nature of film, validity and reliability can be problematic since the variables are contextually bound within the larger scope of the diegesis. This problem is addressed by drawing upon the qualitative data gathered in the content analysis in order to achieve a triangulation of methods that reinforce both validity and reliability. A case in point is the use of a qualitative description of the violent scene which can be referred to in order to make sure the coder is coding a motive for violence specific to the scene and not relating the motive to an overarching theme in the movie.
Problems with Content Analysis Data Collection

Several problems initially arose that were addressed as coding proceeded. The variable describing target of VFAC violence was broken into categories of male, female, alien/other life form, etc. There are many instances when a character is a gendered-life form and confusion arises as to whether to code the gender or the life form. In this instance separate categories were created for gendered alien life forms. Confusion also arose as to who initiated violence as well as issues of self-defense, and these problems were resolved with further clarification in the coding instructions. The most problematic variable in the entire coding process is accurately pinpointing the ending time of each violent scenes.

The movies were viewed in chronological order and all of the problems listed above became more pronounced as time passed due to contemporary editing techniques, computer-generated images, faster action sequences, and increasingly unrealistic characters. In other words, there are now more alien life forms due to computer-generated imagery, but often they retain a gendered appearance which causes confusion. There are more violent scenes to be coded and they move faster and jump from shot to shot. It is difficult to distinguish between where one scene ends and another begins. Action sequences have become a blur of running away from things, elaborate escapes from a multitude of attackers, and non-stop self-defense sequences – it becomes hard to tell who did what first. These problems with data collection are both interesting and significant to the overall research and relate specifically to the effects of the movie industry’s changing production practices, technological advances and editing techniques.
The third and fourth research questions listed above pertain to the impact of movie industry business practices on the representations of the violent action heroine. These questions are answered using existing secondary data sources and film industry literature. A large amount of the box office and related industry data was gathered as part of the sampling process. This information is primarily obtained by utilizing IMDB and includes such data as: name of film; year of release; actors, director, writers, box office gross, movie budget, and source material for the movie. Other data includes movie attendance statistics, sequel information, and genre figures which are available through such recognizable and reliable sources as the Motion Picture Association and Standard & Poor’s Industry Reports.

Existing box office and industry data help answer such questions as: How successful are action-heroine movies in comparison to traditional male-oriented action films? Do increases in female violence sell more movies? How many action heroines stem from other media sources such as books, TV, comics or computer games? The information obtained from existing data sources sheds light on the various profit-driven practices that shape the violent action heroine and the action movies she appears in.

The literature review of the historical development of the movie industry provides important information relating to the shifting imagery of the violent action heroine. It contains insight into modes of production, technological innovations and editing techniques all of which contribute to the formal construct of the action heroine and the action-genre movies that she appears in. Because the movies were viewed in chronological order it became clear that the formal qualities of the action film are
changing over time and that narrative structure is taking a backseat to the spectacular and intense visual effects now occurring on-screen. A review of movie industry literature supports this claim. The emphasis on form over content is also supported by an array of critical theory and postmodern perspectives and these areas of literature are drawn upon as well in order to make sense of the element of spectacle and its broader socio-economic and cultural context, which bears directly upon the movie industry and ultimately shapes the type of mass-entertainment produced for the American public.

Summary

In general, the original data gathered in the content analysis is used to create a VFAC demographic profile and also determine her tendencies of violence which addresses the first research question regarding the general characteristics of the violent women in action films in present-day form. The literature review on feminist film theory provides an orientation for the evaluation of the characteristics and behaviors of the violent female action characters by locating the representations along a continuum of gender roles, norms and values which addresses the second research question. The findings of the content analysis are used in combination with existing secondary sources of data described above that are related to the movie industry and its shifting modes of production which address the third and the fourth research questions related specifically to the evolution of the violent action heroine.

All of the data and information obtained in the research are drawn upon to create a comprehensive analysis of the evolutionary trends and various manifestations of violent women in contemporary American action films and their reflection and re-presentation of
dominant social codes and gendered norms. The research then narrows to focus upon the violent action heroine as a reflection and re-presentation of movie industry practices and postmodern cultural sensibilities. The action heroine is filtered from the broad category of violent women in action films and calls attention to the economic practices of the "culture industry" in its purest form.

The following chapter consists of a second literature review included in the research. It is an historical overview of the movie industry from its inception of one-minute, silent, black and white "peep shows" to the present day feature-length, action-blockbuster. This area of the research addresses "New Hollywood," its post-Fordist production practices, its postmodern cultural tendencies, the rise of spectacle, and the blockbuster phenomenon. The literature review serves as a foundation for the understanding and appreciation of the dynamics of Hollywood that have changed and shaped the formal qualities of the violent action heroine and the action films she appears in.
CHAPTER 4

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN CINEMA

Herein lies the contradiction of capitalist media: to understand our mass media, we must be able to understand them as always and simultaneously text and commodity, intertext and product line. This contradiction is well captured in the phrase ‘show business’.


The movie industry has gone through radical changes in the mode of production caused by a multitude of factors such as technological innovation, federal government regulation, deregulation, globalization, mergers and acquisitions, and shifting power dimensions between artists and studios. Production is also dependent upon audience demand and there have been significant changes in this area as well including niche marketing, multi-media tie-ins, spin-off merchandising, a huge decrease in movie attendance since its heydays in the 1940s combined with increases in youth audience since the 1970s; all of which play a part in the bottom line. Hollywood is first and foremost a business – it produces a commodity and the way it makes the most money is by trying to please the most people and offend the least (Sklar 1994; Neale 2000; King 2002). Every once in a while it comes out with the social-conscience film and for the most part these are not the money makers; however, sometimes the social climate is ripe for them: *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967); *In the Heat of the Night* (1967); *The
Killing Fields (1984); Philadelphia (1993); and Brokeback Mountain (2005) to name a few.

Movies stem from cultural production that is not only a reflection of a zeitgeist but is strongly governed by commercial strategies and practices, the history of which is complex and interesting. Since the earliest development of moving images for entertainment purposes the business of filmmaking has been wrought with tensions between those few large players who have established and held control over the production, distribution and exhibition of their products and those who challenge their power. The following is a trace of the development of the movie industry from its inception to present day in order to provide the historical and economic context that ultimately led up to the most recent versions of the female action heroine. This chapter is a literature review that serves to answer the third and fourth research questions related to the movie industry’s part in the creation of today’s action heroine.

Early Cinema and Audience Reception

As early as 1893, Thomas Alva Edison brought to market a machine called a kinetoscope that would project pictures on film strip inside a viewing device while playing music which was not synchronized to the picture. This was the familiar “peep show”: a minute-long, tiny (approximately one inch), black and white projection of images usually consisting of curiosities such as strong men, contortionists, wrestling matches and trapeze acts and the occasional lewd images. In 1896, large-scale projection capabilities were achieved and the first screened movies where shown in vaudeville theaters in New York. These shows consisted of stringing together numerous peep-shows
and projecting them on the large screen as additional entertainment to the typical vaudevillian fare. At the turn of the century, storefront movie theaters or “nickelodeons” began cropping up by the dozens and then hundreds in large cities across the nation, such as Chicago, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and New York (Sklar 1994). The attraction to this new form of entertainment was overwhelmingly represented by lower working-class immigrants – America’s “great unwashed” (Sklar 1994). Movie technologies rapidly advanced and within a few short years they went from tiny one-inch projections in a box, to feature length films projected onto large screens. This shift in audience reception moved from the individual viewing experience via peep-shows in store-front nickelodeons to a group-oriented experience in a large theater venue. The technological changes of movie production, combined with changes in distribution and exhibition took moving images into the realm of leisure and socio-cultural experience (Sklar 1994).

*The Rise and Fall of Classical Hollywood*

The first inventors and businessmen to capitalize on moving pictures were well-to-do entrepreneurial WASPs. Henry Marvin was a New York manufacturer who founded Biograph Company; D.W. Griffith was the son of a distinguished Kentuckky family and Edward S. Porter was the son of a Pennsylvania merchant. Griffith and Porter both worked for Thomas Edison. Edison went into the movie production side of the business and formed his own studio, Vitagraph, as a means of supplying the movies to be played on the equipment he manufactured and sold. Vitagraph became the largest movie producer in America during the first decade of the 1900s and this was achieved because Edison tried to eliminate competition by only selling or renting films to those exhibitors.
who used his licensed products exclusively. Through the creation of Vitagraph, Edison was one of the first businessmen to try and control the three major economic aspects of film: production, distribution and exhibition. He used his patents to try and force his competitors to use his licensed cameras and made it typical practice to sue for patent infringements. Edison had the financial wherewithal to legally ensnare his competitors until most of them capitulated. By 1908, nine production companies headed by respectable white-Protestant businessmen united under the Motion Picture Patents Company, which was the fulfillment of Edison’s dream of a motion picture monopoly to control production, distribution, and exhibition. They even entered into agreement with Eastman Kodak for exclusive use of raw film stock. This block of interrelated businesses created a trust that had the power to control which films played where and when, and at what price. But by 1915, the Motion Picture Patents Company (or “Trust”) was found in violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act and ordered to dismantle. This trend of monopolistic-type practices accompanied by federal intervention occurred several times over the next century forcing the movie industry to adapt and adopt new business strategies to circumvent federal restrictions and regulations which ultimately had the effect of altering the content of the movies themselves.

At the same time that the major players in the early movie industry were fighting amongst themselves and vying for control of the movie market, they lost touch with who made up the audience and what the audience really deemed as entertainment. The nickelodeons had proven extremely successful among immigrants and the lower working class. As film historian Robert Sklar remarks, “What was distinctive about the [silent] movies as they entered their second decade, over and above their actual or potential
capacity for creating new forms of visual experience, was their success in providing entertainment and information to an audience that did not need English or even literacy to gain access to urban popular culture for the first time" (1994: 30). Because the nickelodeons catered to the lower classes they were deemed as “dens of inequity” by such moral guardians as churches and reform groups. The bourgeois moral imposition resulted in censorship, police raids, seizures and shut downs. In New York City, every movie theater was shut down for a week during the Christmas of 1908 (Sklar 1994). Bourgeois businessmen who ran the Trust distanced themselves from the supposed immorality of the nickelodeons and tried to cater to the middle classes by giving preferential treatment to upscale theaters and showing films that had passed censorship screening by the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, which aligned itself with the Trust before it was dismantled in 1915 (Sklar 1994).

The Progressive Era and the Hays Code

The Progressive Era at the turn of the 20th century forced social change and moral control and brought about such sweeping reforms as the 18th Amendment for Prohibition and the 19th amendment for women’s suffrage; both of which were passed in 1920. In 1922, after many Hollywood scandals off-screen and on, the studios were compelled to provide more moral control over their products and an internal censorship board was formed called the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (“MPPDA”). The studios brought in Will Hays as president of the MPPDA, a respected Presbyterian elder and former U.S. Postmaster General. During the 1920s, Hays was ineffectual at controlling the content in movies produced by Hollywood since he was employed by the
studios and was merely a figurehead.

With the advent of sound in 1929, movies pushed new limits in depicting sex and violence on-screen. “In 1932 Warner Bros. made both strategies official studio policy, ordering screenwriters to cultivate the vice film and to spice up the rest of the product line with vice additives on the theory ‘that an average of two out of five stories should be hot’” (Doherty 1999:104). Studio executives knew that sex and violence sell. But the ratcheted-up portrayal of vice in film caught its downfall from a backlash of churchgoers, conservatives, and moralists. Catholic reformists threatened boycotts of any film they deemed morally unsuitable if something was not done to control the licentious content.

With mounting pressure, Will Hays recruited Father Daniel Lord, a Jesuit priest, and Martin Quigley, editor of the Motion Picture Herald, to create the Hollywood Production Code, or Hays Code as it is also known. The Code was a cultural and moral guidebook that shaped the moral structure and content of film for over thirty years. Although the Code was written in 1930, it was not until 1934 with the appointment of Joseph Breen as chief of the Production Code Administration that it had any teeth. With Breen’s influence and persistence the Code was enforced as he rode roughshod over the studios while taking his lead from the Catholic League of Decency. Breen’s tough control shaped moral content in Hollywood until his retirement in 1954.

The original Code is lost, but various versions of the original have survived. In general, the Code states entertainment should be “helpful” to and “improve” the human race; and further, the motion picture industry has “special moral obligations”: evil should not appear attractive or alluring. Plots should not side with evil, and crimes should not be rewarded. The sanctity of “marriage, home and sex morality [should] not be imperiled”,

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adultery should not be justified. Obscenity, vulgarity, acts of “impure love,” nudity, arousing dancing, and brothels should not be included.

It was the pre-Code years between 1930 and 1934 that gave us those famous icons of sexually powerful, aggressive, and independent women with stars like Mae West, Jean Harlow, and Marlene Dietrich, with movies like *Blonde Venus* (1932) which has been analyzed endlessly and described as a precursor to the *femme fatale* of film noir (Kaplan 1990; Doane 1991; La Salle 2004). Dietrich is remembered as a stereotype breaker with her wearing of male suits, ties, black hats and even men’s underclothes. What the pre-Code years illustrate is that cinema has always had a proclivity to use sex and violence as part of its storyline, and without the clamp of the Code, it would have inevitably followed this course. The studio executives of the pre-Code era intentionally included some form of vice in films as a box office draw via stories about the gangster and/or the fallen-woman. *Variety* estimated that during 1932-33, 352 of the 440 films made contained “some sex slant” (Doherty 1999:104).

By the time of Breen’s retirement in 1954, American culture had shifted and the Code had began to be challenged, questioned, and ignored. In 1968 a new system of ratings was instituted and the moral leash was removed. Hollywood made giant strides to reinstitute sex and violence.

*Jewish Movie Moguls and the Hollywood Studio System*

Sexually risqué content can be traced back to the peep-shows and nickelodeons at the turn of the 20th century. Sex, violence, and comedy were the preferred content of movies for the working class immigrants who sought distraction from economic hardships and
who also needed entertainment that did not require a great deal of knowledge of either English or social nuances (Sklar 1994). Because the Motion Picture Patents Company, which was made up of bourgeois businessmen, did not cater to the needs of the working class immigrants, a large market opened up for independent film companies. With the moral clamp down on nickelodeons occurring in the Progressive Era, the low-end exhibitors were left without access to films that were produced or distributed by members of the Motion Picture Patents Company. A new group of entrepreneurs emerged to fill this void. They were primarily American Jews of East European descent, many of whom had a history in vaudeville; and by time the Trust was forced to dismantle in 1915, names like Laemmle, Goldwyn, and Zukor emerged as the new giants of the industry. These men were innovators of the movie industry and branched out from peep-shows, serials and shorts to feature length films; they were the first to use recognizable stars as box office draws, and eventually established what has come to be known as the “studio system”. Similar to the monopolistic practices that occurred with the first generation of WASP-owned movie companies, the predominantly Jewish-owned smaller independents began to consolidate, and as they grew they too began practicing vertical integration by combining production, distribution, and exhibition rights and capabilities in attempts to gain power and control over all facets of the industry. The first movie moguls to emerge after the breakup of the Trust were Adolph Zukor who founded Paramount and William Fox of Twentieth-Century Fox. By the 1930s and throughout the 1940s five major studios dominated the industry headed by Jewish entrepreneurs including: Adolph Zukor of Paramount; Samuel Goldwyn and Louis Mayer of MGM along with Marcus Loew who built Loews Theaters forming MGM-Loews; Harry, Albert, Sam and Jack Warner who
established Warner Bros.; William Fox of Twentieth Century-Fox; and David Sarnoff who helped create RKO.

The movie industry continued to expand until it reached its peak in 1946 with its all-time audience attendance high of one hundred million tickets per week (Menand 2005). These years were the heyday of the Hollywood movie studio system and are also referred to as the “Golden Age” or as “Classical Hollywood.” The major studios with their vertical integration strategies controlled all facets of the industry; they produced the movies and then made the deals to distribute them to the theaters that they owned. The studios engaged in practices such as block-booking, which required theaters to show B-movies in order to get access to the main features, and films were released in major urban cities first so that the pedestrian suburbanites waited in anticipation to see what the urban sophisticates were already talking about (Menand 2005). In addition, the studios had control over the stars who acted the movies and had the power to make or break them. Studios promoted their stars and manipulated the press to create personas that resonated with the American public (King 2002). Few stars had any control over the films they appeared in and with its all encompassing power the studio system assured that the independents would have no place to show their movies if they did not first get the blessing of a major studio thereby eliminating competition (King 2002).

These same monopolistic practices that were quashed by the federal government in 1915 were able to re-materialize during the 1930s and 1940s because the Depression and WWII diverted the government’s attention away from the industry’s increasing anti-competition practices (Sklar 1994). But in 1948 the federal government was successful again in breaking up the producer-distributor link to theaters under antitrust laws in what
is commonly referred to as the *Paramount Case*. The outcome of this famous case combined with the advent of television and a failing post-war overseas market broke the power-hold of the studio system and ushered in a whole new generation of independent movie makers (Twitchell 1992; Sklar 1994; King 2002).

*New Hollywood Cinema*

"New Hollywood" can be defined in terms of style and economics and it has two commonly understood meanings (King 2002). The first meaning is associated with the shift from the studio system to the rise of the entrepreneurial, experimental, and sometimes rebellious films of the 60s and early 70s, and the second meaning is associated with the overall trend of economically-driven industry practices that ultimately came into being in the post-Classical Hollywood era which include such phenomena as blockbuster movies and "high concept" films. The two meanings are interconnected because it was the breakdown of the factory-like or Fordist-type production of the studio system that is associated with modernism which was then followed by post-Fordist production strategies. Post-Fordism can be understood in terms of David Harvey’s (1989) analysis of "flexible accumulation" were the rigidity of factory-like modes of production associated with Fordism gave way to flexibility in hours and labor processes, decentralized-networks of multi-national corporate structures, outsourcing business strategies, and increasing service sector economies. It is these decentralized, interconnected, multi-layered, networks of economically-driven business strategies that govern today’s movie industry (Pfeil 1995; Neale and Smith 1998; King 2002).

As the studio system broke apart their assets were bought up by corporations, or if
they were more economically viable they transformed themselves into conglomerates (Kellner 1988; Neale and Smith 1998). The power vacuum left a hole for a new breed of filmmakers to emerge, one without the constraints of the studios or the censorship restrictions of the Hays Code. These new filmmakers were part of the 60s generation with its rebellious social consciousness and they took artistic license, dared to be experimental and explored social issues with such films as *The Graduate* (1967); *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967); *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967); *Easy Rider* (1969); and *Five Easy Pieces* (1970). By the 1960s film schools were turning out directors who were familiar with foreign film genres such as French New Wave, German Expressionism, and Italian Neo-Realism which depicted artistic forms quite different from the factory-like production movies of Classical Hollywood. This new group of directors is referred to as the “movie brats,” and includes such successful directors as Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Brian DePalma, and Robert Altman.

Stylistic techniques of cinema changed with the influence of foreign film and content changed as well fueled by the social upheaval of the 60s movements. “Films exercised the same transgressive tendencies that were breaking down old principles of order in the world of the radical movements and the counterculture. They questioned the sanctity of the white male hero, the iconography of capitalist individualism… the prevailing ethos of sexual repression and so on” (Kellner 1988:8).

It was not only the economic shifts in the movie industry and the new crop of filmmakers with a cultural consciousness that changed the face of cinema in the 60s, but the audience also shifted to a younger, more educated group with the rise of the baby-boomer generation (Sklar 1994). This transitional phase of American cinema is termed
New Hollywood in the first sense as discussed above – it is identified by socially controversial films and experimental styles – but it was short-lived. By the 1980s, the social climate turned more conservative and Hollywood reflected this in its movie content (Kellner 1988; Jeffords 1994; Pfeil 1995); but just as important were the continuing economic shifts occurring in the movie industry which by now had readjusted to projected-oriented deal structures that relied upon various networks of relationships for financing, production, distribution, and exhibition. This gave control to directors, stars, and producers instead of the studios and may have seemed like a boon for artistic license in its initial phase, but the reality meant increasing pressure on directors and stars to deliver a profitable product. With increasing production costs and rising budgets, fewer and fewer movies were made and even fewer movies made money (Menand 2005). In 1975, the average cost to produce and market a film was a little over $3 million; by 1984 it had risen to over $14 million and by 2003 it was up to $39 million (Wyatt 1994:78; Menand 2005:5). Today Wall Street financiers bypass studio executives and go straight to the directors who have a proven track record of successful box office hits (Holson 2006).

**Blockbusters.** As the movie industry shifted from studio control to corporate control, accountability shifted from studio bosses to shareholders. Hollywood depended more upon financially proven methods of making profits as the break even point moved upward. By the late 70s, financial success came in the form of the blockbuster which can be described as “a pre-sold property (such as a best-selling novel or play), within a traditional film genre, usually supported by bankable stars (operating within their particular genre) and director” (Wyatt 1994:78). Blockbusters bank on a large return from
a large investment and the profits can be substantial; further, large box office revenue translates into the potential for sequels and spin-off merchandizing. In fact, it is the highly profitable blockbusters that keep the movie-production segment of media conglomerates in the black since most films do not make money (King 2002; Menand 2005). The 1975 movie *Jaws* is a landmark in the blockbuster phenomenon (Wyatt 1994; King 2002). The movie was based on a best-selling book so it had “pre-sold” qualities, it opened simultaneously in 409 theaters across the country and the marketing strategy was to promote it heavily and obtain box office draw before any negative reviews or bad word-of-mouth had time to spread. *Jaws* cost $12 million to make, which was substantial at the time, but it took in $7 million in the first weekend and nearly $70 million in the first month (IMDB). The success of *Jaws* meant others would follow the same strategy.

Blockbuster logic is based in marketing. “The aim of promotion is ‘unaided awareness’ – in other words, ‘buzz,’ a diffused sense in the public that the movie is on the way” (Menand 2005:5). Upcoming movies are advertised in the form of previews in theaters, through coverage on television news, entertainment information programs, newspapers, magazines, and other media forms that are often owned by the same conglomerate which produced the movie. Marketers attempt to get the most people into the theater on opening weekend and promote to the youth audience considered to have an “underdeveloped capacity for deferred gratification” (Menand 2005:5). They must see it now and be part of the experience. The typical blockbuster makes between 25 and 40 percent of its total domestic box office gross in its opening weekend and it is box office success that drives the movie’s future DVD rental and sales success, which is an even larger portion of its total revenue (King 2002). The overseas market for blockbusters is a
huge part of the exhibition profits. Domestic box office gross for 2005 was nearly $9 billion, while foreign markets were over $23 billion (Motion Picture Association 2005). Blockbusters are highly exportable for similar reasons that made the nickelodeons successful in the early days of film by creating easily understood plots and displays of sex and violence which transcend the barriers of language and social customs.

Economics and the Preference of Form

The method of selling can shape the product itself.

— Geoff King, New Hollywood 2002

Today what we are experiencing is the absorption of all virtual modes of expression into that of advertising.

— Jean Baudrillard, Simulation and Simulacra, 1981

The action/adventure/spectacle/noise of blockbuster films can be linked to Western economies of late capitalism and post-Fordism (Kellner 2004). Post-Fordism can be understood in terms of David Harvey’s analysis of “flexible accumulation” described earlier. As the mode of production changes, so too does the superstructure of culture and the aesthetics that support it. “The relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion and the commodification of cultural forms” (Harvey 1990:156).

From narrative to spectacle. Narrative can be defined in two ways: (1) the plot or storyline, and (2) the thematic structure of the story, i.e. opposition, negotiation, reconciliation (King 2002). Blockbusters do have a storyline and a narrative structure, but
most often it is simple, easy to follow, and without controversy or significant political impact. Film scholar, Geoff King explains how the blockbuster has sacrificed narrative to spectacle. The classical narrative style has a suspenseful, rising action sequence that leads to the story’s climax and is based in delayed gratification because the protagonist must overcome obstacles and solve problems along the way before the conclusion (2002:185). In contrast, the blockbuster supplies a steady series of action and is full of “suspense, death, destruction, and loud chase and action sequences, with only a few relatively brief moments of quiet and/or comic relief” culminating in an even bigger final scene which is similar to every other action sequence but only on a grander scale (p. 191). From a psychoanalytic perspective, the ability to delay gratification results from the dissolution of the Oedipal complex which allows the Superego to accept the Reality Principle. But the blockbuster does not delay gratification and instead the Pleasure Principle takes hold and libidinal urges are constantly satisfied with a dose of aggression and/or sex on-screen. Fred Pfeil suggests that the action film has moved from the masculine Oedipal format of the “massively overdetermined climactic shootout [and] is now dispersed into the rhizomatic form of one affiliated bit before and after another, each typically carrying its own buzz or jolt” (1995:27). This “rhizomatic” form of action films can be compared to post-Fordist horizontal, nodal networks of decentralized production (p. 27).

Post-Fordist strategies of production inherent in today’s movie industry ‘offer us an altogether different economy of pleasure, in which the giddying blur of the high-speed chase and/or the gratifyingly spectacular release of aggressive impulse occurs at regularly recurring intervals throughout the film’ (Pfeil1995:23). The classical narrative structure of the film has turned into a roller-coaster ride of non-stop tension and has fragmented
into “short segments cut off from one another [which] serve as little more than the glue that holds together a series of spectacular displays” (King 2002:187). Action displaces narrative and the action character is subsumed into the spectacle.

*Big screen to small screen.* Blockbusters by their very nature are based in the spectacular and driven by scale and impact. With the advent of television and the resultant waning audience which dropped from its weekly high of one hundred million attendees in 1946 to its current 26 million (Motion Picture Association 2005), the movie industry was forced to revise its strategies of production. Going to the movies used to be considered the weekly form of entertainment consisting of double features (A and B movies), cartoons, newsreels and serials. But now it is the blockbuster that is the “big-screen event” so important to the success of the film industry which draws the audience out of the comfort of their homes and away from the smaller screens of their televisions. However, box office attendance is only one source of the total income for the industry and now accounts for only about 26 percent of all revenues earned by Hollywood (King 2002:73); instead the industry now relies upon secondary sources for revenue including DVD sales and rentals and distribution to cable, Pay TV and network television (often part of the same media conglomerate that produced the film) all of which require a smaller format to fit the television screen. The market for movies on television forced technology to move from such wide-screen processes as Panavision and CinemaScope to smaller formats. Older films shot in Panavision with a ratio of 2.35:1 would lose up to 40 percent of the original picture when fitted to television (p. 233). Framing also regressed from the wide-screen tendency to fill up the whole screen back to the classical “T-zone” which focuses on the upper one-third and the central vertical third of the screen and

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translates well to the smaller screens of television (p. 249). Other adaptations of movies
to television include the roller-coaster action effect described above which is more
conducive to the television audience who is distracted and less attentive than the captive
audience of a theater. In addition, the fragmented narrative structure of many recent
movies makes it easier to break away for commercial ads or cut the movie to fit into
specific time slots for television.

*High Concept films, advertising and the hyperreal.* Making room for commercial
breaks is only one consideration of advertising that now goes into movie production, in
addition advertising has also become a huge influence on style. Justin Wyatt explains the
“high concept” film, which contains “the look, the hook and the book” meaning that they
have a unique style that is aesthetically bold and overwhelms the narrative function, the
whole plot can be summed up in a tagline, and they have pre-sold qualities usually based
on a best-seller or some other recognizable pop culture item (1994:26). These movies sell
style and lifestyle; they are like an advertisement or music video, translate well into
television and offer the viewer an aesthetic to mimic.

The American mythos of femininity and masculinity is played out in the high concept
film by being bathed in stylistic backlighting and color schemes, inundated with physical
attractiveness and high fashion, and placed in settings of wealth and glamour which
enhances desire and appeal not only for the images on-screen but for the style and
lifestyle they represent. This stylized version of representational reality is hyperreal in its
effects. High concept films manufacture desire and are like watching one long
commercial advertisement. “In many ads, the images of people and products are
hyperreal, the result of carefully selecting social contexts, settings, and models, then
manipulating lighting and camera angles, and finally retouching the photographic representation” (Harms and Dickens 1996:214). And it is no wonder high concept films look like ads since many of the directors associated with the high concept style began their careers directing television commercials: Ridley Scott (*Alien*, *Blade Runner*); Adrian Lyne (*9½ Weeks*, *Fatal Attraction*); and Tony Scott (*Top Gun*, *True Romance*).

High concept films are also inextricably linked to music and the stylized format of these movies play much like a music video on MTV, which Jameson refers to as “narrativized visual fragments” (1999:300). The high concept film reflects this pasting together of visual fragments into an advertisement for a hyperreal lifestyle.

*Technology, form, editing, and reality.* From the beginning the film industry has been marked by technological advances that have radically altered production dating from the first moving images shown on Edison’s Kinetoscope to the invention of sound; from black and white to color; from wide-screen to television screen; and more recently from long shots and continuity editing to jump cuts and digital editing; from film to digital/video; and from real to computer-generated images.

Classical film style involved continuity editing which ensured a smooth and continuous flow between various perspectives in the movie and helped the audience to understand and follow the narrative (King 2002). In the early years of film it was assumed that the audience was not able to understand changes in time and space, therefore shots followed the movements of characters in order to add continuity and clarity to the narrative – in this case the content is supported by the form. More recently, editing has changed from continuity editing to discontinuous or montage editing where changes between shots are obvious and the story jumps from one scene to another. Rapid
cutting, montage editing, and unsteady or hand-held camera work can heighten the tension of a film by producing a kind of chaotic, fragmented and disorienting effect for the viewer – in this case form takes precedence over content (King 2002). Editing style has been facilitated by editing technology. No longer does the editor physically splice and tape frames of film together, now the entire process is done on computers. Film footage is turned into digitized images and reworked using editing software programs. While most directors still shoot feature length movies using 35 mm film, some well-known directors such as George Lucas and Robert Rodriguez are moving to high definition digital cameras, there has been a 153 percent increase in digital cinema screen since 2000, and most likely sometime in the near future the entire filmic process including production, distribution, and exhibition will all be digitized (Metz 2006).

The first use of computer graphic imagery ("CGI") to create a digital being was in 1985 in Steven Spielberg’s Young Sherlock Holmes (Metz 2006). The being known as the “stain-glass man” was developed at the Industrial Light & Magic studios ("ILM") owned by George Lucas and has revolutionized the film industry with advances in CGI. Spin-off companies from ILM include WETA, Digital Domain, and Pixar who have worked on such successful films as Lord of the Ring; I, Robot; Mission Impossible; King Kong and many more (Metz 2006). CGI has altered the reality of what cinema is capable of producing and in turn altered the reality of what the audience is viewing creating a more fantastic, futuristic and sensational Imaginary. Spectacle has no boundaries as editing capabilities and computer graphics generate limitless explosions, heart pounding action scenes and outlandish physical fight sequences, all of which provide tension and sensory overload for the spectator. As the dependence upon spectacle grows so too does the
dependence upon bodily sensations and the “rational interpretive meaning is displaced by an aesthetic of desire and sensuality rooted in bodily intensities” (Harms and Dickens 1996:211).

*The Era of Spectacle*

The visual appeal and spectacle of the big-budget Hollywood blockbuster is difficult for independents and foreign markets to compete with. There is a rule-of-thumb for financing movies based upon return on investment: profits can be made on movies that cost under $10 million or over $100 million (Menand 2005) – the hundred million dollar mark and above being the epitome of spectacle. Spectacle, which challenges reality, has always been an appealing additive in film and might also be understood in terms of the “train effect” (Bottomore 1999). When the French audience reportedly panicked after seeing the first moving images of a train in The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat, a one-shot film made by the Lumiere Brothers in 1895, the social landscape of reality was forever altered as manufactured visual images made concrete what was previously available only through imagination. A reified form of imagination occurs in cinema because of its ability to produce visual images that evoke shared emotions and bodily sensations by drawing upon social norms and conventions and promoting them as dreamlike entertainment. Participation of the spectator relies upon an altered perception of reality and “the power of unreality is that the unreal has been realized” (Metz 1974:5). The ‘fiction’ exists as a convention, which is the same as everyday life and similar to social patterns, except it is not real. Christian Metz (1974) describes cinema as a visual

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3 In years 2002 – 2005 the top grossing movies earned more than $200 million at the box office (Motion Picture Association 2005).
Esperanto – a visual language that people come to recognize and understand.

Movies have the ability to overlay onto the spectator a synthetic replacement of imagination and thereby create an imagination that transcends the subjectivity of the individual and reaches into the realm of the Imaginary in a Lacanian sense. For Lacan, the Imaginary stems from the first moment a child sees its own reflection and internalizes this image; therefore the Imaginary is controlled by visual processes. There is a discrepancy between what is actually scene and what is perceived and this psychological practice carries on throughout life as “images of otherness are transformed into reflections of the self” (Stam 92:129). Hollywood stars are part of our collective Imaginary; they are frequently objects of desire and social roles models; we copy and imitate them, pretend to be them, and co-opt their image and make it part of our own self-image (Stacey 1991; Gledhill 1991). Stars become commodities themselves and are consumed as such (Dyer 1986). The stories of their lives are consumable as tabloids, infotainment, and more. The products they directly promote or the brand names linked to them through some form of media exposure drive a whole media-related consumer society (Dyer 1986; 2004). Stars are part of the spectacle of Hollywood.

Guy Debord compares the spectacle to commodity fetishism, where manufactured reality becomes tangible. In his Society of the Spectacle, “the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible par excellence” (1967: Section 35). Kellner (2003) builds on Debord’s concept:

Media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society’s basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution … the correlate of the spectacle, for Debord, is thus the spectator the
reactive viewer and consumer of a social system predicated on submission, conformity, and the cultivation of marketable difference. (P. 3)

Movies are customarily referred to as a form of escapism, diversion or distraction but they can also be deemed seductive teachers of ideology because they are emotionally and aesthetically pleasing packages of socio-political and cultural values sold as entertainment – they reflect that from which they are drawn. Their pre-sold qualities assure us familiarity and reinforce convention. Adorno has argued that all mass culture is fundamentally adaptation with “pre-digested” qualities that justify and reify its existence. “It is baby food: permanent self-reflection based upon the infantile compulsion towards the repetition of needs which it creates in the first place” (Bernstein1991:66).

As film historian Robert Sklar (1994) notes:

For the first half of the twentieth century – from 1896 to 1946, to be exact – movies were the most popular and influential medium of culture in the United States. They were the first of the modern mass media, and they rose to the surface of cultural consciousness from the bottom up, receiving their principal support from the lowest and most invisible classes in American society. (P. 3)

One can question if this still holds true today. Mass appeal is usually equated with low art, Adorno explains this is so because “the culture industry contains an element of rationality – the calculated reproduction of the low” (Bernstein1991:185). The art of the masses is not made by the masses but for the masses, and this is precisely the point of Hollywood, which now serves up the blockbuster as a more efficient, pervasive and economically profitable form of spectacle created with the intention of pleasing the most people and offending the least. One could argue there is active agency in selecting which “pleasing package” of entertainment to view but when we refer to the big blockbuster mainstream movies, we get a sense of what appeals to the masses and an understanding
of the broad brush strokes of mainstream American ideology.

Summary

The blockbuster movie is an economic phenomenon usually associated with the action genre, while the high concept film is more a promotion of style and lifestyle associated with advertising and music videos. The blockbuster and high concept film are the best representatives of the shift in production practices after the demise of the studio system. The cinematic mode of production has moved away from the rigid Fordist-factory-like studio structure to a "rhizomatic" post-Fordist system where deal-driven financing ventures between multiple entities situated within larger corporate networks with numerous media venues for distribution, exhibition, and tie-ins to related merchandising affect the form and style of the final product. The economic development of Hollywood presented in this chapter shows the dependence on the blockbuster and high concept films to carry the bottom line of the movie segment of large media conglomerates.

Technological advances have also enhanced the potential of spectacle by creating movies that move faster, make more noise, and cause more tension and sensation in the viewer. Plot, dialogue, and the elements of narrative have been sacrificed to spectacle. Spectacle easily lends itself to advertising — it is more marketable to secondary sources of revenue such as DVD sales and rentals, television, Pay TV, and cable; it is easily exported to overseas markets since it is not dependent upon social nuances specific to countries, regions or groups of people; and it lends itself to spin-offs, franchise merchandising, themeparks, computer games, toys, clothing and so on.

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The blockbuster and high concept films with their interconnectedness to advertising, spin-off merchandizing, computer games, etc. can be considered postmodern in terms of multi-media, self-referentiality and hyperrealism. The technological innovation of CGI adds another dimension of altered reality to the hyperreal. In this we can see that economics and technology play a large factor in determining the formal qualities of the movie and in turn how the form shapes the content and characters within. The system of production also manifests itself in sequels and remakes where pastiche, nostalgia and familiarity are used as means to attract audiences by repackaging old movies, TV series, and comic books. Standard and Poor’s predicts that baby boomer’s “nostalgia for the music and movies of the past is likely to remain a business driver for entertainment companies. To tap into this longing, companies periodically create new productions based on familiar characters or stories” (2003:10). As Jameson points out, pastiche represents the point where “stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles” (1998:132). However, the blockbuster spectacle is the “big draw” and there is a point when too much of the familiar undermines spectacle, so Hollywood looks to add in the more sensational, the strange, and the curious in order to revamp and modify the old. Most of the recent violent action heroines are pre-sold-blends of the successful action hero character with a computer generated character, comic book heroine, or an earlier TV action heroine.

Neither the blockbuster nor the high concept film are genres in themselves, rather they are examples of industry practices. The genre most represented and most profitable in this “New Hollywood” is the action genre (IMBD) and there are many sub-genres associated with it: action sequels; wire-fu (wire enhanced action); buddy action; and

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These sub-genres can be termed “diverse homogeneity”, i.e. more of the same only packaged a bit differently, and is achieved in the same manner as pastiche by using the old to create the new. The sub-genre of action heroine films stems from all the economic and technological determinants described above and it also includes some of the characteristics of the male action hero so prevalent and successful in the blockbuster. One might also refer to the action heroine as *bricolage* – where the oppositions of masculinity and femininity are relationally structured in a way that borrows characteristics from the male cinematic hero and combines them with characteristics of an ideologically acceptable American feminine mythos and wraps them up in a stylized “pre-sold” package for mass distribution and consumption. In this sense, the action-heroine genre has two histories: a shorter, economically and technologically determined history stemming from post-Fordism production practices and postmodern cultural influences which affects its form, and a longer and more pervasive socially-constructed history of gendered norms, roles and values that affects its content.

Men have always played the hero in movies and there is a large body of literature spanning decades which analyzes this phenomenon including Morella and Epstein’s *Rebels: the Rebel Hero in Films* (1971); Susan Jeffords’ *Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994); Fred Pfeils’s *White Guys* (1995); and Trice and Holland’s *Heroes, Antiheroes and Dots: Portrayals of Masculinity in American Popular Films* (2001).

Action heroes such as John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Bruce Willis, Clint Eastwood, and Mel Gibson play lawmen, cops and soldiers who protect society. They are real-life type characters portrayed in a reality-based society. Action heroines in contrast are not so real-
life or they exist in some futuristic society as evidenced by the characters of Lt. Ripley, *Catwoman, Lara Croft*, and *Æon Flux*.

The following chapter offers an explanation and evidence of why these unrealistic action heroines have developed. Using the original data derived from the content analysis, Chapter 5 will describe the characteristics, behaviors and tendencies of violence displayed by the violent female action character. The chapter will then focus upon violent action heroines and how they are related to female action characters in general with respect to content and how they are related to the changes in movie industry practices and changing modes of production with respect to form. Chapter 6 will use all the findings from this research in combination with the broader body of feminist film literature presented in Chapter 2 to develop a schema of violent women in film in order to provide a systematic and comprehensive way of understanding the various images and representations of violent women we encounter in American cinema.
The research findings to be presented in this chapter are twofold. First, the research analyzes violent women in action films, and secondly, the research narrows to focus specifically on the present day form of the violent action heroine.

The analysis utilizes descriptive methods such as data tabulations, frequency distributions, and trend analyses, and many of the findings are visually presented in tables and charts. Original data, relevant secondary statistical data, and information gained from literature reviews are used to help answer the four main sociological questions set forth initially as the goal of this research. The first two questions can be seen to deal with the present day characteristics of violent women in action films and how they broadly relate to gender norms, roles, and values. The third and fourth research questions focus on the movie industry’s modes of production and the historical forces that have influenced the form of the contemporary violent action heroine.

For clarity, research findings will be presented in two parts. Part 1 of this chapter relates to the demographics and behavioral characteristics of violent women in action films by examining the VFAC, a term specific to the purposes of the research and defined in Chapter 3. The findings employ original qualitative and quantitative data gathered from the content analysis and existing demographic data for descriptive purposes in order to create a general profile of violent women in action film. The content analysis tells us
much about the various representations of violent women in film and how they reflect and reinforce gender and other social inequalities. Existing secondary data is also incorporated in order to understand how accurately female action characters reflect present day U.S. social demographics.

The data gathered and presented in this part of the research indicate that there are three distinct types of VFACs: (1) the principal action heroine who is the central character of the movie and is not subordinate to a male-hero; (2) the supportive action character who is typically a helpmate or love interest to a male hero; and (3) the female villains. In total there are 158 VFACs comprised of 24 principal action heroines; 105 supportive action characters; and 29 female villains. The analysis of the various orientations of behavior of each type of female action character provides a deeper understanding of their similarities and differences. The focus of the research ultimately turns to the principal violent action heroine because it is this type of representation that feminist film theory has paid most attention to in recent years. In addition, the violent action heroine has taken a postmodern cultural turn since 2000 with its emphasis on form over content, spectacle over narrative, and cultural production reliant upon such postmodern notions as pastiche, parody, and the hyperreal. Also the action heroine calls attention to the economic practices of the “culture industry” generally and the movie industry specifically.

The distinction between VFAC as a broad category and violent action heroine as a sub-type becomes clear in Part 2 of this chapter which examines how movie industry practices, marketing strategies, profit motives, and changing technology have shaped and influenced this newest form of violent women in action films. Part 2 of this chapter relies

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heavily upon existing industry data and also connects back to the movie industry literature detailed in Chapter 4 regarding post-Fordist modes of production and postmodern cultural influences that contribute to the development of the contemporary action heroine.

Part I. VFAC Profile: Demographics and Orientations of Behavior

The findings begin by comparing demographic data gathered from the content analysis with existing social data gathered from various sources in order to shed light on how well representations of female action characters reflect the real social world and ultimately to create a profile of the VFAC. Distinct patterns emerge from the various representations, gendered stereotypes, and patterns of violence coded in the content analysis – some surprising, some not so surprising.

Marital status, race/ethnicity and sexual orientation. Eighty percent of the VFACs are single and 13 percent have children. Less than two percent are divorced and three percent are widowed. The marital status, while not representative of the overall U.S. female population, corresponds accurately to females aged 15 to 24 – in that age group 81 percent have never been married (U.S. Census 2000). VFACs are young too; over ninety percent are in their 20s or early 30s. Typically, the VFAC is young, single, and has no children, something her audience might be able to identify with since 57 percent of movie-goers are between the ages of 12 and 29 (Motion Picture Association 2005).
Figure 1 above illustrates the racial/ethnic composition of VFACs in relation to U.S. census data for 2000. VFAC demographics are as follows: white 74.5%; black or African American 9.5%; Asian 5.1%; and Hispanic 9.5%. U.S. Census Data shows: white 69.1%; black of African American 12.1%; Asian 3.6% and Hispanic 12.5%.

The most prevalent female star in for each VFAC racial/ethnic category is as follows: Uma Thurman (5) – white; Halle Berry (4) – African American; Michelle Rodriguez (3) – Hispanic; and Lucy Liu (2) – Asian. Other prevalent stars include Carrie-Anne Moss (3); Milla Jovovich (3); and Charlize Theron (3). Of those African American VFACs, every fourth one is played by Halle Berry.

With respect to sexual orientation, the majority of the VFACs are romantically involved with male characters, and the rest are not romantically linked, with one exception and that is the lesbian VFAC character played by Queen Latifah in the movie *Set it Off* (1996).
Education and occupation. The education level of the VFAC is difficult to code since it is usually not mentioned in the story; therefore education is usually inferred by occupational status. Surprisingly, there are 18 VFACs that have Ph.D. status indicated by their title and/or occupation and this accounts for 11 percent of the VFAC population compared to .7 percent of U.S. female population (U.S. Census Data 2005). It is also inferred from occupational status that 24 percent of VFACs have college degrees which compares to 16.8 percent listed in U.S. Census Data (2005). Total percentage of employment cannot be calculated since many VFACs are unreal characters and exist in fantasy worlds; however, most VFACs had some form of job related to the role of their character and only five (3%) were shown as housewives.

It has been suggested that female representations of strong, independent, working women reflect social tensions of women's entry into the workforce and a perceived threat to men's job status (Pfeil 1995) or that they reflect an undermining of gendered norms (Haskell 1987). Historically, women's percentage of the total labor force increased from 39.6 percent in 1975 to 46.5 percent in 2005 (U.S. Bureau of Labor 2005). During these three decades the overall job growth for women has been fastest in managerial and professional specialty occupations increasing from 22 percent in 1975 to 45.9 percent in 2005 for managerial occupations, and from 45 percent in 1975 to 54.7 percent in 2005 for women in professional specialties (Wootton 1997; Bureau of Labor 2005). These real-world gains of women in the workforce are reflected in VFAC demographics since most of them are employed and also because there are numerous VFACs with Ph.D.s. This fact illustrates an ability to accept women in high-status occupations; however, all but one of
the Ph.D.s are helpmates to the main male hero in the movie, and while they may have a high-status position, they still play a subordinate role to the lead male character.

For all the advances that women have made in the workplace, the difference index which measures occupational segregation is still above 50 percent, which means that certain occupations remain highly gendered. Currently women make up the bulk of clerical support (79%), service industry (60%) and nearly all domestic service (95%), all of which are lower-wage occupations; and presently women earn only 81 cents on the dollar compared to men (Bureau of Labor 2005). The gender gap remains and a large percentage of Americans live within this gap which contains its own reinforcing ideology of gender inequality. Mainstream America is the reality with which the film industry must deal when creating a movie for mass consumption, and Hollywood generally tries to appeal to the widest possible audience by covering all bases while maintaining dominant and familiar social codes and gender roles. As the demographic data illustrates, the typical VFAC is a young, single, white female who has a job. Sometimes she has a high-status profession and is highly educated. On the surface, she appears to represent a social reality since her profile does not drastically conflict with social demographics and she especially reflects the demographics of her youth-oriented target audience. The VFAC also replicates gendered social hierarchies with her subordinate position to the male lead character, which is further substantiated by several measures of VFAC behavior which are described in the sections below.

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4 According to the Motion Picture Association, 57% of the total movie-goers are between the ages of 12 and 29 and there was a shift toward younger movie-goers in 2005.
Female Action Characters as Helpers

Table 1 below illustrates how often female action characters are depicted as helpmates to a male hero, thus reinforcing gender hierarchies. The supportive character also appears as a damsel-in-distress which provides motives for the male hero to overcome obstacles in order to save her. The data shows 58 percent of all VFACs hold a subordinate position to the male hero. Nineteen percent depict negative imagery of the evil female villain. In contrast, only 15 percent are shown as strong, capable action-heroines who are in charge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VFAC Types</th>
<th>Action Heroine</th>
<th>Supportive Action Character</th>
<th>Female Villain</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal Heroine</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assists Female Heroine</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assists Male Hero</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protected by Male Hero</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assists and Protected by Male Hero</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villain</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What this information tells us is that even though women may be physically tough, violent, and empowered on-screen, they are rarely depicted as the principal action heroine, and are most often relegated to a subordinate status to men, which reinforces the
status quo of gender inequality, or are portrayed in a negative manner as villainous characters.

Hollywood also manages to subtly reinforce gendered inequality by creating the almost-equal-but-subordinate VFAC. As mentioned above, 58 percent of the VFACs either assist the male hero and/or are protected by him. This data is combined with data obtained from another variable which measures VFAC equality with the male lead character resulting in the finding that of those VFACs who are subordinate to a male hero (58%), over a third (35%) of those still have significant input into the chain of events within the diegesis and are treated as an equal by the male. This may seem to be contradictory, yet it supports the notion that Hollywood tries to appeal to the widest possible audience by covering all bases while maintaining dominant and familiar social codes and gender roles. Hollywood also subscribes to dominant social codes regarding race and ethnicity in ways that are described below.

Race, Ethnicity, and Romance

Interracial romantic relationships rarely happen in mainstream Hollywood. It has been almost 40 years since Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967) but miscegenation remains a boundary that is rarely crossed. There are several specific instances in the sample where potential racial boundary crossing was presented within the diegesis and yet those boundaries were maintained in a manner that once again subtly reinforces existing social relations. The information was gathered incidentally and qualitatively from the content analysis and therefore it is interpretive in nature and is presented as such.
In The Long Kiss Goodnight (1996), Geena Davis' plays a character that has two personalities caused by amnesia: Samantha, the good school-teacher/mom (i.e. the Madonna) and Charlie, the aggressive and promiscuous CIA assassin (i.e. the whore). Samantha teams up with Samuel L. Jackson (Mitch) to help her find traces of her past so she can cure her amnesia. Mitch is characterized as an oversexed black male; however, he suppresses his sexual urges when the Charlie-personality emerges with a new hairdo, makeup, provocative clothing and tries to seduce him. Mitch rejects her advances and says he likes her better as Samantha; from that point on they remain “buddies” and Mitch turns into the standup guy and end up helping her save her child from the bad guys. In the end Charlie gives up her wicked ways and returns to small-town U.S.A. and her normative female roles as the good-mother and school-teacher, while Mitch receives fame and fortune for helping Charlie bring down the bad guys. The danger of the whore and the libidinous black man is erased with the happily-ever-after ending.

Denzel Washington (Hub), another standup guy, rejects the sexual advances made to him by Annette Bening (Elise) in The Siege (1998). She plays another too tough, too bitchy, too loose CIA operative. There are several references in the movie referring to her promiscuous nature and sexual activities. At one point Hub asks Elise “Is there anybody you haven’t slept with?” She even sleeps with the enemy by having a sexual affair with her Palestinian mole who infiltrates terrorist cells. Elise comes on to Hub, but he tells her no. Hub, the sexually restrained black man makes the right choice and becomes the hero, but Elise the wanton white woman who makes the wrong sexual choices ends up dying in the end.
Blade II (2000) has a symbolic sex scene where the vampire character Nyssa (Leonor Varela, an Hispanic actress) lets Blade who is also a vampire (Wesley Snipes) suck her blood in order to give him energy and bring him back to health. But Nyssa dies in the end in a suicidal gesture as Blade holds her in his arms with the golden glow of the morning sun shining upon her body while she disintegrates into an airy-dust – a poetic ending for the metaphoric mixing of blood.

Halle Berry who is considered and self-identifies as African American is an exception to the interracial boundaries of Hollywood. In Catwoman (2004) Berry’s character has sex with Benjamin Bratt’s character Tom, but the two do not end up together. Likewise, her character Jinx has non-committal sex with James Bond in the most recent 007 movie Die Another Day (2002). In the X-Men movies, Halle Berry plays Storm. Her character is de-racialized with straight white hair and eyes that turn blue with the power of a storm emanating from them, and her sexuality is downplayed by her lack of a love partner, even though she wears a tight black-leather outfit. X-Men, like all of the other huge blockbusters, does not cross the racial divide when it comes to sex.

The cast and characters in contemporary action films appear at first glance to be diverse and egalitarian with respect to gender, race, and ethnicity. Action films even go so far as to include alien species, yet social inequalities and existing barriers are reified in spite of and due to the diversity depicted. The white male hero of the most successful action blockbusters reigns supreme even in the diverse soup of his universe with the hero-Jedi Luke Skywalker in Star Wars, the wise and omniscient Gandolf in Lord of the Rings, and the chosen one Neo in Matrix. The boundary maintenance of interracial romantic
relations is just another part of a larger white hetero-patriarchy that plays itself out in Hollywood blockbusters (Modleski 1991; hooks 1992; Pfeil 1995; Dyer 1997).

_Happily Ever After and Other Hollywood Clichés_

Most VFACs are young, single, white females and therefore good material for plots stemming from a white hetero-patriarchal cinema. Table 2 illustrates that the VFAC is most often romantically involved with a male character and the plot focuses on the love relationship and provides the storyline with typical male motives for aggression such as protection, jealousy, and sexual competition. Only 47 (30%) of VFACs are not romantically involved with a male character in the action movies of this sample many of them are principal action heroines. The traditional form of action-genre centers on the male action hero wherein the hero lives and the bad guy dies and Table 2 below illustrates this formula. Sixty-six VFACs (42%) serve as a love interest to the primary male hero, and by the end of the movie most of those couples stay together or even get married. The data shows that it is the proverbial happily-ever-after ending for the hero.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fate of Relationship</th>
<th>Male Hero</th>
<th>Bad Guy</th>
<th>Other Male</th>
<th>Love Interest</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VFAC’s lover dies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VFAC and lover part</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VFAC and lover stay together</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VFAC and lover marry</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total count of love interest</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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This finding again supports the notion that most violent female action characters are written into the story in a subordinate position to support the lead male character. Traditional story plots of good versus evil remain with bad guys who die; typically these bad guys are romantically involved with a female villain and she usually dies too.

*Why did Thelma and Louise have to Die?*

Bad girls have to die – that is a standard formula in the moral world of Hollywood. Thelma and Louise however are morally ambiguous as good girls gone bad; but they are still the primary action heroines in the film. In Hollywood, unlike most male heroes, action heroines can die – in fact a lot of female action characters die.

![Figure 2. VFAC Deaths](image)

Figure 2 above illustrates the percentages of deaths for the three types of female action characters. Four principal action heroines are killed off (17%), including Thelma and Louise (1991), Meg Ryan’s character Captain Walden in *Courage under Fire* (1996) and Sigourney Weaver’s character Ripley in *Alien*³ (1992) who comes back as a clone in
the following sequel; 22 supportive action characters die (21%); and 23 female villains (79%). In total, 49 or nearly one-third of all VFACs are killed off in the story.

The reasons for the supportive action character’s deaths are varied. A few die saving society such as Annette Bening’s character Elise Kraft in *The Siege* (1998) who in an almost suicidal heroic attempt stops a terrorist from blowing up New York City and gets shot in the process, however as described above she tried to cross the racial barrier by coming on to the character Hub, played by Denzel Washington. In *X-2* (2003), Famke Janssen’s character Dr. Jean Grey dies when she uses her superpowers to hold back surging water from a broken damn to allow her fellow X-men, including the male hero Wolverine, to escape and subsequently they save the world. Most of the VFACs die because they are dispensable helpmates to the male hero or because they add an emotional element of sorrow and empathy for the hero as the VFAC dies in his arms: Trinity dies in Neo’s arms in *Matrix Revolution* (2003); Princess Valerious dies (at the hands of and) in the arms of Van Helsing (2004); Dizzy dies in Johnny’s arms in *Starship Troopers* (1997); and Nyssa dies in Blades arms in *Blade II* (2002). This finding contributes to the pattern of subordinate and dispensable female action characters used primarily to promote the actions of the male hero; and in so doing the tough, ass-kicking, gun-toting, female representations negate the power that they purport and portray.

To sum up so far, the profile of the typical VFAC is a young, single, white female who on the surface appears to represent a social reality, but she really maintains traditional gender hierarchies in her subordinate role to men (Haskell 1987); reinforces racial boundaries (hooks 1992; Dyer 1997) promotes heteronormative relations (Modleski 1982; DeLauretis 1984); and reifies hegemonic beauty standards (Stacey 1994;
Dyer 2004). In short, the violent female action character ends up recreating dominant social codes. The violence that the VFAC partakes in only veils the subtext of the white hetero-patriarchy that her characteristics and orientations of behavior support.

*Tendencies of Violence*

The data from the content analysis show that VFACs are becoming more violent over the 15-year period covered in the sample. In total, 786 violent scenes were analyzed in the content analysis. An increasing trend of violence was anticipated and the findings support this presumption. The question arises as to whether this increase corresponds to an increase in real-world violent criminal behavior. Crime on a national level has decreased dramatically over the past decade, and last year in 2004 it hits its lowest level in 30 years. There has been a ten percent increase in female arrests for violent crimes for the 15-year period from 1991 to 2005; a 4.5 percent increase for the ten-year period from 1996 to 2005; and a 3.5 percent increase for the five year period from 2001 to 2005 (FBI Uniform Crime Report 2005). What this trend shows is that although female crime has increased over the past 15 years, the increase has slowed.

Figure 3 below shows that total seconds of violence recorded for each scene in the sample has increased, ranging from under 1,000 seconds in the early-90s to over 3,000 seconds at its highest in 2003. The trend line indicates a nearly 25 percent increase in VFAC violence depicted. It should be noted that this research makes no claims of causation for the correlation of increasing real female violence to increasing fictional violence.
The number of movies made that contain a VFAC has also increased over the past fifteen years, ranging from five movies per year in the early-90s to the high of 14 movies in 2003. (See Figure 4.)

While movies with a VFAC are becoming more prevalent and displaying more violence overall, a different finding emerged that actually was problematic for coding purposes. The quantity of violent scenes has increased, as would be expected, but the length of each scene has decreased (see Figures 5 and 6).

---

5 Figures 3, 4, and 5 include linear regression trend lines to help illustrate the increasing tendency of VFAC violence. These trends are positively affected by the increase in the number of action movies made in 2003 that contain VFACs. All of the trend lines are used for illustrative purposes only and do not have predictive ability.
The content analysis revealed that the violent scenes of the early 1990s were usually comprised of a single camera shot or a montage of a very few. By the late 90s, editing had changed to a much faster pace, jump and cut style, where the VFAC would be shown fighting, then the scene would switch and a separate shot of a different person, usually a male hero fighting someone else, would be edited in, then the scene would switch back to the VFAC still engaging in a fight or even moving on to a different encounter. This style is also known as discontinuous montage editing and with technological advances of digital editing, it is has become easier and less costly to accomplish.

It is clear that the technological advances in movie production effect both form and content. As the literature in Chapter 4 establishes, with the advent of computer-generated images (CGI) bigger and better explosions happen, longer and more intricate car chases occur, and people fly through the air, scale walls, and jump from building to building on rooftops – all unrealistic, death-defying feats.

Along with the CGI ability to display chaos, destruction, and fantasy the data indicates that VFACs use more high-tech weaponry now such as lasers and computer guided weaponry. The VFACs use of hand-to-hand combat as the sole means of violence decreased; however, this is most likely due to the combination of martial arts with the use of non-firearm weapons such as numb-chucks, knives, swords that are increasingly common in action movies. While the use of guns did not change, the purpose for and effects of using guns changed from aiming at an individual to blowing away a whole group of bad guys, which is supported by the variable measuring the VFAC’s scale of destruction.
The amount of destruction caused by the VFAC is measured on a scale from 0 - 7, zero being none and seven being destruction on a science-fiction level of whole planets or galaxies (see Codebook, Appendix B). The findings indicate that incidents of lower level destruction declined and this includes: property damage, individual injury, and individual death, while incidents of group injuries, multiple deaths, and extensive destruction increased. This change is to be expected with overall increases in violence and further indicates a switch from interpersonal one-on-one acts of violence to participation in group violence where the VFAC engages in combat with multiple persons, often teamed-up with a male hero.

This group or team-oriented violence is more indicative of traditional male violence in the sense of policing, military, and other coercive forms of social control (Enloe 2000). However, higher end levels of destruction rarely occurred; this includes large groups of people (20 or more) injured with large scale destruction such as blowing up planes or boats, or even higher levels of destruction which includes destroying cities, large spacecraft, or planets. These costly and spectacular scenes may have been saved for the male hero; however male violence was not coded in the research so that assertion cannot be substantiated.

In the early 1990s the VFAC was more likely to be the initiator of violence, that is, she made the first strike. The coding process looked specifically at who threw the first punch so to speak, regardless of the impending threat. The fact that more recently VFACs decreased in being the first to attack can be interpreted in different ways that are not mutually exclusive. The more contemporary VFAC is able to take a punch and still come back fighting, and this was not always the case. In the earlier movies the VFAC usually
had to hit first and this might be due to some residual chivalry of boys-don’t-hit-girls or adherence to gendered stereotypes of women being weaker than men.

The primary target of the VFAC is a male or group of males 59 percent of the time, and each VFAC’s main enemy in the movie is a male 59 percent of the time. Clearly men and women are pitted against each other in action movies; however, it must be remembered that since the majority of VFACs are assisting the male hero, they have common enemies. More recently alien life forms have become the target and enemy, and aliens also initiate violence more often. The VFAC has changed from being the initiator of violence to acting violently out of self-defense, often being chased by some alien creature, genetically-modified monster, or some other computer-generated image.

The original intent of the research was to focus on the VFAC’s motives for violent behavior in order to find out if the character engaged in gendered roles and norms by trying to save her loved ones or her children – motives that would be deemed traditionally “feminine” and related to a “feminine ethic of care” (Gilligan 1982). In addition, with the anticipated increase in violence, it was also predicted that there would be a rise in the VFAC engaging in traditionally “masculine” motives such as protecting citizens and society relating to justice, law and civil protection (Woods 1996) since she appeared to be more aggressive and taking on roles involving authority. However, these suppositions are proved inaccurate. The trends in both “feminine” and “masculine” motives for violence have decreased while the trend in the motive of self-defense has increased; escape as a motive has decreased slightly (see Figure 7).
In summary, female action characters are becoming more violent in several ways. They are using more high-tech weaponry and their level of destruction is higher. They are engaging in more team-oriented violence as opposed to individual aggression. They are initiating violence less, and defending themselves more, often as a result of fighting multiple attackers at a time. Their motives of protecting a loved one, family member or child are waning as they engage in more group combat with alien creatures and other unrealistic life forms.

The increase in violence accompanied by the decrease in length of violent scenes indicates changes in editing styles supported by the digital advances in technology. The increase in unrealistic targets, high-tech weaponry and scale of destruction are also facilitated by technological advances in CGI. The new digital technologies create change in both form and content of the movies, and affect the characters, narrative, and spectacle of the action genre. It becomes clear that changing modes of production in the movie industry have had a significant impact of the representations of female characters in action films. The representations of violent women in action films are a commercial
product created for a mass audience by a profit-driven industry, therefore these representations also reflect mainstream social attitudes and gender norms, and they represent existing social relations and inequalities. They reinforce the status quo because the industry that creates them wants to appeal to the most people and make the most money (Sklar 1994; King 2002). In addition, the appeal of the action blockbuster is the spectacle which is the *sine qua non* of the big-screen event, and Hollywood constantly looks to raise the level of spectacle to induce the masses to watch. This is simple economics. Therefore, the trends of violence for the female action characters are best explained by employing a critical approach in analyzing box office data and statistics from industry reports in addition to the utilizing the information gathered from the movie industry literature review. The research now turns to the industry to understand what changes have occurred that currently affect the representations we see of violent women in action films.

*Part II. Movie Industry and the Violent Action Heroine*

The VFAC profile and orientations of behavior as described in Part 1 provide a starting point for further analysis of violent action heroines. The majority of the action films in the sample are traditionally male-oriented films with the token female action character added in for reasons of support or love interest. Only 19 percent can be categorized as true action-heroine films and these films belong to what is known as the “action-heroine sub-genre.”
Box Office and the Action-Heroine Sub-Genre

According to BoxOfficeMojo.com 48 movies are included in the action-heroine sub-genre, 23 of which are represented in the sample for this research. The difference between the research sample and the action-heroine sub-genre list provided by BoxOfficeMojo.com is due to the movie’s failure to meet box-office success criteria; the time period of release date between 1991 and 2005; and the omission of action movies that are cross-listed as comedies, since the sample for this research only includes successful action movies that are not also categorized as comedies. Unfortunately, the omission of action-heroine films which are cross-listed as comedies proved to be a mistake since these particular types of action-heroine movies are highly successful. These movies will be addressed later in the chapter.

On the following page, Table 3 below lists action-heroine movies in chronological order and includes lifetime box office gross. The Motion Picture Association breaks the top-grossing movies into three tiers: top tier grossing over $100 million; the middle tier grossing between $50 and $100 million; and the bottom tier grossing between $30 and $50 million (2005). In general, action-heroine sub-genre films are not big box office hits. One-third of the films earned under $20 million and fell below the national average of box office gross for new releases⁶. The highest grossing movie listed in Table 3 is Terminator 2 at $205 million; however, the success is attributable to the starring role of Arnold Schwarzenegger and not the co-starring role of Linda Hamilton.

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⁶ According to the Motion Picture Association, yearly box office averages for all new releases are as follows (in millions): 2001 - $18.2; 2002 - $21.2; 2003 - $20.7; 2004 - $20; 2005 - $15.8.
Table 3. Action-Heroine Sub-Genre and Box Office Lifetime Gross

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Life Time Box Office Gross</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>La Femme Nikita*</td>
<td>$5,017,971</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thelma and Louise</td>
<td>$45,360,915</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminator 2: Judgment Day</td>
<td>$204,843,345</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.I. Warshawski*</td>
<td>$11,128,309</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alien 3</td>
<td>$55,473,545</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffy the Vampire Slayer*</td>
<td>$16,624,456</td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point of No Return</td>
<td>$30,038,362</td>
<td>1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad Girls*</td>
<td>$15,240,435</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Quick and the Dead*</td>
<td>$18,636,537</td>
<td>1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tank Girl*</td>
<td>$4,064,495</td>
<td>1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutthroat Island*</td>
<td>$10,017,322</td>
<td>1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb Wire*</td>
<td>$3,793,614</td>
<td>1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courage Under Fire</td>
<td>$59,031,057</td>
<td>1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Long Kiss Goodnight</td>
<td>$33,447,612</td>
<td>1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fifth Element</td>
<td>$63,820,180</td>
<td>1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.I. Jane</td>
<td>$48,169,156</td>
<td>1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alien Resurrection</td>
<td>$47,795,658</td>
<td>1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Avengers</td>
<td>$23,384,939</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc*</td>
<td>$14,276,317</td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie's Angels</td>
<td>$125,305,545</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon</td>
<td>$128,078,872</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Congeniality</td>
<td>$106,807,667</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lara Croft: Tomb Raider</td>
<td>$131,168,070</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars</td>
<td>$8,709,640</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident Evil</td>
<td>$40,117,322</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballistic: Ecks vs. Sever*</td>
<td>$14,307,963</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle</td>
<td>$100,830,111</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life</td>
<td>$65,660,196</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underworld</td>
<td>$51,970,690</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kill Bill Vol. 1</td>
<td>$70,099,045</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kill Bill Vol. 2</td>
<td>$66,208,183</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Arthur</td>
<td>$51,882,244</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catwoman</td>
<td>$40,202,379</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident Evil: Apocalypse</td>
<td>$51,201,453</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blade: Trinity</td>
<td>$52,411,906</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elektra</td>
<td>$24,409,722</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Congeniality 2: Armed and Fabulous</td>
<td>$48,478,006</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serenity</td>
<td>$25,154,517</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domino*</td>
<td>$10,169,202</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aeon Flux</td>
<td>$25,877,366</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To put this into perspective, excluding Terminator 2 (which really belongs to the traditional male-oriented action-genre) the lifetime gross of all 40 action-heroine sub-
genre totals under $2 billion. Contrast that figure to the box office gross for the six *Star Wars* movies that earned $2.2 billion, which does not take into account the huge revenues from spin-off merchandising, and it is clear that the action-heroine sub-genre movies are just not the stuff of blockbusters.

This relative lack of box office success has shaped the course of both the action-heroine sub-genre and the violent action heroines in them. Another look at Table 3 and it will become clear that beginning in the year 2000 the action-heroine sub-genre began to earn more money and therefore more action-heroine movies were made. A change occurred in the types of action heroines depicted with the revival of the 1970s TV series characters of *Charlie’s Angels* in 2000, and the (re)creation of the videogame character of *Lara Croft* in 2001. An important finding in the research is that the success of these two films altered the form of action heroines going forward to present day. Instead of portraying realistic VFACs described in Part 1 of this chapter, the movie industry opted for the more successful unrealistic, futuristic beings that a female spectator can neither identify with nor use as a role model for empowerment. The lack of realistically plausible female imagery driven by film industry economics further augments the position of this research that mainstream cinema reinforces normative gender codes – now it does so by offering up cartoonish and virtual constructs of sexuality and aggression, by emphasizing form and spectacle, and de-emphasizing content and narrative.

*Genesis of the Postmodern Action Heroine*

Movies with action heroines in low budget films like *Red Sonja, Sheena,* and *Supergirl* made an appearance in the mid-80s. Other examples of physically violent
women in early movies include Russ Meyer's soft-core porn, women-gone-wild, cult films of the 70s, and the cult-classic, rape-revenge movie *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), but these fringe movies were never successful in relation to mainstream action movies.

With the exceptions of *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986) no other action-heroine movie was remotely successful prior to 1991 when Linda Hamilton stepped up with her hard-bodied, militaristic, mother role in *Terminator 2* and helped to solidify the type of action heroine prevalent in the 1990s who is physically strong, emotionally tough, and competent without being hyper-sexualized or completely unrealistic. Also in 1991, Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis broke gendered stereotypes with their unruly and unlawful behavior while on the lamb after killing a would-be rapist in *Thelma and Louise*. Throughout the 90s we saw the likes of Demi Moore as a tough Navy Seal in *G.I. Jane* (1997), Meg Ryan as a capable and noble army captain who saves the soldiers under her command in *Courage Under Fire* (1996); and Bridget Fonda and Geena Davis as government-trained assassins who fight and kill without remorse in *Point of No Return* (1993) and *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996) respectively. No doubt the star power involved in these films made them box office draws, but even at their average box office take of approximately $45 million they all fall far short of the top action blockbusters which make well over $100 million (see Table 3 for a list of action heroine movies and box office gross).

A perception study of the viewing of action heroines by adolescents reveals young men and women are more apt to value “traditionally … feminine characteristics, such as

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physical attractiveness, nurturance, compassion and using the mind over the sword” (Calvert et al. 2001:51). The finding of the perception study supports the claims made regarding the characteristics and behaviors of the violent action heroine in this research. Since the target audience for the action genre is young males and females, it is reasonable to conclude that Hollywood has figured out that the traditionally feminine characteristics described above need to be included in the construction of the contemporary action heroine.

When the action genre needed some innovation and new blood, bringing in the kick-ass woman might have seemed a good marketing strategy that also rectified the problem of Lara Mulvey’s (1975) “gaze” by satisfying the women in the audience who view action films, as well as appealing to men who like to look at pretty women. From the female spectator’s point of view there is a strong and empowering female character on-screen for her to identify with and from the male spectator’s point of view there is the possible fetishization of the aggressive heroine (Tasker 1998; Rowe-Karlyn 2003; Brown 2005). However, these particular types of realistic action heroines did not last long.

_From Army Boots to High Heels_

Realistic action heroines began to wane by the late-90s because these types of violent female representations simply do not have big box office appeal. Watching Demi Moore or Sigourney Weaver with their shaved heads, dirty faces, and army fatigues can be a bit over the top for women to identify with or for men to fetishize. Hollywood came up with two new strategies, both of which made her more unrealistic and more profitable. First, they dressed the girls up, made them sexy again and their violence became almost
slapstick as they jumped and kicked in their high heels and joked about fashion while fighting. In 2000, the not-to-be-taken-seriously action girls in *Charlie's Angels* were a huge box office success making over $100 million in both the original movie and the sequel. This type of VFAC can be termed a “parodic” action heroine since she is for the most part a satire of female physical aggression and empowerment; she acts “girlie” even as she kicks and punches her way through the movie. As film critic Jeffrey Anderson explains in his review of *Charlie’s Angels*, “We're dealing with three super-babes who have been heavily trained in everything from paratrooping to race car driving to *Matrix* like slo-mo kung-fu. Plus they can cook and dance. Plus they're gorgeous. So anything goes” (2000:1). This parodic category includes other successful movies such as the *Kill Bill* movies and the *Miss Congeniality* movies, all of which poke fun at gender roles and norms within the context of the story by depicting extreme physical aggression and violence while paradoxically reinforcing normative gender codes.

Second, Hollywood drew upon a virtual character and created the “hyperreal” action heroine of *Lara Croft*. The movie *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) is the most successful action-heroine ever released (BoxOfficeMojo.com). Her character can be understood as the prototype of the current generation of hyperreal heroines. She is a blend of traditional, masculine, action-hero behavioral traits combined with hegemonic feminine beauty, and enhanced with a high degree of unrealistic qualities using CGI technology.

The character *Lara Croft* began as a computer-generated image and Angelina Jolie was selected to match the image. In this case the real adapted to the virtual instead of vice versa. The success of *Lara Croft* set the stage for the latest trend of virtual imagery dominating the action-heroine genre and has been quickly taken up by other hyperreal...
heroines including Cherlize Theron as *Aeon Flux* derived from an MTV anime series, Milla Jovovich in the *Resident Evil* movies, and Kate Beckinsale in the *Underworld* movies. The movie *Resident Evil* stems from the 1996 videogame *Biohazard*, and after box office success the movie was then again turned into another videogame called *Resident Evil*. The movie *Underworld* was also turned into a videogames after box office release which continues to blur the distinction between real, virtual and hyperreal and interconnects various sources of media.

The hyperreal heroine, more than the parodic, relies upon computer-generated imagery to create her character. It is her formal qualities brought about by the latest digital technologies that are of most importance. Figure 8 below illustrates the decline in realism over the past decade and a half for violent female action characters in general.

![Figure 8. Percentage of Realistic, Unrealistic and Partially Unrealistic VFACs 1991-2005](image)

The data for the figure above comes from a variable in the content analysis which codes the realism of the VFAC on a three-point scale. The realism variable is defined in the coding instructions as follows: Real means a regular human being; real with
unrealistic qualities means a regular human being who has extraordinary abilities (such as spectacular martial arts skills like Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill*); unreal means a being that could not really exist (like Kate Beckinsale in *Underworld* who is part vampire). In Figure 8 above, the three degrees of realism are shown as a percentage of total VFAC characters for each year.

*The Parodie and Hyperreal*

The parodic and the hyperreal heroines that stemmed from *Charlie’s Angels* and *Lara Croft* respectively are both related to the postmodern concept of pastiche since they rely on old aesthetic forms and, as Jameson (1991) suggests, imitate dead styles. Hollywood calls it “pre-sold” qualities and, whether postmodern or post-Fordist, the common practice now is to use the old to create the new. By the end of the 90s the overall trend in the research sample was to revive and revise the old. Before 2000, 44 percent of the movies came from original screenplays; between 2000 and 2005 only 24 percent were original screenplays. Overall, 65 percent of the movies in the sample stem from previous or alternate media, including movies, remakes, TV series, comic books, novels, and video games. As Chapter 4 explains, Hollywood draws upon the pre-sold and the familiar to maximize profits (Sklar 1994; Wyatt 1994; King 2002).

The unrealistic character of the new action heroine and the fantasy nature of the movie she appears in also facilitates spin-off merchandise such as clothing, toys, videogames and so on. The 1990s realistic female action characters did not translate well into merchandise, even the G.I. Jane doll was a short-lived product and only made in 1997, the year the movie was released (Enloe 2000). In contrast, the unrealistic and
futuristic characters of the *Alien* movies ultimately resulted in the joining of two huge action-film, make-believe critters, the Alien and the Predator, which resulted in yet another pastiche movie in 2004 called *Alien vs. Predator*, with its own official website, numerous videogames, comics, toys, music, collectibles, art and so on. The unreal characters are easier to package and sell as spin-off merchandise. The reliance upon the futuristic quality of the Ripley character links the past to the present and informs the postmodern versions of action heroines.

Using data from BoxOfficeMojo, which includes box office statistics for the parodic action heroines as well, Figure 9 below illustrates a lower box office gross per movie for the 1990s realistic action heroines than for the newest action heroines beginning in 2000. In 2000, *Charlie’s Angels* was a huge box office hit earning over $125 million and in 2001 *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* brought in over $131 million. The success of these newest types of action heroines, one parodic and the other hyperreal, dramatically changed the representations and imagery of action-heroines from 2000 to present-day.

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*Data for the two variables, movies and box office gross, were determined as percentages per year of the total sum for each variable, i.e. 32 movies and $1.9 billion. The y-axis represents the percentage of the total for each variable, and the y-intercept for each variable illustrates the comparison between the two.*

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To re-cap the genesis of the action heroine to her present-day form, we see her evolve from early “girlie” action characters in TV series of the 1970s and 1980s, and from the fringe and cult films of the same period where she was portrayed as an unrealistic warrior woman or a hyper-sexualized “Vixen”\(^9\) who used violence as part of her sexual allure, to the realistic action-heroine of the 1990s that reflected an increasing occupational equality with men and implied the threat of an emerging social reality. After 2000, we find parodic and hyperreal heroines who are indicative of postmodern cultural sensibilities including: a pastiche of re-created nostalgic versions of mass culture favorites stemming from a media-saturated society; hyperreal characters that originate in virtual space and become the (un)reality to imitate; intertextual and self-referential media collaboration which builds upon and reinforces its own cultural space; and a changing visual aesthetic based in fantasy and spectacle which can be easily transformed into a diverse array of commodities conducive to spin-off merchandising.

\textit{On-screen Escapism}

Spectacle is a distinct aesthetic form that the movie industry has relied upon since its inception. The “train effect” discussed in Chapter 4 suggests the effect of spectacle to both alter the audience’s perception of reality and physically impact the senses. Spectacle has always been one of the movie industry’s greatest assets and it has relied upon it through the tough years of the Great Depression (Sklar 1994; King 2002) and through the dwindling audience attendance since the invention of television (Sklar 1994; King 2002) – for it is the environment of the movie theater that provides the spectacle and big screen event which is hard to replicate even in the best home-media system (Motion Picture

\(^9\) A reference to Russ Meyer’s films \textit{Vixen} (1968) and \textit{Supervixens} (1975).
Association 2005). With the latest digital technology, computer generated images, and digitized sound the audience can literally be blasted out of their seats.

The movies are also equated with a form of escapism and it is widely thought that the reason the movie industry sustained itself through the Great Depression is because they offered the masses a reprieve from their misery (Sklar 1994). Now the action film offers allegorical escape instead of escapism. Referencing Figure 7 above, the data show that traditionally gendered motives for violence have decreased over the past 15 years, while motives for violence based on self-defense have risen. This finding supports the idea put forth in Chapter 4 that narrative is increasingly being sacrificed to spectacle. The hero and heroine now engage in a constant stream of fighting bad guys and monsters, dodging bullets, jumping out of windows, and being pursued at high speeds while driving the wrong direction on a freeway. It is a constant chase and they are incessantly reacting to something or someone. The allegory transposes to metaphor when one understands film as a reflection of society – the obstacles of the hero and heroine may reflect the daily frustrations and stress of people’s lived experience.

The metaphor is subsumed into the audio-visual impact of the action-packed violent spectacle itself where the spectator engages in flight or fight responses to what he or she sees on-screen. Recent studies that use functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain scans reveal that although cognitively the viewer understands that the violence on-screen is fantasy, at a pre-cognitive level their brains respond to the visual stimuli as a real threat. The same area of the brain that registers fear and triggers increased heart-rate and emotional arousal (right amygdala) is activated when watching violent movie scenes (Murray et al. 2006). In addition, the part of the brain that is implicated in posttraumatic
stress disorder (posterior cingulate) is also activated when watching violent scenes. The negative assumption implied in the fMRI research is that the viewer actively processes the images and stores the aggressive and emotional responses as “scripts” that are readily available to draw upon (Murray et al. 2006). This research takes a neutral stand regarding the long-disputed argument that watching media violence leads to real-world violent behavior (Blumer 1933; Gerbner 1969, 2003; U.S. Senate 1999; Huesmann 1999).

However, the “heart-pounding” effects of action movies turns into a selling point for Hollywood – the more exciting the better. The audience is young and they want the thrill of the spectacle. Over eighty percent of males under 25 think that viewing a movie in the theater is the “ultimate viewing experience” (Motion Picture Association 2005). Last year, the number of moviegoers aged 50 and over decreased by 5 million viewers, while the age group 12-24 grew by almost 12 million viewers (Motion Picture Association 2005). It is easy to see where the parodic and hyperreal action heroines fit into this Hollywood strategy for success.

Summary

The most obvious finding from the research is that violent female action characters who are principal action heroines in action-heroine sub-genre films are relatively rare, and the reason is that economically speaking they are not blockbuster material. Women in action films serve as helpmates and love interests most of the time which reinforces traditional gender roles and norms. Essentially, women are not represented as the saviors and protectors of society, and women in action films typically do not subscribe to traditional male-hero qualities.
The movie industry tries to tap into the American psyche in order to give the mass audience what is most appealing and least offensive, therefore gender, racial, and sexual-orientation boundaries are not crossed, and the status quo of existing social relations is propagated and re-presented (Hall 1993). The white-hetero patriarchy of cinematic representations that dominates mainstream movies has been a major criticism by many feminists and film theorists including Teresa deLauretis (1984, 2000); Richard Dyer (1997, 2002); Stuart Hall (1973, 1993, 1997); bell hooks (1992, 1996); and Tania Modleski (1982, 1991) to name an important few, and the data gathered here supports their positions.

Violence by women in action films has increased and this was a predictable finding. However, while all of these tendencies of violence suggest the masculinization of female action characters, all of the other behavioral characteristics outlined above undermine the assumption that the VFAC is a “figurative male” (Clover 1992). Instead, her violence is better understood from an economic and technological perspective rather than from feminist perspectives which tout empowerment (McCaughey 2001), gender fluidity (Hills 1999; Brown 2005), and “Grrrl Power” (Rowe-Karlyn 2003).

Hollywood found a working formula which ultimately revised the realistic 1990s female action character into a negation of physical strength and power by using over-exaggerated and unrealistic physical aggression and incorporating computer graphic imagery to ultimately replace reality with fantasy. One can read into the increasing unrealism of the violent woman the denial of female power in its basest, most threatening form. A realistic woman physically challenging and conquering a realistic man did not pay off well for Hollywood in the 1990s because this imagery constituted a transgression.
of gendered norms. As realism diminishes so too does the reality of societal boundaries and hence there is no transgression. The new imagery is acceptable in its implausibility. Paul Piccone refers to type of artificial creation of opposition as “artificial negativity” (1978:46). The same social mechanisms that operate to subsume distinction and difference under one umbrella and have liberated sexuality and aggressiveness in the name of libidinal freedom (Marcuse 1964), have also adopted and adapted old imagery and representations into a less offensive pap. We may think we are getting a strong dose of the liberated female in a rough and tumble action-heroine image, but instead we are getting the watered down version – watered down with altered reality.

The movie industry also combined the unreal with nostalgia for past movies and TV series. As Adorno presciently perceived “...the average film now boasts of its similarity with the successful prototype ... the pre-digested quality of the product prevails, justifies itself and establishes itself all the more firmly in so far as it constantly refers to those who cannot digest anything not already pre-digested”(Bernstein 1991:67). In the same vein, when the 1990s realistic female action characters failed, Hollywood looked backward to the pre-digested feminized heroines that were televised in the 1970s and 1980s and revived the parodic and softly-sexualized forms of the tough chick ala Catwoman, The Avengers, and Charlie’s Angels and Wonder Woman. These findings show that as violence increases, so too do the unrealistic representations of female action characters. This positive correlation can be explained using two different sets of assumptions. First, relating back to the findings described in the first part of this chapter, from a feminist perspective it appears that representations of female violence and aggression must be modified as to negate any realistic social threat.

10 The movie Wonder Woman, directed by Joss Whedon, is scheduled for release in 2007.
or major upheaval of gendered roles and norms. Second, relying upon the findings described in the second part of this chapter, from an economic and technological perspective the formal qualities of the contemporary action heroine have been driven by blockbuster logic, profit motive, and digital technology. The first perspective addresses content and the second addresses form. And so it is this tension between content and form that exists in the postmodern action heroine which presents the theoretical problem of situating these latest manifestations of violent female imagery within the scope of a postmodern feminist logic since gender binaries are still present and reinforced, albeit in a subversive manner.

Next, Chapter 6 provides an overarching schema which refers back to the literature review in Chapter 2 and outlines the major contributions by feminist film theorists on the subject of violent women in film. It will describe the different types of representations that are highly referenced in film literature including Carol Clover’s “Final Girl”, Barbara Creed’s “Monstrous Mother” and various interpretations of the *femme fatale*. The schema provides different orientations with which to think about violent women in film and includes a description of the violent action heroine as analyzed in the present research.
CHAPTER 6

SCHEMA OF VIOLENT WOMEN IN FILM

A goal of this research is to develop a schema of the various representations of violent women in film and trace their relationships to each other through the theoretical constructs offered up by several major contributors to feminist film theory. The schema can then be used as reference guide for feminist film literature and a heuristic tool in order to examine the various filmic representations of violent women and provide a way of thinking about the genesis and evolution of violent women in film and their relation to overarching patriarchal socio-economic structures and cultural influences.

The schema includes such influential feminist film theorists as Mary Anne Doane, Barbara Creed, Carol Clover, and Jacinda Read, all of whom are represented in the literature review of Chapter 2 and their theoretical constructs of: the femme fatale, the Monstrous Mother, the Final Girl, and the Rape-Avenger, respectively. These particular constructs are chosen because they are important, well-known, and cited often in film literature and also because they situate violent female representation within two distinct categories of phallocentric use value: sex and reproduction.

The schema also includes the construct of violent action heroines as a contribution of this research. The violent action heroine does not neatly fit into the sex and reproduction categories ascribed to the other constructs. Instead it borrows from them and adds another layer of masculinized violence into the mix along with economic and postmodern cultural
influences which have helped to create the types of violent action heroines analyzed in Chapter 5. The theoretical construct of the violent action heroine also draws upon the theories developed by Jeffrey Brown and Yvonne Tasker which have been presented in feminist literature review in Chapter 2.

Figure 10 below illustrates how the schema essentially breaks into two broad categories of sex and reproduction reliant primarily on predominant male-oriented desires and fantasies, with the violent action heroine straddling and not wholly included within the two domains. Both categories of sex and reproduction have positive and negative connotations which stem from gendered norms, roles and values; and although the schema is set up in discrete categories and types, it needs to be stated that there exists not only a continuum between the negative and positive connotations, but also combinations and degrees of variation between the different categories and types. All of these categories contribute to the broader classification of violent women in film. The schema spans over six decades of female cinematic imagery beginning with the femme fatale who was prevalent in 1940s film noir to the violent action heroines who emerged after 2000 described in this research. While the schema is not exhaustive, it offers a comprehensive conceptual mapping of various theoretical constructs of violent women in film.
Overview of the Schema

The literature review in Chapter 2 reveals that the foundations of traditional female representations in cinema have relied upon two basic functions of sex and reproduction as they relate to patriarchal order and phallocentric logic. From a purely biological stance,
these two functions have value to both sexes, i.e. satisfaction of sexual urges and
propagation of offspring. However, it is within the patriarchal order that these functions
carry their meanings and use values. The cultural code of mainstream cinema
differentiates between the good girl and the bad girl specific to the sex act and in turn
reinforces the myth of the Madonna/whore dichotomy with respect to the reproduction
function. The patriarchal structure of mainstream cinema also situates female filmic
characters in the stereotypical sex-roles of wife and mother and naturalizes these
positions as biologically innate (Haskell 1987; Magoulick 2006).

Sex Functions. As the schema illustrates, the good girl and bad girl/whore
dichotomies are positive and negative representations of female imagery related to sex
functions. The “goodness” of the good girl is dependent upon her innocence, modesty,
and purity and is linked to patriarchal norms of female virtue in relation to male
dominance and libidinal control. This research finds that the violence of the good girl is
often associated with the maintenance of her chastity or respectable social position, and
she normally plays the loyal girlfriend or faithful wife. Her violence can also take the
form of protectress, since the virtuous woman is a “chaste helpmate” of her husband or
male lover. She will do battle with bad girls, whores, and men who threaten her sexual
virtue; she will also attack others who attempt to harm her love interest or husband
because her virtue is dependent upon the dominant male. The most prevalent type of
female action character was the good girl which ultimately has the effect of reinforcing
gender roles, norms and values. Specific theoretical constructs of good girls include the
Final Girl and the Rape-Avenger.
Negative imagery associated with female sex functions are *femme fatales* and whores. The *femme fatale* represents male loss of control over his sex drive. Male fear of lack of sexual control is as old as history and is evidenced by the ubiquitous themes of the temptress in mythology and religion which includes such seductresses as Eve, Salome, Delilah, Jezebel, Cleopatra, and Mara; other mythical half-human creatures include mermaids, sirens, and nymphs. It is the hero in mythic terms that is able to overcome the sexual lure of the temptress which is evidenced historically and cross-culturally in archetypal heroes such as Ulysses, Jesus, Buddha, and Gilgamesh (Campbell 1968). In contrast to this hero is the lesser man whose downfall is due to the tricks or treachery of a temptress or seducing woman such as Adam, Samson, Lancelot or Atlas (Campbell 1968). The *femme fatale* as the seducer uses her dominant sexual position to metaphorically "rape" a male, since the weak male has no resistance to her sexual power. Her violence is usually indirect and is associated with manipulation of a man to do her violent deeds for her, or if she does commit violence she tries to implicate or involve a male character in her scheme. While the seductress-type of female action character was found in the sample in the form of a bad girl/whore, a true *femme fatale* was not apparent due to the limits of the action genre. The *femme fatale* is included in the schema as a type of violent woman in film due to her prominence in a broader cinematic sense.

The good girl represents male mastery of the sex drive and her opposite is the whore, who represents the potential for and social threat of the lack of male sexual control on a societal level. The category "whore" results from collective social sublimation which occurs in patriarchal societies and normally results in ostracism and lowered social status for the female. Even the beneficent schema of the "whore with the Golden Heart" has a
lowered social status, and “is constantly willing or asked to make sacrifices for the group as a whole” (Hutson 2002:3). The findings of this research indicate that the violence of the whore is usually depicted as a lower-class, promiscuous woman romantically or otherwise associated with the male antagonist or villain, and it is the low character of both the male villain and his “whorish” girlfriend that are used to facilitate violence in the diegesis. Often both the male and female villains are killed off in the story by the male hero and/or action heroine. Ten percent of the violent scenes coded in the content analysis depict girl-on-girl violence where the action heroine fights the bad girl/whore, thereby using women as enforcers of the hetero-patriarchal system.

Reproduction. The role of the female reproductive function is represented in the form of the Madonna or good mother and she is inscribed with an almost universalistic set of qualities such as caring, nurturing, selflessness and devotion. She is best understood in Carol Gilligan’s (1982) concept of a “feminine ethic of care” for she is only violent when her children are threatened. This category of violent female character was underrepresented in the sample since most of the female characters were single, young women. Only three of the principal action heroines are shown as the good mother figure; Meryl Streep as Gail in The River Wild (1994) plays a traditional good mother; however Geena Davis as Samantha/Charlie in The Long Kiss Goodnight (1996) is an ambiguous good mother/whore with her split personality; and Uma Thurman as the Bride in the Kill Bill movies (2003; 2004) is a parody of female violence and motherhood.

The negative imagery of the reproduction function takes a variety of forms such as the Monstrous Mother, the man-eater, vampire, and witch, all of which evoke either the sterility of woman or the return to the womb/death and negation of man(kind). The sterile
woman and empty womb are also portrayed as evil. This representation includes the oldmaid, the wicked witch, and the hag. The witch is frustrated by her barren state and taunts the young girl protagonist with the fear of what might happen if she never marries and has children – she is the stuff of fairytales and children’s stories such as the Wicked Witch of the West in *Wizard of Oz* (1939); Queen Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959); and Ursula the sea-hag in *Little Mermaid* (1989).

The monstrous mother appeared often in the sample as vampires in *Blade series; Van Helsing* (2004); and *Underworld* (2003); and the devouring mother in the form of the alien creature in the *Alien* (1992), *Alien Resurrection* (1997) and *Alien vs. Predator* (2004).

*Violent Action Heroines.* The newest female imagery of the violent action heroine with its abstraction of social reality and transgression of gender boundaries does not so easily fit into the categories of sex and reproduction. Going beyond these traditional binaries, which are naturalized as biologically innate functions, are representations which conflate sexuality and aggression as well as blend traditional notions of masculine physical violence and with traditionally feminine roles, norms and values. The violent action heroine as described in this research is further divided into three different types: the realistic, parodic and hyperreal. These three types will be described at length since they are the focus of the research, but first each of the theoretical constructs listed in the schema will be presented in order to understand how these types are related to each other through phallocentric perspectives and patriarchal values of sex and reproduction.
Sex Functions: Positive Imagery

Rape-Avenger and Final Girl

Rape-Avenger. Jacinda Read suggests the rape-revenge movies are Hollywood’s way of making sense of the discourses of the second-wave feminist movement. As women become physically violent on-screen there are ways to justify or rationalize this behavior. Read (2000) points out, pre-1970 the rape victim was portrayed as defenseless, her revenge was acted out by a close male figure, father, husband or fiancée. But as feminist discourse took hold, female representations began to include a more independent woman able to seek revenge on her own terms, what she terms the “rape-avenger.”

The good girl who acts violently is justified in her behavior because she is defending her sexual honor which must remain intact as defined by a patriarchal order which values virginity as a possession and male right. This type of aggressive female has always been present in film because she is rooted in traditional feminine values with particularly strong connection to masculine notions of ownership of the vagina/womb (Rich 1992). She has appeared as Raquel Welch in Hannie Caulder (1971); Farah Fawcett in Extremities (1986); and Julia Roberts in Sleeping with the Enemy (1991). These representations remain traditional because she is the aggressive woman in situ. It is the situation that demands she behave violently. Many times her motives for aggression are actually based on what Carol Gilligan defines as a “feminine ethic of care” (1982), as with Margaux Hemmingway who revenges her sister’s rape in Lipstick (1976), and as Susan Sarandon preventing her friend’s rape in Thelma and Louise (1991). In these instances, the rape-avenger is the nurturer and caretaker who is forced to go to extremes.
to accomplish her traditional feminine role. Without the situation she would remain a gentle nurturer.

Rape-Avenger
Susan Saradon, Geena Davis in *Thelma and Louise* (1991)

Much ado has been made over Susan Saradon’s character, Thelma, who shoots a man who has attempted to rape her best friend Louise (Rich 1992; Tasker 1998; Hills 1999; Read 2000; McCaughey 2001; Inness 2004). In the abstract, she might be considered the figurative male taking ownership of her friend’s vagina and womb and complying with the patriarchal structure. The rape-avenger remains a good girl stereotype, and while it may appear that boundaries are being crossed, in fact, the boundaries are being reinforced by the use of aggression to preserve traditionally feminine values and reaffirm patriarchal order.

*Final Girl.* Carol Clover (1992) describes this type of female victim/heroine as a figurative male, standing in for the adolescent male’s break with the mother and overcoming of sexual repression. The male viewer identifies with both the killer and the
Final Girl as the movie progresses. The horror/slasher movie usually starts out with the spectator viewing the scenes through the gaze of the killer as he tracks his prey, and then by the end of the movie, the spectator's gaze shifts to the position of the Final Girl as she overcomes and kills her stalker.

Fundamentally, the Final Girl is also a good girl. She does not engage in promiscuous sex like the other female characters in the movie who normally get killed off. Instead the diegesis unfolds around her character, all the while demonstrating her worthiness in the battle between the murderous antics of the killer and her strength of will which represents a socially constructed feminine sexual virtue.

In the movie *Halloween II* (1981) Jamie Lee Curtis is terrorized by a resurrected Mike Myers, a psychopathic killer, who began his tormented psychological state at six years of age by killing his older sister for having sex with her boyfriend. The Oedipal implications are clear in this series of films (of which there are eight movies and a ninth projected for 2007). According to Freud (1960) the male must work through his
dissolution of the Oedipal complex and break his identification with and desire for the mother figure in order to become a healthy individual.

The death-fantasy evoked in horror/slasher films is directed toward the oneness with the mother. The death-drive fantasy involves the desire to remain in the pre-Oedipal (at-oneness) with the mother figure; however, the psychological and social forces demand a separate identity formation and mark the transition into Symbolic stage in Lacanian terms, or the development of the Superego in Freudian terms. The horror/slasher genre speaks to the death-fantasy as the integration of the active male psycho killer linked with the mother figure, or Oedipal root of the psychosis. In the classic Oedipal tragedy, libidinal desire of the mother is a symbol of death and this is the psychic root of the psycho-killer that is used in the horror/slasher movies. In the Friday the 13th series, of which there are so far eleven movies, Jason’s mother is the root cause of her son’s murder sprees. The movie Psycho is the classic synthesis of the active male (Norman Bates) and psychic-root female (his mother) conflated into the embodiment of the inability to complete the Oedipal dissolution and remain in the tormented state of an incomplete identity in the form of the psycho-killer.

Conversely, the good girl or Final Girl represents mastery over sexual desire for and identification with the mother figure, a complete dissolution of the Oedipal complex, and the ability to develop an independent identity and partake in society. It is the virtue of the good girl, who symbolically represents male sublimation, which saves the small town from the terror of the psycho-killer, who in Freudian (1961) terms would symbolize the social chaos which results from the inability to sublimate. While the Rape-Avenger
partakes in violence for the sake of an individual via protection or revenge, the Final Girl serves to save society from its own destructive libidinal energies.

In a different vein, Kathleen Rowe-Karlyn (2003) points out that the character of Sidney in the Scream series of slasher films does not act like a Final Girl, but instead represents a new-found sense of empowerment and Girl Power, similar to Jacinda Read’s notion of the Rape-Avenger.

However, the Final Girl of the horror/slasher genre, whether she be viewed as a figurative male appealing to the young boys in the audience or seen as a symbol of empowerment for the young girls in the audience, is first and foremost a good girl. It is by means of her sexual virtue that she is able to survive and protect the town against the rampage of the psycho-killer. The Final Girl always reaffirms a patriarchal order and its derivative values of traditional feminine sexuality. Whores are never Final Girls.

Sex Functions: Negative Imagery

Femme Fatale and Whore

Femme Fatale. The seductress representation comes in the form of the femme fatale who gained popularity in the 1940s and 1950s in film noir. Feminist film literature is replete with psychoanalytic interpretations of the femme fatale. These women are cold, calculating, manipulating seductresses that tempt or lure the hero of the story into some danger, which then forces him to draw upon some inner-strength to overcome the seduction or else his life will turn upside down.

Mary Ann Doane reveals the nature of the sexual power of the femme fatale as “a peculiar sort [of female power] insofar as it is usually not subject to her conscious will,
hence appearing to blur the opposition between passivity and activity. She is an ambivalent figure because she is not the subject of power but its carrier” (1991:2). Her power is located in man’s fear of her sexual control over him. Doane thinks the femme fatale is a frustration of lack of mastery and control, an “epistemological trouble” as she defies phallocentric logic and represents the “other side of knowledge” (p. 103).

The femme fatale wears her sexuality, she “uses her own body as a disguise” and Doane likens this to the “masquerade” of femininity. Performing masculinity is nothing new, we have seen it with Marlene Dietrich dressed in her tuxedo in Blonde Venus (1932), Greta Garbo passing as a man in Queen Christina (1933), and the tomboyish Doris Day slinging guns and wearing chaps as Calamity Jane (1953). Doane suggests that women performing masculinity is simply another site of desire for men. The femme fatale with her acts of violence then can also be read as performing masculinity. For Doane, the female spectator can oscillate between a feminine and a masculine position while viewing the movie because, just like the femme fatale, she has a sexual mobility available to her, which is a distinguishing feature of femininity.

Some well-known examples include Barbara Stanwyck in Double Indemnity, Rita Hayworth in Gilda and Gene Tierney in Laura. For Anne Kaplan (1990), the femme fatale conjures up the male fear of castration; she represents the “bleeding wound” or the vagina denata (vagina with teeth) that rips away manhood. It is the sexual desire by the man for the beautiful and alluring femme fatale that enables her power. The femme fatale is not nurturing, passive or submissive like the Madonna and neither is she the Whore. She actually represents the male symbolism for the danger of his own sexual desires; she is a creation by the male for the male (Kaplan 1998). Overcoming the lure of the
temptress allows the hero of the story to be noble and pure – it is a testimony to his worth as a man. The sublimation going on in the narrative appeals to the male spectator who can identify with the male protagonist in the film. If the male can control his sexual urges he will be triumphant over the *femme fatale*, if not, it will be his doom. The lesson is directed toward the male viewer.

The *femme fatale* had a reemergence in the 80s with the renewed and revamped *neo-noir* genre including movies such as *Body Heat* with Kathleen Turner (1981); *Basic Instinct* with Sharon Stone (1992); *The Last Seduction* starring Linda Fiorentino (1994); *Femme Fatale* with Rebecca Romijn-Stamos (2002); and most recently *Basic Instinct 2* (2006). Hollywood changed its traditional *femme fatale* formula. Instead of centering the
story on the male protagonist, the narrative in the *neo-femme fatale* movie focuses on the triumphs of female antagonist. The *neo-femme fatale* exploits the sexuality of the female character, who not only knows she has sexual power but fully uses it to her advantage as the male falls prey to her wiles – she wins, he loses. This story expresses the inability to sublimate and the "downfall-of-man" that has been around since Eve – female sexuality overpowers the male, he succumbs to his libidinal desires, does whatever evil deeds she manipulates him into, and usually ends up in jail or dead, while she vacations on the shores of an exotic island paradise and literally gets away with murder. Regardless of the outcome, the social moral lesson and the male-orientation remain intact.

*Whores.* During the years of the Hollywood Production Code from 1934 through to the late 1950s, if the protagonist did not succumb to the wiles of a seductive female, the character was written as whore instead of *femme fatale.* Whores are female representations in movies who are served up to reinforce traditional values and the moral dictums of society. The "whore with the heart of gold" is another type of female character who is self-sacrificing and in her own way reifies social mores. These "good" whores include Jean Harlow as Vantine in *Red Dust* (1932); Ona Munson as Belle in *Gone with the Wind* (1939); or the whore transformed by the love (possession) of a man such as Julia Roberts as Vivian in *Pretty Woman* (1990).

The whore is typically not good enough to be a mother and she has no potential to fulfill her biological destiny; she usually loses out to the good girl. In the action movies included in this research, the fate of the whore is usually more devastating than just losing out to the good girl. Often times the whore is killed off because she is either the
lover of the male villain or she tries to use her sexual wiles to overcome the male hero, usually unsuccessfully, which means her demise.

Reproduction: Positive Imagery

The Good Mother

The Good Mother. The good mother is ubiquitous and crops up in the most unlikely places such as the alien and mother bonding scene with Sigourney Weaver in Alien Resurrection. The baby alien, created out of Lt. Ripley’s DNA sniffs her mom with a sense of recognition. In that moment, Weaver’s character is not afraid of her alien offspring, but suffers anguish because she knows she must destroy it to save civilization. This tug on the emotions of maternal bonding has been written into other films such as The Good Son, where Susan Evans must choose between saving her evil biological son and her good nephew.

The Good Mother
Left: Meryl Streep in The River Wild (1994)
Right: Sigourney Weaver in Alien Resurrection (1997)

Normally good mothers do not kill their own children, they take extreme measures
to save them. This type of good mother is depicted in the movie *The River Wild* (1994) where the take-charge character Gail played by Meryl Streep ends up fighting off the bad guys in white-water rapids in order to protect her son. Sarah Connor played by Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2* buffs up and gets tough to protect her son as well. The good mother movie is universal and draws upon a myth as old as time. However, the monstrous mother is more complex and diverse.

*Reproduction: Negative Imagery, Monstrous Mother*

In mythology and rite, as well as in the psychology of the infant, we find the imagery of the mother associated almost equally with beatitude and danger, birth and death, the inexhaustible nourishing breast and the tearing claws of the ogress.


As described in Chapter 2, the notion of the monstrous mother in film was developed by Barbara Creed and it drew upon the work of Julia Kristeva. Kristeva sees the monstrous or abject mother as a primal repression, a pre-oedipal, pre-lingual space – an imaginary return to the womb – where meaning collapses and boundaries do not exist. In the child’s attempt to break away from the mother and enter into the Symbolic Order of the phallus, the mother becomes an abject. According to Lacan (1977) the child evolves from the pre-language or Imaginary phase and enters into the Symbolic stage, which is associated with the Law of the Father also understood as the patriarchal structure of language, and in so doing is able to develop a separate identity apart from the mother; this transition also signifies entry into language and culture. It is with the conflicting desire for and rejection of the mother in the Imaginary or pre-stage of the symbolic order that the fascination to the abject exists. This is the place of the formation of identity.
separate from the mother – the moment of the mirror event – when the child recognizes itself in its reflection and makes the distinction that it is separate from the mother.

Kristeva states that the abject is a “precondition of narcissism” (1941:13). Even though the self must evolve into the symbolic in order to function in society, it has an attraction to the pre-symbolic, the abject, the oneness with the mother, the pre-self.

Creed notes that in most horror films the emphasis is usually on the “gestating and all-devouring womb of the archaic mother” (1986:56).

Because she comes from the Imaginary, the monstrous mother manifests in a variety of forms; she represents the threat of non-existence through the non-formation of self and is often symbolized by the bodily excrements, blood and viscous fluid associated with the maternal womb and the moment of birth such as the slimy monster in the Alien series; the blood-sucking vampires of the Blade series; Van Helsing 2004; and Underworld 2003;
and the devouring mother as the alien creature Sil in *Species* series who mates then kills her victims with her huge tongue.

In an interview, Ridley Scott who directed *Alien* was asked what he though about the feminist film theory analysis of the alien as representing the uterus, to which he replied, “No. I find it gets a bit too much. What it does, actually, is makes you reign in and think just about how influential a film is” (Aames, 2003). Bracketing the psychoanalytic take on the monstrous mother, most monsters are still culturally coded by gender and exhibit traditional gendered traits. In *Alien versus Predator* (2004), the alien is female and the predator is male, the predator triumphs in destroying the alien and saving Earth with the aid of his helpful human companion, an action heroine.

*Violent Action Heroines*

The violent action heroine does not fit neatly into the schema since the characteristics of this type of representation go beyond the gendered functions of sex and reproduction. While the violent action heroine still borrows from normative gender codes and often includes aspects of sex and reproduction in the diegesis, these are minimized in order to offer more violence. As has been stated, the narrative takes a backseat to spectacle, and spectacle often includes sex and violence, therefore the action heroine might also be understood by drawing upon Marcuse’s notion of repressive desublimation.

Marcuse (1964) suggests that in modern culture sexuality and aggressiveness are liberated to the point where there is no longer a need to repress instinctual drives since they have become socially acceptable. He believes that in a society where everything is permissible there no longer exists the need for repression; therefore, repressive energy is
desublimated toward the base and sensuous needs of immediate satisfaction. The contentious and objectionable are minimized and “society turns everything it touches into a potential source of progress and of exploitation, of drudgery and satisfaction, of freedom and of oppression” (p.78). Entertainment then serves to “sugar-coat the ideological content of oppression while eroding cultural standards in order to quell any forms of expression which might contest the given order” (Bronner and Kellner 1989:10), and oppositions are absorbed under the all-encompassing “one-dimensional” society, where conflict and rebellion are suppressed by taking away the distinctions between high and low art, good and evil, and freedom and oppression (Marcuse 1964).

From a feminist perspective, the tensions between socially constructed norms of masculine and feminine are subsumed under the commodity form of a violent action heroine. In its form, the violent action heroine negates the critique of patriarchal oppression since it appears as though the violent action heroine represents the empowered female while at the same time it reifies the status quo of social relations and gender hierarchies.

The sexual aggression of the violent action heroine blends traditional representations of masculine aggression with traditional representations of feminine sexuality to develop something that seems non-traditional. This is the movie industry’s newest pastiche commodity form which mimics the male heroes of the highly profitable action blockbuster, yet retains some of the traditional female sex and reproduction functions as discussed above. Simply put, Hollywood understands that sex and violence sells as long as it stays within mainstream boundaries, and this is the stuff of the contemporary violent action heroine.
With the appearance of equality on-screen, some feminist film theorists argue that the violent action heroine is a progressive third-wave representation of “Girl Power” which expresses the agency of the angry young female and her ability to draw upon her own femininity and sexuality as a source of power (Rowe-Karlyn 2003; McRobbie 2004). However, the sexualized aggression of the action heroine remains locked within the hierarchy of a patriarchal domain that still imposes traditional gender roles, norms and values. Even as recent films try to empower female characters by situating them within what would be deemed “masculine” professions or depict them in positions of power typically held by men, this research finds that female action characters usually retain a subordinate role as a helpmate to a male lead character or a victim to be protected by a male hero. Most successful movies revolve around a male-oriented narrative and within the action genre over 75 percent depict male heroes that save the world.\(^{11}\)

Several theories have been put forward in this research that support the notion that mainstream cinema offers the mass audience a violent action heroine which is nothing more than a distraction from real inequalities in the patriarchal social order. The idea of artificial negativity suggests that capitalism creates within it its own oppositions with which to smooth over discontent, and as mentioned above, Marcuse explains that the liberation of sexuality and aggressiveness leads to a feeling of satisfaction which “generates submission and weakens the rationality to protest” (1964:75). Further the economics strategies of the movie industry with its profit motive draws upon existing social codes and gender norms to re-present the status quo of social relations and re-articulate dominant ideology in order to appeal to a mass audience (Hall 1973). Part of its

\(^{11}\) Of the top 100 all time box office hits nearly half are male-oriented narratives involving men saving society, of the top 100 all time action hits it increases to almost 75 percent (IMBD).

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business strategy is to provide spectacle; sex and especially violence are part of the aesthetic appeal of the spectacle (Kellner 2004).

This research has examined successful, mainstream action films made over the past fifteen years which contain violent action female characters and three different types of action heroine have emerged: the realistic, the parodic, and the hyperreal heroines. Each type of action heroine will be described below pointing out those attributes that reinforce traditional feminine roles, norms, and values in combination with characteristics normally associated with masculine aggression.

These violent action heroines offer the spectator multiple perspectives of the gaze and multiple positions of identification since they have a postmodern fluidity about them; they offer all types of identificatory practices through media recognition, brand identification, fashion, style, lifestyle, and so on; and they collapse all distinction under the guise of commodification and situate the spectator as consumer, regardless of gender. The violent action heroine then turns into a satire of gendered aggression employing the primary drives of sex and violence as marketing hooks.

**Realistic Action Heroine.** The realistic action heroine does not outwardly portray stereotypical feminine characteristics. She is not yet parody or hyperreal, she is pastiche. Jameson makes a distinction between the postmodern notions of parody and pastiche where both involve imitation and mimicry of styles, except he believes that pastiche looses its humor and satire and becomes a kind of “blank irony” (1998:131). The realistic action heroine is a serious attempt at imitating the highly successful style of the male action hero. Hollywood must have thought the American audience was ready for a tough, hard-bodied action heroine. However, as the findings of this research have indicated, the
realistic action heroine was a short-lived phenomenon relegated primarily to the 1990s; however, she was the precursor to the post-2000 heroines.

The realistic action heroine came to being with Sigourney Weaver as Lt. Ripley in *Alien* series in 1979 and 1986; it was not until 1991 that she appeared again as Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. This type of action heroine’s body is portrayed as physically strong, she does not exude emotion or hysterics but rather she employs practical strategies; she does not tolerate weakness; she is aggressive and competitive; she leads; she barks orders; she invokes punishments; she seeks revenge not for herself, her brood or her man, but for all of mankind. Hers is typically the public domain, not the domestic domain. She transcends into the male world and operates within it on a level equal to any man; she subscribes to male rules, norms, attitudes and behaviors. Her
culture is male, her motives appear to be male, her rationale is male, and for all intents and purposes she is interchangeable with male heroes.

The litmus test for the realistic action heroine is to see if she is nearly interchangeable with a male character. Both Lt. Ripley and Sarah Connor have all the characteristics of the male hero, i.e. strong, independent, and fearless except for the fact that they are mothers. Sarah Connor is the mother of John Connor, future leader of the human resistance against the machines and Ripley is the mother of the alien creature, even though she must destroy the offspring. Hollywood retains the reproduction function in these movies because in order for movies to be successful in mainstream American they need to contain some orienting feature which locates the characters within dominant
social codes and maintains a complimentary relationship between ideological notions of masculinity and femininity (Neroni 2005).

During the 1990s Hollywood put forward several other realistic action heroines, two had children: Meg Ryan who played an Army captain in *Courage under Fire* (1996); and Geena Davis, a C.I.A. operative in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996). Two others included boyfriend problems that resulted from their careers interfering with their relationships: Bridget Fonda as a trained government assassin in *Point of No Return* (1993); and Demi Moore as a Navy Seal in *G.I. Jane* (1997). In addition to their connections to female functions of reproduction and sex, these realistic action heroines intentionally shed traditional concepts of femininity by symbolically shaving or cutting their hair, wearing male uniforms, or wearing men’s underwear. But as Mary Ann Doane (1991) has suggested, a woman performing masculinity can be just another site of desire for men.

Box office statistics however undermine Doane’s assertion because these realistic action heroine movies were nowhere near as successful as the typical male-oriented action movie. In fact, of the mere eleven action heroine movies made during the 1990s, half of them made less money at the domestic box office than they cost to produce (IMDB). In essence, the realistic action heroine movie is not only rare but is not a bankable commodity. As described in Chapter 5, the audience was not buying into the grimy, hard-bodied, action heroine, with her shaved head and fatigues, so Hollywood changed her into something that the would make more money – they brought in more sex and violence and made a joke of it.
Post-2000 Action Heroines


But the parodic action heroine is still a girl with girl issues; in essence she pokes fun at the physical aggressiveness of women (whether in comedic or dramatic form), and in so doing actually reinforces notions of traditional femininity. She is an aggressor in a somatic sense using physical means of expressing anger and revenge, as opposed to the traditionally more subtle, manipulative forms of sexual power available to representations of women in the past, in particular the femme fatale and neo-femme fatale.

This is the case with the Kill Bill movies where Quentin Tarantino, who may be considered one of today’s best postmodern directors, creates a sense of irony with a parody of 1970s kung fu or "wuxia"\(^{12}\) films, going to great lengths to replicate the style of this particular sub-genre. Tarantino makes intertextual references to these films, his own films, and various other media. All the villains in the Kill Bill movies are named after enemies of Captain America, and in line with the "knowing wink" (Goldman and Papson 1991) Tarantino pokes fun at the advertising apparatus that he is ultimately dependent upon by creating a fake brand of cigarettes, Red Apple, which are recognized as a pop culture brand in their own right.

The Kill Bill movies are good examples of the parodic heroine and display the postmodern elements of parody, intertextuality and mocking self-referentiality. The

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\(^{12}\) Wuxia is a sub-genre of martial arts films based upon an ancient Chinese code of Xia, that has a particular style and narrative (IMDB).
movies poke fun at the violent action heroine in a way that reinforces gendered norms as in a scene where the Bride goes to her female enemy’s (Copperhead) home in order to kill her. The two women fight and tear up the house until Copperhead’s daughter comes home from school. The two stop fighting when the daughter gets out of her school bus in front of the house and the Bride tells Copperhead, “You can relax for now. I’m not going to murder you in front of your daughter” (IMDB). Tarantino, for all his postmodernist ways, reinforces the phallocentric belief that the primary functions of women are sex and reproduction. The Bride in the Kill Bill series avenges the death of her fiancée, searches to find his killer, comes to discover her missing child, kills Bill, and finally discovers maternal bliss upon the reunion with her daughter, all wrapped in a typically bloody Tarantino façade.

In the highly successful Charlie’s Angels series, Drew Barrymore, Lucy Liu and Cameron Diaz partake in typical male action scenes by stunt-riding motorcycles, shooting guns and using their martial art skills to kick ass, but they wear high heels when they do it and then they giggle afterward. As film critic Jeffrey Anderson explains in his review of Charlie’s Angels, “We’re dealing with three super-babes who have been heavily trained in everything from paratrooping to race car driving to Matrix like slo-mo kung-fu. Plus they can cook and dance. Plus they’re gorgeous. So anything goes” (2000:1).
The parodic heroine mocks her own creation; she retains all the characteristics of traditional femininity except that she engages in stylized fight sequences, car chases and other tension building scenes which intensify the spectacle of the movie. She is a fetish object for the male audience and a stylized role model for the female spectator – tough yet sexy. “Parody capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original” (Jameson 1998:130); the original in this case is the realistic action heroine, which is itself a copy of the male action hero. Hollywood came to realize that the realistic action heroine was not going to be successful and it began to poke fun at its own creation.

In the case of the parodic action heroine, parody and pastiche work together since these action heroines are nostalgic and familiar forms of past female characters derived
from television but retain a satiric quality, and from an economic and marketing perspective all these movies have pre-sold qualities with recognizable characters, stars and directors, and they lend themselves to spin-off merchandise, sequels and multi-media distribution and exhibition.

The Hyperreal Heroine. Lara Croft is a fictional character that stems from a video game. She has more of the qualities of the male than the authentic male hero, such as Indiana Jones. Lara Croft is the perfect imitation/simulation of heroism, its "simulacra." She is a good example of what Baudrillard (1981) terms the "hyperreal" since she is a simulation of a simulation and has become more real than the (unreal) original.

Lara Croft is also a commodified heroine. Googling "Lara Croft merchandise" brings up over 252,000 websites (October 2006). The top two sites are Lara Croft Planet and Lara Sanctuary that advertise "everything you could need on Lara Croft" including not only the videogames, but wallpapers, posters, clothing, toys, statues, books, cups and table games. However, there are two Lara's: the unreal original-video-Lara and the hyperreal movie-Angelina-Lara.
The character of Lara Croft originated from a computer video game created by Toby Gard at Eidos software in the U.K. The character of Lara Croft has an elite history as the Oxford-educated daughter of Lord Henshingly and Lady Croft (Davies 2000). However, her large breasts, .45-cal pistols and tight shorts do not let on to her aristocratic breeding, nor does the fact that she is a female character dissuade male gamers from taking on the gameboard (Taylor 2002). Lara Croft was the best selling Sony PlayStation game in 1996, where the gamer is less than three percent female (Wice 1997). The movie Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001) was produced and distributed by Paramount Pictures and has been the most successful action-heroine movie to date grossing over $131 million at the box office (IMDB); however, the sequel, Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life
(2003) was a box office disappointment in comparison, only grossing $65 million with an estimated budget of $90 million.

Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft in real life is not a hard-bodied, physically tough looking woman, instead she embodies extremely feminine physical characteristics that have in fact been demonstrated in psychological tests to be rated as hyper-feminine: larger eyes, a smaller nose, plumper lips, a narrower jaw, and a smaller chin (Lemley 2000) not to mention the evolutionary-biological explanation of the fecund female of the .7 hip-to-waist ratio, and the impressive size of her breasts. Whereas Lara Croft has every masculine psychological attribute of the male hero, she has none of the physical attributes. However, this combination of feminine physical beauty ideals with masculine psychological characteristics has two different yet important connotations. One is a suturing of the male viewer with the female heroine in an identificatory process that transcends gender, and the other is a conflation of sex and violence into an urge that can be substituted for the fetish-object of the heroine.

Gaming Fetish

I've always wanted to make a really scary movie. After I caught people in my office playing the Resident Evil game when it first hit the marketplace, I could instantly see its movie potential. It wasn't gory or too violent - just completely terrifying to play - and I knew if we could transfer that quality to the screen we would be on to a real winner.


In the movie Resident Evil (2002), Milla Jovovich plays Alice who is immune to the T-virus, a disease that creates flesh eating monsters, and she and her companions blast away at hundreds of annoying, gnawing zombies. The first movie was so successful that it was followed by the sequel in 2004, Resident Evil: Apocalypse, and has another on the
way entitled *Resident Evil: Extinction*, due in 2007, and possibly a fourth (IMDB). The game *Resident Evil* is part of a new gaming genre called “survival horror” and was developed in 1989 by Capcom, a Japanese company. It has been hugely successful with videogame sales of over 30 million copies as of February 2006, consisting of seven different versions in the main series and six different versions related to the main series.

In addition, there are *Resident Evil* novels, comic books, and action figures. The movies are simply pieces of a larger franchise of merchandizing operation. It has pre-sold qualities of a well-known star, Milla Jovovich, the script was written by George Romero of *Night of the Living Dead* fame, and it is a spin-off from an earlier 1996 videogame called *Biohazard*. The movie employs a narrative that centers on Milla Jovovich’s character Alice, which is quite different from the gaming scenarios.
Comic Books

*Fantastic Four* and the *X-Men* series are both based on Marvel comic books. In *Fantastic Four*, Jessica Alba plays Susan Storm, the invisible girl, who is the sister of Johnny Storm, the boy who turns into fire. Their characters enact traditional gendered norms with Johnny as the hot-tempered (literally), sex-crazed, macho-male and Sue as the supportive, care-taking, subordinate (invisible) female, sister of Johnny and love interest of the male hero Reed Richards aka “Stretch”. Halle Barry plays Storm (another “Storm”) in *X-Men* whose power comes from controlling the weather – invoking the myth of the tempestuous and unpredictable nature of women and the recollection of hurricanes being named after them. As discussed in Chapter 5, Halle Berry is de-racialized in this movie with straight white hair and eye of blue when she conjures her stormy powers.

Left: Jessica Alba in *Fantastic Four* (2004)  
Both movies were produced and distributed by 20th Century Fox. Each of these Marvel comic book creations has its own cartoon series, action figure toys, books and other miscellaneous merchandise. Susan Storm and Storm serve a supportive role to other more dominant action heroes, such as Reed Richards (Ioan Gruffudd) who is the leader of the Fantastic Four, and Wolverine (Hugh Jackman) who is the main macho X-man.

In the publicity stills above, both Alba and Barry wear tight-fitting, body-accentuating outfits. Alba’s outfit is a little less seductive which suits her character of older sister who is constantly trying to reign in her wild and crazy little brother Johnny, yet she still must appear sexually appealing since she is the “girl factor” in the movie. In contrast, Halle Barry’s outfit suggests the dominatrix, which Jeffrey Brown (2005) believes is characteristic of many action heroines. Berry’s character Storm is the stormy, emotional woman; she wreaks havoc. The violence of these two characters is only used to protect others, usually loved ones, and they do not engage in promiscuous sex, despite their seductive clothing. They are sexualized aggressors even while they maintain traditional gender norms.

Æon Flux and Catwoman. Æon Flux started out as an animated television series that premiered on MTV in 1991. The animation is similar in style to Japanese anime and contains violence, sexuality, domination and fetishism. Viacom owns MTV as well as Paramount Pictures who produced and distributed the movie Æon Flux. A videogame was developed to coincide with the release of the movie in 2005, using the voice of Charlize Theron.
Catwoman was originally a character in DC Comics associated with Batman. Time Warner now owns DC Comics and Warner Bros. produced and distributed Catwoman and well as the successful Batman series of movies. There are five highly successful Batman movies made since 1989, all of which grossed over $100 million, two of those grossed over $200 million. Warner Bros. relied on the pre-sold qualities and mass
merchandising of *Batman* which has been a phenomenal success and has remained popular for over a decade in order to spin-off *Catwoman* and also added in one of Hollywood’s highest paid female stars, Halle Berry.

Unfortunately, *Catwoman* as the “Feline Fatale” turned out to be a box-office flop, grossing only $40 million at the box-office with a production budget of $85 million. *Catwoman* received the Raspberry Bomb “Razzie” Award in 2005 for the biggest action movie bomb. It also won worst actress, worst screenplay and worst director – it swept the Razzies.

*Feminist Film Theory and Sexualized Aggression*

Yvonne Tasker and Jeffrey Brown both put forward the notion of the sexualized aggressor which is evident in all of the violent action heroines described above to varying degrees. Jeffrey Brown suggests the action heroine can be seen as a dominatrix. Observing the tight-fitting body suits, often in black leather, which most of the violent action heroines wear lends support to his claim. Brown further suggests that instead of reading the violent action heroine character as operating outside of gender norms, she should be understood in terms of co-opting both sides of the gender divisions. “She is both subject and object, looker and looked at, ass-kicker and sex object” (2005:52) and “at a fundamental level every action heroine, not just those who are explicitly sexualized, mobilizes the specter of the dominatrix” (p. 50).

Yvonne Tasker is one of the earliest feminist film scholars to examine the growing phenomenon of violent action heroines. She takes a cultural studies approach and examines production and consumption aspects of the new female imagery. By drawing
upon Star Theory developed by Jackie Stacey (1991, 1994b), Tasker suggests that the new female imagery is attached to stars and linked with other media and publicity sources including music video, fashion magazines, and advertising. She cites Madonna as one of the earliest examples of purely sexualized aggression. Both Tasker and Brown suggest that it is the stereotype of the dominatrix as sexualized aggressor that runs through many of the new female images in cinema.

In most action-heroine sub-genre movies the main heroine appears sexualized, aggressive, and unrealistic. She is a fetish object. The action heroine is also a movie star who becomes a fetish commodity created to sell products of entertainment. As Tasker (1998) explains, these stars are mass-marketed and the images that they create then become mass-marketed. They are linked with multiple media, such as film, television, DVDs, magazines, books, videogames, and the Internet. The postmodern quality of action heroine stars and images is that the realness of the person implodes as the media-created version of the real takes precedence. Richard Dyer (2004) suggests that the characters the stars play are media creations themselves promoting other forms of media; the stars and images conflate into a singularity of commodification used for further commodification. Tasker and Brown both touch upon the role of economics in Hollywood and postmodern cultural influences which help shape the form of the violent action heroine, unfortunately neither goes far enough to into the late-capitalist modes of production of the movie industry itself to explain how these representations of action heroines end up reinforcing dominant social and gender codes.
The Reason Catwoman Bombed

*Catwoman* won the Razzie last year and nobody knew it would be such a phenomenal flop. Malcolm Gladwell quotes William Goldman’s famous phrase “Nobody knows anything” which refers to Hollywood’s inability to predict a successful movie (2006:138). Gladwell goes on to describe two businessmen who have developed a system to predict box office hits using a neural network computer, which operates similar to the structure of a human brain and has learning capacity. The system scores variations in narrative theme and Gladwell cites an example: “the hero’s moral crisis in act one, which is rated a 7 on the 10-point moral-crisis scale, was worth $7 million, and having a gorgeous red-headed eighteen-year-old female lead whose characterization came in at 6.5 was worth $3 million” and so on, assigning each element of the movie or screenplay a dollar value (2006:143). The system learns by going through huge data bases of existing data and calculating probabilities, and as it learns through trial and error its predictive capabilities increase.

The research herein makes no claims at prediction, but the box office bomb of *Catwoman* can be used as a model for the findings presented. First and foremost, only four American made action-heroine movies without a main male hero have ever grossed over $100 million at the box office: *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001); the two *Charlie’s Angels* (2000, 2003); and *Miss Congeniality* (2000). That in and of itself is the most important finding of the research – action heroines do not resonate well with the mainstream American audience. People want to see men in charge, not women.
At a production cost of $85 million *Catwoman* was already in trouble. It had the potential for spin-off merchandizing, but with its lack of box office gross, even the *Catwoman* doll is not a huge success.

![Barbie® as Catwoman™ Doll by Mattel](image)

*Catwoman*’s enemy was Laurel Hedare, played by Sharon Stone; in the sample of this research, two primary female characters were never pitted against each other. In essence, the film revolved around women, their problems, and their struggles with each other. Most female action character’s enemy is a human male or an alien life form and this is because she is usually a helpmate to a male, so the audience is used to seeing male conflict, not female conflict.

The main issues in *Catwoman* are women’s issues: first, a feminist message about freedom and empowerment, and second, a message about the tragedies of the aging woman with a subtext against hegemonic beauty standards. Again, blockbuster films stay

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clear of social issues and aim to please the most people and offend the least. Patience Phillips dies and is resurrected as *Catwoman*; even the character’s name represents the feminist message of the film. The feminist issues presented in *Catwoman* are the stuff of independent films and not mainstream blockbuster action movies. In addition, the spectacle was lost in an elaborate narrative as it followed *Catwoman’s* daily activities, love life, career difficulties, personality transformation, female empowerment, fascination with cats, and so on.

The racial boundary is crossed when Halle Berry (Patience Phillips/Catwoman) is romantically linked with Benjamin Bratt (Tom Lone), albeit Bratt is a Peruvian Indian from Lima (IMDB), and this is a rare occurrence in mainstream film. *Catwoman* ends up having sex with Tom and leaving him in the end – this type of non-committal sex is usually left for the male heroes, such as James Bond and not female heroines. Berry’s character also ends up killing the white woman, Laurel, played by Stone; interracial fighting is also rare.

On the other hand, *Catwoman* fits well into the category of violent action heroine with her dominatrix-like outfit and style, and she fits the schema of the hyperreal heroine, with her unrealistic qualities and connection to various media. Economically speaking, as a star, Halle Berry has the best pre-sold qualities for the *Catwoman* character since she is typecast as a sexy and aggressive woman, is an academy award winner, and a huge box office draw. In addition, she is beautiful, a Revlon model who sets fashion, a cover girl on women’s magazines, and a top-story in tabloids.

The movie also had pre-sold qualities with its tie-in to the blockbuster hits of the *Batman* series. All of the economic predictors were in place for the movie, but its issue-
oriented narrative undermined the spectacle and therefore any chance of success. The blockbuster form that should have been the emphasis of this movie was not developed enough to overtake the content, and the content did not have enough mass appeal to compensate for the lack of spectacle; neither form nor content was powerful enough to pull the movie out of its nosedive to failure.

Summary

The example of Catwoman connects back to the research questions and illustrates how the present day characteristics of violent women in action films relate to gender norms, roles, and values and ultimately effect filmic content; it also is indicative of movie industry’s business practices and how they come into play and shape the form of the contemporary violent action heroine. The tension between form and content have been mentioned throughout the paper as a means of understanding how normative gender codes play themselves out in the narrative structure of the action movie, while the shifting modes of production in the movie industry itself affect the form of the movie and subsequently the characters in the film.

Again, it is this tension between content and form that exists in what is termed a postmodern action heroine which presents a theoretical problem since gender binaries are still present and therefore contradict a postmodern feminist logic. The theoretical constructs of the contemporary action heroine may be postmodern in form with their pastiche, parody, and hyperrealism, and seemingly postmodern in content with some aspects of gender fluidity where female characters take on traditionally masculine aggression and violent behaviors, but because the films themselves are mass-marketed
commodities they necessarily have to retain normative social and gender codes in order to be successful in the main. This is the paradox of the violent action heroine that often gets overlooked by feminist film theorists due to the fact that they do not include a structural economic approach in their analyses.

Sex and violence sell – sex is associated with the feminine and violence with the masculine. The latest versions of the violent action heroine in the form of the parodic and hyperreal are Hollywood’s latest attempt to get the largest piece of the economic pie by appealing to the largest percentage of the population, both the male and the female spectator, since everyone is a consumer in a consumer society.

The following and final chapter summarizes the research, describes its strengths and weaknesses, and offers suggestions for future studies.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Our films … depict a very specifically white/male/hetero/American capitalist dreamscape … [where] a sharper power line is reasserted between masculine and feminine, in which, indeed, all the old lines of force and division between races, classes, and genders are both transgressed and redrawn.

— Fred Pfeil, *White Guys* 1995

The broad goal of this research has been to find out where the present day action heroine came from and why she matters sociologically. We see the contemporary action heroine represented in films and on television and intuitively understand that she is new and different from other more traditional representations of female characters. Academics, feminists, and popular pundits have weighed in on her growing significance, both pro and con. To some she represents and reflects a social reality of the gains of women in America, to others she is simply another sexualized form of media entertainment.

This research started by looking at the motives of women acting violently in film and was therefore content driven. A feminist British cultural studies approach was the starting point since female representation in popular culture is one of the main focuses of the research. The original emphasis on the motives of violence was due to depictions like Lt. Ripley’s DNA used for alien offspring, Sarah Connor protecting her son, the future leader of the world, in *Terminator 2*, and the Bride engaging in bloody battle to find her missing
daughter in the *Kill Bill* movies. The assumption was that action heroines were acting violently within traditional gender roles and therefore subscribing to feminine, relationally-driven motives for violence in accordance with Carol Gilligan’s notion of a feminine ethic of care. Conversely, other films showed women acting violently within traditionally masculine domains. Therefore, it was also assumed that women’s increasing presence and professional gains in the American workforce would be reflected in female representations of violence on-screen to include traditionally masculine rationales involving a sense of justice, duty, law, and the protection of citizens. *Lara Croft* fits into this category as she takes on bad guys and saves society from evil. Since the original theoretical orientation of the research was content driven, a content analysis was the method used to examine recent shifts in female representation in action movies.

However, as the research progressed, the findings revealed that while the overall moral themes for most action movies adhere to the notion of good triumphing over evil, the individual violent scenes themselves do not typically subscribe to traditional feminine or masculine motives, and in fact there has been a decrease in gendered motives for violence and an increase in motives of self-defense as the characters are chased, attacked, and terrorized by aliens and bad guys. As mentioned in previous chapters, the movies were watched in chronological order, and in so doing it became evident that the style of the action film is changing over time. The coding for the content analysis became more difficult due to increasing complexity of violent scenes and the increasing implementation of jump cuts and discontinuous montage editing made possible by technological advances in digital editing software. The finding that the total time of violence in action movies is increasing while the length of each violent scene is
decreasing supports the notion that filmic form is evolving in relation to shifts in modes of production and consequent styles of editing. In addition, changes in weaponry used, level of destruction, and increasing unrealism all led to the conclusion that action movies now rely more heavily upon special effects and spectacle to ensure success. This change in the formal qualities of action films led to a second literature review regarding the movie industry itself, its business strategies in general, and blockbuster logic in particular.

The research then took into account not only the significance of female representations in action films but also the broader late-capitalist practices and post-Fordist production processes involved in the construction of these representations. Therefore, the theoretical orientation of the research grew to include critical theory and Frankfurt school perspectives. In effect, the research went from a focus upon female representations and the content of their construction, using content analysis as its primary method, to a more critical approach that examined filmic form through economic processes, business practices, marketing strategies, and technological advances. The final result is that this research takes a materialist approach to cultural analysis.

The Frankfurt school emphasizes the standardization, commercialization, and conformist nature of mass entertainment produced by the “culture industry” and it is easy to see the increased use of computer generated imagery (CGI) in action movies as a commercialized reflection of today’s “information age” and society’s reliance upon computers as a mode of production. Virtual images on the big-screen and the little-screen normalize a computerized virtual-world as these images become a part of our history and are made into a “reality” of their own. Adorno states, “Nothing may exist if it is not like
the world as it is" (1989:209), and although he is addressing a concern against increasing aesthetic realism he is speaking before the time of CGI. Now it is increasing aesthetic virtual realism that is problematic in the sense that the hyperrealism seen on-screen is a reflection and reproduction of the reality of our dependence upon computers and their role in our everyday lives. Computers now are our reality and in the virtual world, the tendency toward realism is the primary objective as computer generated characters become more and more “life-like” enabling the unreal to become hyperreal. The hyperreal lends itself to fantasy and spectacle and the problem then becomes the reliance upon fantasy and spectacle to represent and resolve real-life issues of existent inequitable social relations. The movies analyzed in this research maintain racial boundaries by concealing them in a diversity of future virtual worlds of cooperating alien species; support gendered hierarchies by masking them in the computer generated “wire-fu”\(^{13}\) martial arts of female action characters battling bad guys; and reinforce dominant social codes and status quo social relations by disguising them in a blend of old content with new fantasy forms.

*The Sociological Relevance of the Action Heroine*

The questions established for this research were aimed at clarifying the characteristics and on-screen behaviors of the action heroine, and examined where she came from, and how she evolved. By understanding these aspects, the broad question of why she is sociologically relevant is better served. The first and second research questions ask:

“What are the characteristics of violent women in action films today?” and “How are the

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\(^{13}\) Wire-fu is a type of action sub-genre that uses wire work in marital arts sequences to produce unbelievable physical feats such as twirling in or flying through the air.
images and representations of violent female action characters related to feminist discourse on gender roles, norms and values?" The findings of the research indicate that the violent female action character is a young, white, heterosexual female who has become increasingly more violent and unrealistic over the past 15 years. Most of the time the female action character serves as a helpmate or love interest to a main male action character. She is, with few exceptions, romantically linked with a male hero who is of the same race/ethnicity, and she is usually punished in the story if she strays from traditional social codes and gender norms. In short, the violent female action character reinforces the white, hetero-patriarchy that she comes from, since the action genre specifically and the movie industry generally is a male-dominated business.\(^\text{14}\)

The third and fourth research questions then narrowed to focus more specifically on the contemporary violent action heroine as a sub-category of violent female action characters. They ask: “What is the historical development that led up to the form of violent action heroine of today?” and “How is today’s violent action heroine shaped by modes of production related to the film industry?” The findings show that about 20 percent of the violent female action characters are depicted as the principal action heroine around whom the story revolves. Of this 20 percent, only a handful of action heroines are realistic, strong, and independent women; these realistic depictions are relegated to the action heroines of the 1990s and have since disappeared. After 2000, two new types of action heroines emerged: one which is the comedic or mocking version of an action heroine, termed in this research the “parodic” heroine, and another that relies heavily

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\(^{14}\) Of the action movies included in this research, only one movie, \textit{Aeon Flux} (2005), was directed by a woman Karyn Kusama; and only three movies were written by women: \textit{Thelma and Louise} (1991); \textit{Rapid Fire} (1992); and \textit{G.I. Jane} (1997).
upon computer-generated imagery for unrealistic or virtual depictions, termed in this research the “hyperreal” heroine.

Is the Action Heroine Postmodern?

The tension between content and form is woven throughout the research as the content suggests a reinforcement of social codes and gendered roles, norms, and values, while at the same time the form suggests an alignment with postmodern cultural influences and economic modes of production. The form of the contemporary action heroine stems from the profit-motive of the movie industry, which relies upon the action blockbuster and its utilization of the latest technologies of digitization and CGI to make the fastest, loudest, most exciting, heart-pounding action film possible to attract its target youth audience.

The tug-of-war between content and form stood out as one of the major findings of the research as content seems to remain stubbornly stuck in gendered stereotypes, while the formal characteristics of the movies (and all that goes into their production) alter and transform the images within the movies, and thereby ultimately affect the content, albeit not in such a way as to undermine dominant social codes and norms. This tension becomes readily apparent when trying to situate the newest female imagery of the action heroine within a postmodern context. The construction of the contemporary action heroine may be viewed as postmodern in form because one can apply notions of pastiche, parody, and hyperrealism, and one can also see aspects of gender fluidity where female characters take on traditionally masculine aggression and violent behaviors. However, the
action heroine can not really be deemed postmodern because she is locked within a scheme of gendered binaries and forms of traditional femininity and masculinity.

This problem of the not-quite-postmodern aspect of the action heroine can be understood by employing a Frankfurt school perspective which suggests that the negative function of instrumental reason causes recognition of and rebellion toward existing oppressive and exploitive social relations. Yet, what might appear to be a negative function in the form of transgressing gender stereotypes depicted by the violent woman in film actually has no effect, because the very “play” on gender reinforces the status quo. In other words, it is an artificial negativity put forward by a system that ends up “creating and supporting its own oppositions” and extends the logic it was meant to challenge in the first place (Piccone 1978:46). Artificial negativity is the paradox that occurs because the films themselves are mass-marketed commodities so they necessarily have to retain normative social and gender codes in order to be successful in the main, even while they attempt to be new and different. Instead they subscribe to a postmodern cultural tendency within a media-saturated society that ends up blurring the lines between traditional and non-traditional, old and new, production and consumption, and ends up with a mass-entertainment product that is “sugar-coated ideology” (Bronner and Kellner 1989).

The material conditions which have ushered in the new action heroine rely upon movie industry business practices including blockbuster logic and the mass appeal of spectacle, which in turn is facilitated by advances in technology including digitization and CGI which create more violent and unrealistic action heroines. These economically driven factors create the almost-but-not-quite postmodern action heroine who can take the form of the parodic or hyperreal associated with postmodern sensibilities, yet still
remain rooted in traditional social and gender codes. As discussed in Chapter 2, the negotiated and oppositional readings that some feminists espouse, which tout a self-reflexive and “knowing-wink” (Goldman and Papson 1991) at gender construction, also ignore the elasticity and resiliency of gender norms which borrow from traditional feminine and masculine norms to create the *bricolage* of the action heroine. But the mortar in this *bricolage* is apparent and there is no seamlessness to the combination of traditional gendered characteristics because it is the irony that reinforces the norms. The joke is not on the action heroine, it is on the audience who would take any of these images as a serious representation of gender equality in American society.

*Audience or Spectator?*

As Jackie Stacey (1994b) suggests, the audience can be seen as a spectator with agency. Angela McRobbie notes that the younger female “educated in irony and visually literate” can join in with her male counterparts and, instead of getting angry at the sexualized promotion, can “appreciate its layers of meaning and ... get the joke” (2004:259). Similarly, Kathleen Rowe-Karlyn (2003) believes that the young women in the audience can recognize and embrace both their sexual power and their ability to enter the public domain traditionally occupied by men. Both McRobbie and Rowe-Karlyn argue in favor of negotiated readings, agential interpretations, and “female individualization” in understanding popular media depictions of female characters.

Recent studies indicate that young women today believe gender discrimination is a thing of the past and that old attitudes of gender difference belong to “dinosaurs” (Kindlon 2006). Today, many young women think of feminism in pejorative terms.
believing that feminism has extremist tendencies that are no longer applicable since women have made advances in education and higher-status careers and have protection against sexual harassment and discriminatory employment practices (McRobbie 2004; Liss, Hoffner, and Crawford 2000). Young females think that today’s world offers women opportunities and access to careers similar to those of men and that women now have more agency and an increasing capacity to exhibit masculine personality and physical characteristics including aggression, courage, dominance, and physical strength (Wilde and Diekman 2005). The question arises whether the representations of action heroines in the movies have led to a popular belief that women are just as strong, powerful and in charge as are men.

Susan Faludi (1991) puts forward a different perspective and argues that the anti-feminist attitude of young girls today is caused by the conservative and populist rhetoric of the 1980s and 1990s with its anti-liberal and anti-intellectual messages linking liberalism with leftist elitism. The conservative right wing lumped feminism, liberalism, and leftist ideology into the same camp, and since more women are democrats than men a conservative backlash against women’s gains in American society followed (Eagly and Diekman 2006; Center for the American Woman in Politics 2005). Faludi believes young girls of today were raised in this conservative socio-political environment and therefore hold the same anti-feminist view, and she argues that young women still need to look critically at the structural issues of social power, remaining inequalities, and real socioeconomic limitations.

The research herein is in agreement with the structural perspective espoused by Faludi and finds a problem with much of the recent feminist theoretical explanations
touting the triumph of the contemporary action heroine. The action heroine is not exactly what she appears to be at first glance. She wears her masculinity in the form of aggression and violence which can be seen as a “masquerade” and in Mary Ann Doane’s terms she is simply another “site of desire” (1991:). The young women in the audience may identify and acknowledge their own sexual power but is this not still sexual exploitation? Lara Croft may “adopt male forms of behavior but [she] is unmistakably female and highly eroticized” (Herbst 2004:22). As Claudia Herbst (2004) explains:

She is a sex symbol and is openly exploited as such. In 1997, for the release of Tomb Raider II in the United Kingdom, a “washroom campaign” was started for which pictures of Lara were placed in men’s bathrooms. In a German advertisement campaign, Lara states, “You can move me into 2000 different positions. Try that with your girlfriend!” ... an unofficial ‘Nude Raider Patch” allows a [game] player to watch Lara fight her way through the different levels of the game naked. (P. 25).

It becomes difficult to accept the feminist position that the new female imagery of action heroines is really all that empowering when these images and representations still rely upon sexual exploitation for advertising promotion, and when they poke fun at gender roles and stereotypes in an attempt to reinforce these social norms as a matter of course in order to appeal to a mass audience. This paradox of the action heroine gets overlooked by feminist film theorists who do not include a structural economic and materialist approach to their analyses. It needs to be understood that the action heroine is situated within the action genre which is itself reliant upon a blockbuster strategy that appeals to a mass audience. The action heroine is not a product of niche-marketing; rather she is an innovation of mass marketing. Therefore, her construction becomes an issue of mass appeal and this research has shown that the audience does not want to see a tough realistic action heroine. The audience can however accept her as a joke or an
unbelievable heroine. The parodic and hyperreal action heroines have fared better at the box office than her realistic heroine predecessors. In addition, this newest unrealistic imagery also lends itself better to spin-off merchandizing and creation of various versions of CGI videogames.

There are so relatively few action heroines in mainstream cinema that they should not be looked at as a general representation of a social trend in America. To put this into perspective, over the course of the 15-year period examined in this research over 7,000 new films have been released (Motion Picture Association) and of those, nearly 850 are action films (IMDB); only 112 of those action films that were successful and included a violent female action character, and of those only 23 include a principal action heroine as a main character of the story. That is 23 out of over 7,000 films! And of those 23 films, only half depict a realistic action heroine, the rest contain a hyperreal or parodic heroine. Stuart Hall (1993) points out that what is not represented is just as important, if not more so, than what is represented. What is not shown in these films are realistic, capable, strong, resourceful, and independent heroines who are leaders. Kellner notes that in order “to be desired it must be represented” (2004:295) and this research finds that there are relatively few representations of action heroines that could usher in the “desire” for a new American female mythos, and, equally important, there seems little desire by the mass audience for change.

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15 Success was determined as being in the top-20 box office grossing films for each year of the sample.
16 As noted earlier, many of the parodic heroines were not included in the research sample because these films were cross-listed as comedies. Referring to Table 3, parodic heroines in films such as Charlie’s Angels and Miss Congeniality could also be included as principal action heroines.

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Instead, Americans seem to prefer male heroes, as these are the biggest box office hits by far (IMBD)\(^\text{17}\). The mythic male hero looms large in American culture and resonates with mass audiences not only here in the U.S. but globally as well. The iconography of the Marlboro man is “the most powerful – and in some quarters, most hated – brand image of the last century. The Marlboro Man stands worldwide as the ultimate American cowboy and masculine trademark, helping establish Marlboro as the best-selling cigarette in the world” (Advertising Age 2005). The mythic American male in cinema has been extensively studied and written about (Morella and Epstein 1971; Jeffords 1994; Pfeil 1995; Trice and Holland 2001), and the mythic American hero is associated with several genres including Western, War, and Action movies that have spanned decades. We can identify the hero-myth in political rhetoric, in many social institutions, and in certain religious teachings. Our typical American hero is loyal, hard-working, often a loner, independent; he challenges bureaucratic or corrupt authority, is fearless, is morally bound to the cause of the underdog, and is not tempted by sex, greed, or pride; he values common sense over education, is typically the strong, silent type, and is too busy saving others to wallow in his own introspection; he has integrity, is morally altruistic, and constantly risking his life for the larger, common good. Americans can and have drawn upon this American male mythos readily, and as early as 1835 Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the American capitalist culture is founded upon strong notions of individualism and a sense that hard work can overcome structural obstacles, while downplaying class distinctions, and has an anti-intellectual bias inherent in it. These same national cultural characteristics so astutely recognized by Tocqueville over 150 years ago

\(^{17}\) Of the top 100 all time box office hits nearly half are male-oriented narratives involving men saving society, of the top 100 all time action hits it increases to almost 75 percent (IMBD).
are embodied in the mythic American hero. Most recently political consultants and campaign managers have drawn upon this mythic hero to construct media imagery with which the American public can identify (for better or worse). For example, the use of the male mythos for political purposes can be seen in campaign ads for Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush.

Male identification with the mythic hero raises the question: what American mythos can females identify with? In real-world terms, what is the political significance of not having a “heroine” available to draw upon as iconography? If Hillary Clinton were to run for Presidential in 2008, it is quite likely that her gender would be the central issue in the campaign, coming even before issues of political platform, leadership abilities, and political qualifications, and her former role as First Lady and “scorned wife” would probably be upper-most in peoples’ minds. There is no American female mythos associated with leadership or positions of political and economic power available to add alongside the status quo sex roles of wife and mother. The traditional mythos of the American female encompasses positive archetypes as good wife and/or mother and negative archetypes of women as temptresses and wielders of sexual power. Needless to say, this is disadvantageous to many women in positions of power who try to create a new social and cultural female space that is not dependent upon sex roles. Traditional masculine characteristics take on a negative meaning when associated with women (such as aggressiveness equated with bitchiness) and the breach of traditional gender norms can create a social backlash against the advancement of women in real terms. Hillary Clinton gets associated by the conservative right as a closet lesbian and a “dyke” for her non-subscription to traditional gender roles, norms, and values (Lombardi 2005). Whether or
not one agrees with these characterizations is irrelevant; what is important is that because the current American female mythos is still dependent upon sex roles, women in positions of power and leadership must take on the additional burden of challenging socially constructed gender codes and stereotypes.

**Strengths and Weaknesses of the Research**

This research has taken an empirical approach to an overwhelmingly interpretive area of film studies in order to identify and describe patterns of representation of violent women in film. It has also taken a critical approach by examining the structural economic and materialist elements that affect these representations. Both the empirical and the material orientations used in this research are missing from most feminist film analyses. The findings of this research provide empirical evidence of continued gender stereotyping and reveal several economic structural influences that do not support the feminist positions that this new imagery is empowering to the female spectator and that it promotes gender equality.

However, this research examines only violent female action characters in the action genre and therefore is unable to make claims about what kinds of changes are occurring with violent male action characters in the same genre, which may or may not affect the behaviors of the female action characters in the stories or the plots themselves. Male filmic action heroes may be as likely as action heroines to change in form to the parodic and hyperreal due to the technological advances of digital editing and CGI in combination with movie industry modes of production and blockbuster logic. However, the action genre was selected for the research because of its traditional male-orientation
in order to find out if female characters are making any significant “penetration” into a predominantly male cultural space. The answer is clearly no, since there are few principal action heroines in the genre. This finding situates the action heroine on the extreme end of a socially-constructed gender continuum and indicates that they are more an outlier to, than a representation of, social norms.

The demographic and behavioral characteristics of violent female action characters clearly show reliance upon social norms and the reinforcement of what Fred Pfeil terms a “white/male/hetero/American capitalist dreamscape” (1995:32). Many of the findings of this research closely correspond to Pfeil’s examination of male filmic representations and therefore support the claim that systems of production shape the imagery we see and the ideological codes that are embedded throughout the film, both in form and content.

The expression, “violent women in film,” brings to mind a whole variety of female filmic characters. Each individual viewer has his or her own unique frame of reference and will when asked cite specific stars, characters, and movies that fit into their personal mental schema. Often movies that come to people’s minds are not represented in the research sample analyzed herein since the research is specific to violent female action characters and specific to the action genre while excluding comedies, romance, and drama. However, those various mental images and impressions do fall into the categories included in the schema presented in this research. The diagram of the schema enables people to locate the various imagery and representations within a larger context in order to understand the relationships between the differing types and their relationship to a broader system of phallocentric logic.
Suggestions for Further Research

In order to support or refute some of the findings of this research, male heroes of the action genre also should be analyzed to determine if similar changes have occurred over the past 15 years which pertain to those representations as well. In addition, the limited scope of the action genre might be expanded to include other movie genres or television. There are several existing interpretive studies on television action heroines and a quantitative content analysis approach might well serve this area of media studies and expand the current research to a more comprehensive media study.

The quantification and empirical description of the physical acts of violence by female characters in movies is a starting point in trying to understand some of the recent changes in female representations in popular culture, but it is acknowledged that many forms of non-violent power are available to female movie characters. An overarching analysis of a variety of filmic female characters depicted in roles of leadership, dominance, and authority over others, spanning multiple genres might facilitate a better understanding of the general nature of imagery and representations of women in contemporary American cinema, and may or may not support the claims presented herein with respect to the female action heroine specifically.

Finally, no multi-perspective media analysis is complete without a reception study. As mentioned above, people have their own understanding of what constitutes “violent women in film.” While the schema presented in this research is an attempt to address the issue of variations in perception so that people can situate their own concepts into a larger context, it has not yet been tested or employed in any reception studies. One of the contributions of this research is the schema and ultimately its potential use as a tool to
examine and understand different representations of women in film, their relation to each other, and their relation to larger social structures. The schema presented in Figure 10 shows how these positive and negative archetypes are attached to sex and reproduction and stem from a phallocentric rationale and a patriarchal order. By identifying general patterns in the schema, the problem of polysemic interpretations is lessened as people come to understand the shared meanings that go into the construction of filmic characters. The schema therefore addresses the problems of “dominant, negotiated and oppositional” (Hall 1973) readings of filmic forms by locating them within larger phallocentric and patriarchal domains. Because of its potential usefulness, the schema should be used in conjunction with reception studies and developed further as part of an ongoing research into changing representations of women in film.
## APPENDIX A

### RESEARCH SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Box Office Gross</th>
<th>Female Star</th>
<th>Male Star</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td><em>Eve of Destruction</em></td>
<td>$5.45M</td>
<td>Renee Soutendijk</td>
<td>Gregory Hines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td><em>One Good Cop</em></td>
<td>$11.3M</td>
<td>Rachel Ticotin</td>
<td>Michael Keaton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td><em>Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves</em></td>
<td>$166M</td>
<td>Mastriantonio</td>
<td>Kevin Costner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td><em>Thelma &amp; Louise</em></td>
<td>$45.4M</td>
<td>Susan Sarandon</td>
<td>Harvey Keitel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td><em>Warlock</em></td>
<td>$9.09M</td>
<td>Lori Singer</td>
<td>Julian Sands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Alien²</em></td>
<td>$55.5M</td>
<td>Sigourney Weaver</td>
<td>Charles Dutton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Batman Returns</em></td>
<td>$163M</td>
<td>Michelle Pfeiffer</td>
<td>Michael Keaton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Patriot Games</em></td>
<td>$83.3M</td>
<td>Anne Archer</td>
<td>Harrison Ford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Rapid Fire</em></td>
<td>$14.4M</td>
<td>Kate Hodge</td>
<td>Brandon Lee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>Hard Target</em></td>
<td>$32.5M</td>
<td>Yancy Butler</td>
<td>Jean-Claude Van-Damme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>Jason Goes to Hell: The Final</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>Friday</em></td>
<td>$15.9M</td>
<td>Kari Keegan</td>
<td>John LeMay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>Point of No Return</em></td>
<td>$30M</td>
<td>Bridget Fonda</td>
<td>Gabriel Byrne</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>RoboCop 3</em></td>
<td>$10.7M</td>
<td>Jill Hennesey</td>
<td>Robert Burke</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>True Romance</em></td>
<td>$12.3M</td>
<td>Patricia Arquette</td>
<td>Christian Slater</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td><em>Natural Born Killers</em></td>
<td>$50.3M</td>
<td>Juliette Lewis</td>
<td>Woody Harrelson</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td><em>Speed</em></td>
<td>$121M</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td><em>Street Fighter</em></td>
<td>$33.4M</td>
<td>Kylie Minogue</td>
<td>Jean-Claude Van-Damme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td><em>Terminal Velocity</em></td>
<td>$16.5M</td>
<td>Natasha Kiniski</td>
<td>Charlie Sheen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td><em>The River Wild</em></td>
<td>$46.8M</td>
<td>Meryl Streep</td>
<td>Kevin Bacon</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td><em>The Specialist</em></td>
<td>$57.4M</td>
<td>Sharon Stone</td>
<td>Sylvester Stallone</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Assassins</em></td>
<td>$30.3M</td>
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<td>Sylvester Stallone</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Congo</em></td>
<td>$81M</td>
<td>Laura Linney</td>
<td>Dylan Walsh</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Desperado</em></td>
<td>$25.6M</td>
<td>Salma Hayek</td>
<td>Antonio Banderas</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>GoldenEye</em></td>
<td>$107M</td>
<td>Izabella Scorupco</td>
<td>Pierce Brosnan</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Johnny Mnemonic</em></td>
<td>$19.1M</td>
<td>Dina Meyer</td>
<td>Keanu Reeves</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Judge Dredd</em></td>
<td>$34.7M</td>
<td>Diane Lane</td>
<td>Sylvester Stallone</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Mortal Kombat</em></td>
<td>$70.4M</td>
<td>Bridgette Wilson</td>
<td>Linden Ashby</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Rob Roy</em></td>
<td>$31.6M</td>
<td>Jessica Lange</td>
<td>Liam Neeson</td>
</tr>
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</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Domestic</th>
<th>Female Star</th>
<th>Male Star</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>1995</td>
<td>Species</td>
<td>$60.1M</td>
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<td>Michael Madsen</td>
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<td>The Net</td>
<td>$50.7M</td>
<td>Sandra Bullock</td>
<td>Jeremy Northam</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>Broken Arrow</td>
<td>$70.5M</td>
<td>Samantha Mathis</td>
<td>John Travolta</td>
</tr>
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APPENDIX B

CONTENT ANALYSIS CODEBOOK AND INSTRUCTIONS

MOVIE AND VFAC CODING

Name of Film: SAMPLE NAME
Year released: SAMPLE YEAR
Assign film code ID# FILMID

VFAC: ACTRESS AND CHARACTER NAME

MALE LEAD CHARACTER & MALE HERO: ACTOR AND CHARACTER NAME
VFAC CHARACTER  CHARACTER NAME  Page Two FILMID

Age Range:  teen  20-29  30-39  40-49  50+  not applicable

Degree of realism:
1 - unreal
2 - real character, with unrealistic qualities
3 - real

Race:
1 - Caucasian
2 - African-American
3 - Asian
4 - Hispanic
5 - American Indian
6 - Hawaiian Native/pacific Islander
7 - other, describe ____________________________

Life Form:
1 - Fully human
2 - Partially human (mixed with other type of life form)
3 - Alien from other planet, human
4 - Alien life form from other planet, non-human
5 - other non-human, describe ____________________________
88 - unknown

Socio-economic status for the character.
1 - wealthy: income not dependent upon profession.
2 - professional or upper-middle class: e.g. lawyer, doctor, executive.
3 - middle class: e.g. manager, detective, nurse,
4 - working class - e.g. policeman, soldier, construction worker.
5 - poor - unemployed, impoverished.
88 - unknown
99 - not applicable

Education Level
1 - high level - college grad or above
2 - mid level - some college attendance
3 - low level - high school or lower
88 - unknown
99 - not applicable

Sexual Orientation
1 - heterosexual
2 - homosexual
3 - bisexual,
88 - unknown (not described in story)
99 - not applicable (e.g. computer)

Marital Status (at the beginning of film)
1 - single
2 - married
3 - separated
4 - divorced
5 - widowed
88 - unknown
99 - not applicable

Marital Status (at the end of film)
1 - single
2 - married
3 - separated
4 - divorced
5 - widowed
88 - unknown
99 - not applicable
VFAC’s reproduction: number of children (at the beginning of the film) _________

VFAC’s reproduction: number of children (at the end of the film) ____________

VFAC’s enemy:
  1 – female
  2 – male
  3 – male and female
  4 – other life form describe, ____________________________

Describe the VFAC character, comment on her violence and tell what happens to her in the end of the film.
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Main love interest during the film (if more than one love interest, select the one that is most important to
the story)
  1 – husband
  2 – boyfriend or male friend
  3 – girlfriend
  4 – alien/other life form
  5 – none
  6 – other, describe ________________________________
VFAC love life – the end result of love relationship (if no love interest, mark 99)
1 - love interest dies
2 - love interest and VFAC part
3 - love interest remains with VFAC
4 - VFAC marries or gets engaged with love interest
6 - other, describe __________________________________________
99 - not applicable

Love interest relationship
1 - male hero
2 - male villain
3 - none
4 - other, describe __________________________

Team support
1 - VFAC works alone
2 - VFAC works with other female(s)
3 - VFAC works with male(s)
4 - VFAC works with group of male(s) and female(s)
5 - other, describe ________________________
99 - not applicable

Equality with lead male character
1 - in general, the VFAC takes orders/direction from male lead character
2 - in general, the VFAC gives orders/directions to male lead character
3 - in general, the VFAC and male lead character treat each other as equals
99 - not applicable

Moral character of VFAC:
1 - on the side of good
2 - on the side of evil
3 - morally ambiguous or neutral

Hero status of VFAC
1 - VFAC is the main hero
2 - Male lead character is main hero, VFAC assists him
3 - Male lead character is main hero, VFAC is protected by him
4 - VFAC is evil and attempts to kill people or destroy society
99 - not applicable
Note: more than one answer can be selected

Fate of VFAC – by the end of the movie the VFAC:
1 - has died
2 - has protected society
3 - has protected a loved one or family member
4 - has protected male hero (who was not a love interest)
99 - not applicable
Violent Scene Code Sheets

A. Primary initiator of violence (first strike)
1 - VFAC
2 - male
3 - female
4 - alien/other life form (specify gender if applicable)
5 - other, describe

B. Target of violence by VFAC
1 - male
2 - female
3 - property
4 - alien/other life form (specify gender if applicable)
5 - other, describe

C. Relationship of primary target
1 - intimate male
2 - intimate female
3 - child(ren)
4 - other family member
5 - friend
6 - acquaintance
7 - stranger
8 - alien
9 - other (inc. property), describe

D. Type of weaponry (select highest level):
1 - martial arts or hand-to-hand combat
2 - knives, clubs or other non-firearm weapons
3 - guns or firearms
4 - bombs, grenades, tanks, etc.
5 - high-tech weaponry, including lasers, missiles
6 - other, describe

E. Scale of destruction (select highest level)
0 - no damage
1 - property damage only
2 - individual injury
3 - individual death
4 - two or more people with injuries or death with or without property damage, including cars, small planes, boats
5 - large group of people with injuries and deaths accompanied by large scale destruction of property including spacecraft, large planes, entire buildings
6 - large scale devastation, such as destruction of towns and cities
7 - science fiction scale of damage, such as the destruction of countries, planets, galaxies

F. Motives for VFAC’s violence:
1 - traditional feminine - protect child or loved one
2 - traditional masculine - protect citizen/society
3 - self defense
4 - escape
5 - other

G. Name the location
H. Describe the violence
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INSTRUCTIONS FOR CODING THE MOVIE

Please read over these instructions on how to code the movie and if you have any questions contact me before you begin. The purpose of this research is to determine some of the characteristics and violent behavior of female action characters. The Action Female Lead Character for each movie is referred to as the “VFAC” and you will focus on her. As you watch the film you will look for her actions, behaviors and characteristics that pertain to this research. You also need to understand how she interacts with other characters, especially the male lead character, who is identified for you.

There may also be a second VFAC that needs to be coded and/or a female villain that needs to be coded. These will be identified for you if applicable.

There are two parts to this coding process: (1) VFAC Character and (2) Violent Scenes.

I. VFAC CHARACTER:

Pages 2, 3 and 4 of the codebook consist of questions regarding the character of the VFAC and what becomes of her in the movie. Read them over before you start viewing so you know what to look for. Many of the questions require you to make value judgments and you will also use your own words to describe the VFAC’s behavior on page 3. If there is a second VFAC or a female villain, you will use pages 5, 6 and 7 for coding. Note: for clarification the reality of the VFAC is coded as follows: Real means a regular human being; real with unrealistic qualities means a regular human being who has extraordinary abilities (such as spectacular martial arts skills like Uma Thurman in Kill Bill), unreal means a being that could not really exist (like Kate Beckinsale in Underworld who is part vampire).

Some of the questions can be answered during the course of the movie as the information is relayed in the story, such as the VFAC’s occupation and marital status. Some of the information is explicitly provided during the movie while other information must be inferred by circumstances in the story, such as sexual orientation or socio-economic status. Several of the questions cannot be answered until the movie is over, such as “fate of VFAC” or “VFAC’s love life”.

Regarding the question on equality with male lead character -- The male lead character is identified for you, so pay particular attention to the relationship between the VFAC and the male lead character as the story progresses and identify who takes orders from the other most often, or if they treat each other as equals.

II. VIOLENT SCENE CODING:

Coding each violent scene is the most time consuming and difficult part of this research. It requires that you turn on the display function of your DVD player in order to show the timer. Please read the “Instructions for Coding Violent Action Scenes” carefully. If you do not understand any portion of this coding process, please contact me before you begin watching the movie.

Thank you for participating!
INSTRUCTIONS FOR CODING VIOLENT ACTION SCENES

Definitions:

Shot: a shot is a continuous strip of film that runs for an uninterrupted period of time.
Scene: a scene is a part of the action in a single location.
Sequence: a sequence is a series of scenes which form a distinct narrative unit, usually connected either by unity of location or unity of time.
Violence: Physical force exerted with the intent of causing injury or damage.
First Strike: the first physical act of aggression taken against someone or something – a point of contact should be made. Threats do not count; only physical actions.

TIMING (Turn on the Display Function of your DVD player)

You will only code the violent action scenes of the VFAC¹⁸ (whose name is provided for you). For purposes of coding acts of violence, the scene begins the moment she makes her first strike; for example, the moment she physically hits someone, or squeezes the trigger of a gun, or pulls the pin on a grenade, etc. The action ends when she stops engaging in the physical activity that was prompted by the first strike. She has to actually engage in violence; threats do not count. For example, the VFAC pulls out a gun and then does not shoot the gun: do not code this scene.

In general, begin timing when the VFAC engages in violence and end timing when she stops or when the scene changes.

Many times violent scenes will consist of different shots edited together to create a complex action scene or action sequence. The scene will jump to show what other characters are doing at the same time in the story. Unfortunately, this type of editing can be confusing when trying to time the violent actions of the VFAC and makes it hard to pinpoint the beginning and end. When this happens, use the following criteria:

If the scene changes for a few seconds to show other action taking place in the movie, and it is assumed that the VFAC is still engaging in her act of violence while the other action is occurring, then count the entire amount of time for the VFAC’s violent action and do not exclude the jumps to other scenes. [For instance, Wai Lin, the VFAC in Tomorrow Never Dies, is fighting and shooting the bad guys, then the scene jumps to show James Bond also fighting and shooting the bad guys, and then it jumps back to Wai Lin continuing on in the same fight she was previously shown in. Begin timing when Wai Lin starts to fight and end when she stops fighting, including the cutaway to Bond.]

If the scene changes for more than a few seconds and the VFAC has finished engaging in a specific act of violence and is now on to a different point of action in the story, then do not include the break away scene. Code any subsequent action as a new act of violence. [For instance, Wai Lin is fighting a group of bad guys, then the scene changes to highlight what James Bond is doing. By the time the camera turns back on Wai Lin she is

¹⁸ Also second VFAC and/or female villain if applicable.
engaging with a different bad guy or group of bad guys and is in a different scene in the action sequence. In this instance you would end the timing of the first scene at the breakaway to Bond, and then begin timing a new scene when Wai Lin is shown again.

If there is a second VFAC or female villain, include their violent actions on the same Violent Scene Code Sheet. For clarification specify which VFAC or villain you are coding in the description of violence section.

A. INITIATOR

Indicate which character makes the first strike (first strike is a physical action as described above).

B. TARGET

Indicate the gender of the character the VFAC engages in violence with, or identify as animal, property, alien or other. If the target is an alien or other life form, regardless of gender, code as alien. If the VFAC engages in violence with many people at once, identify the predominant gender present. [For instance, the VFAC shoots at a group of police, assume male gender].

C. RELATIONSHIP

Indicate the relationship between the VFAC and the character she engages in violence with. For clarification, an acquaintance is someone the VFAC has met before but is not friends with.

D. TYPE OF WEAPONRY

Indicate the highest level of weaponry used during the scene. For instance, the VFAC may begin by using martial arts, then grab a gun and start shooting, then run out of bullets and grab a club and hit someone. You would code as (3) guns or firearms.

E. SCALE OF DESTRUCTION

Indicate the highest level of destruction shown in the scene. For clarification, (4) means two or more people injured or killed and possible property damage. (5) large group of people, means more than 20 people injured or killed including substantial property damage.

F. MOTIVES

Motives are difficult to understand, which is why there is also a description of the violence asked for in question H. If the VFAC commits violence to protect her own child(ren) or a loved one then code as (1) feminine. If she commits violence to protect a stranger or to protect society in general (as in fighting bad guys to disarm a bomb); then
code as (2) masculine. If she commits violence because someone else has struck her first, then code as (3) self-defense. (Note: you should not code motive self-defense if you have coded the VFAC as primary initiator in question A above.) Often, the VFAC engages in violence in order to escape, then code as (4) escape. All other motives are coded as (5) other.

G. LOCATION

Name the location where the violence takes place such as: desert, boat, street, house, warehouse, train, office, etc.

H. DESCRIPTION OF VIOLENCE

Provide a clear but short description of violence which includes a brief motive. Example: VFAC attacks guard in order to escape; VFAC shoots computer operator in order to stop laser missile launch; VFAC TWO attacks bad girl in order to save male hero from being shot, VILLAIN attacks male hero to stop him from freeing the hostage, etc. (This is where you will identify each VFAC if there is more than one.)
APPENDIX C

INTERCODER RELIABILITY

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APPENDIX D

COPYRIGHT REQUESTS AND PERMISSIONS
September 5, 2006

MGM Clip+Still Licensing
2500 Broadway Street
Santa Monica, CA 90404

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am writing to obtain copyright permission to include the movie stills listed below in my doctoral dissertation entitled “Violent Women in Film.” The purpose of such use is strictly educational and does hold any commercial value.

The use of the photos is to illustrate various types of violent women in film in connection with my research.

The movie stills and thumbnails:

*Thelma and Louise* (1991)

In addition to my university address listed below, my email is gilpatric10@aol.com. Please inform me of any additional information you may require in order to obtain permission to use this image in my dissertation.

Sincerely,

Katy Gilpatric
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Sociology
September 5, 2006

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am writing to obtain copyright permission to include the movie stills listed below in my doctoral dissertation entitled “Violent Women in Film.” The purpose of such use is strictly educational and does hold any commercial value.

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The list of movie stills and thumbnails include:

- *Aeon Flux* (2005)

In addition to my university address listed below, my email is gilpatric10@aol.com. Please inform me of any additional information you may require in order to obtain permission to use these images in my dissertation.

Sincerely,

Katy Gilpatrick
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Sociology

Univ. of Nevada, Las Vegas
Department of Sociology
4505 Maryland Parkway • Box 455033 • Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-5033
(702) 895-3322 • FAX (702) 895-4800

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September 5, 2006

SCI Entertainment Group
Wimbledon Bridge House
1 Hartfield Road
Wimbledon, London
SW19 3RU
UK

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_Lara Croft_

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Sincerely,

Katy Gilpatric
Ph.D. Candidate

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Film Clip and Still Licensing
Sony Pictures Plaza, Suite 1016
10202 West Washington Blvd.
Culver City, CA 90232

Dear Sir or Madam:

Spoke with Steve Seller from Canal+ on 11/15/06 at 10:30AM. Okay to use Terminator 2 and Basic Instinct and Charlie's Angels photos for academic purposes only. E-mailed Linda Trujillo twice at Screen Gems, no response.

From Sony, can't use the Gilda photo.

I am writing to obtain copyright permission to include the movie stills listed below in my doctoral dissertation entitled "Violent Women in Film." The purpose of such use is strictly educational and does hold any commercial value.

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The list of movie stills and thumbnails include:

Gilda (1946) – Columbia Pictures
Basic Instinct (1992) – TriStar Pictures

In addition to my university address listed below, my email is gilpatrick10@aol.com. Please inform me of any additional information you may require in order to obtain permission to use these images in my dissertation.

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Katy Gilpatrick
Ph.D. Candidate
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Sony Pictures Plaza, Suite 1016
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The list of movie stills and thumbnails include:

- Gilda (1946) – Columbia Pictures
- Basic Instinct (1992) – TriStar Pictures

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Katy Gilpatric
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Sociology

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Ms. Kary Gilpatric  
University of Nevada Las Vegas  
Department of Sociology  
4505 Maryland Parkway  
Box 455033  
Las Vegas, NV 89154

Re: Film Still — "GILDA"

Dear Ms. Gilpatric:

Thank you for your request seeking permission to license a film still from the above-referenced Columbia motion picture for use in connection with a doctoral dissertation entitled "Violent Women in Film". Unfortunately, Sony Pictures Entertainment is unable to grant your request due to business and legal reasons.

I am sorry we are unable to assist you and kindly remind you that unauthorized use of copyrighted material will constitute copyright infringement.

Sincerely,

MARGARITA DIAZ  
Executive Director, Film Clip Licensing  
10202 West Washington Boulevard  
Turner Building, Suite 4312  
Culver City, California 90232  
(310) 244-7554 Phone  
(310) 244-1536 Fax  

Via Email: gilpatric10@aol.com
Please see attached.

FYI - Your request has been forwarded to Steve Sellers (Canal +) and Linda Trujillo (Screen Gems) for the titles Terminator 2, Basic Instinct, and Resident Evil (please see below).

Warmest Regards,
Monique Diaz
Contract Administrator, Film Clip Licensing
Sony Pictures Entertainment
10202 West Washington Blvd.
Turner Building, Room #4312
Culver City, California 90232
310.244.7562 Direct
310.244.1336 Fax
310.244.7306 Film Clip Hotline

Steve Sellers - Terminator 2; Basic Instinct are for your handling.
Linda Trujillo - Resident Evil is for your handling.

Warmest Regards,
Monique Diaz
Contract Administrator, Film Clip Licensing
Sony Pictures Entertainment
10202 West Washington Blvd.
Turner Building, Room #4312
Culver City, California 90232
310.244.7562 Direct
310.244.1336 Fax
310.244.7306 Film Clip Hotline


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20th Century Fox Licensing and Merchandising
PO Box 900
Beverly Hills, CA 90213-0900

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The list of movie stills and thumbnails include:

- Aliens (1986)
- Alien Resurrection (1997)
- Fantastic Four (2004)

In addition to my university address listed below, my email is gilpatrick10@aol.com. Please inform me of any additional information you may require in order to obtain permission to use these images in my dissertation.

Sincerely,

Katy Gilpatrick
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Sociology

Department of Sociology
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(702) 895-3322 • FAX (702) 895-4800

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September 5, 2006

Spoke with Ronnie at Universal Studios in Clip Licensing Dept on 11/15/06 at 10:05 AM. Verbal okay to use the photos. They have an exemption for academic use. This also applies to The River Wild and Halloween II.

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am writing to obtain copyright permission to include movie still listed below in my doctoral dissertation entitled “Violent Women in Film.” The purpose of such use is strictly educational and does hold any commercial value.

The use of the photo is to illustrate various types of violent women in film in connection with my research.

The movie still and thumbnail:

Van Helsing (2004)

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Sincerely,

Katy Gilpatrick
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Sociology
September 5, 2006

Warner Bros. Licensing Department
4000 Warner Blvd.
Building #11
Burbank, CA 91522

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The use of the photo is to illustrate various types of violent women in film in connection with my research.

The movie still and thumbnail:

Catwoman (2004)

In addition to my university address listed below, my email is gilpatrick10@aol.com. Please inform me of any additional information you may require in order to obtain permission to use this image in my dissertation.

Sincerely,

Katy Gilpatrick
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Sociology

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Clay & Still Licensing

September 13, 2006

Ms. Katy Giparic:
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Sociology
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
4506 Maryland Parkway, Box 455033
Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-4033

Re: Film Still Request: CATWOMAN (2004)

Dear Ms. Giparic:

Thank you for your letter dated September 6, 2006 in connection with the above.

Please be advised, Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. has no objection to you using one (1) still from the theatrical motion picture entitled CATWOMAN in your dissertation paper, so long as the following conditions are met: (1) the still is used only in connection with the submission of your paper and will not be commerically published in any way (including the worldwide web); (2) the still is obtained through legal channel; (3) the still is not altered or edited in any way; and (4) you will include a copyright notice in the publication on the pages where the still appears either on the still or immediately adjacent thereto, as follows:

"CATWOMAN © WB Films III LLC. All Rights Reserved."

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Please sign in the space provided below and return a duplicate copy of this letter to indicate your acceptance and agreement to the above.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Julie Heath
Director, Clip and Still Licensing

Agreed:

[Signature]

By: [Signature]

TOTAL P. 01

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VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Kathryn A. Gilpatric

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Henderson, NV 89074

Degrees:
Bachelor of Arts, 1999
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Master of Arts, 2002
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Special Honors and Awards:
GREAT Assistantship, Summer 2001

Dissertation Title: Violent Women in Film and the
Sociological Relevance of the Action Heroine

Dissertation Examination Committee:
Chairperson, Dr. Kate Hausbeck, Ph. D.
Committee Member, Dr. David Dickens, Ph. D.
Committee Member, Dr. Matt Wray, Ph. D.
Outside Committee Member, Dr. Larry Mullen, Ph. D.