

## ABSTRACT

### Girls With Guns: Understanding Gender and Violence in Contemporary Action Cinema

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Since Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) there has been a steady trend toward movies featuring women using firepower. These films have been, for the most part, shunned by the critical community. They are regularly called sexist and/or unsophisticated. I argue that these criticisms often ignore the basic mechanisms at work within these films and how they effectively communicate positive representations of women. Through analyses of *Alien*, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), *Barb Wire* (1996), *Sucker Punch* (2011), *Kick-Ass* (2010), and *La Femme Nikita* (1990), I argue that, while these films include problematic elements (e.g., ideologically male women, sexualization, and women whose motivation relies on one or more males), they are also often misunderstood. Within the context of a film, these taboos can be used to criticize society's understanding of established gender norms. Therefore, the "girls with guns" subgenre should not be seen as necessarily regressive.

Girls With Guns:  
Understanding Gender and Violence in Contemporary Action Cinema

by

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Communication Studies

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### *A Girl and A Gun*

The idea that “All you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun” is often attributed to the famous French New Wave filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. While there is no concrete knowledge about where he said it, the statement, whether it was Godard or not, essentially distills the essence of what is appealing about movies. To Godard, cinema is a window through which humanity should view things they would otherwise be unable to experience. In this case, girls and guns combine to make what Godard believes is a worthwhile movie.

What Godard does not explicitly state is equally important in determining why and how these components work together. If a girl and a gun provide the necessary means to create a movie, it is important to understand what Godard is actually saying. First, he did not imply that it is necessary for all movies to have a girl and a gun. Rather, these criteria happen to make a compelling combination. It is also important to note that he does not state that the girl must wield the gun. It is merely related that both must be present. In fact, within his body of work, it is just as likely, if not more so, that one will find a gun in a man’s hand.

However, a look at some recent box office hits suggests that modern audiences find girls with guns particularly compelling: *Salt* (2010), *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (2010), and *Knight and Day* (2010) are only a few of the recent hits

featuring women (or girls) as killing machines. All of these movies received mixed reviews and all of them made more than \$60 million box office (“Box Office Mojo”). This trend highlights the fact that a girl with a gun is a particularly resonate idea whether or not critics fully appreciate them.

Like Godard, I believe the idea of girls and guns provides a motivation that can be exploited to make a compelling movie. The box office is now consistently bombarded with movies about women who not only wield guns, but do so more effectively than their male counterparts. These characters resonate with both the American public and filmmakers. Entire transmedia franchises are built around stars like Angelina Jolie and Mila Jovovich, while audiences anxiously await *Kick-Ass 2: Balls to the Wall* to see 13-year-old Chloe Moretz maim bad guys. But, we must ask ourselves a question: Is this a good thing?

In this thesis, I critically examine a specific subgenre of film in which the primary draw is the spectacle of women handling firearms. Each of the chapters is a case study that investigates one aspect of the girls with guns subgenre. By considering previous research done in the area , as well as analysis of specific films, I intend to investigate why this genre is so popular, how the audience interacts with the films, and whether the female protagonists should be considered feminist heroines or just another point of male objectification.

### *Girls with Guns Foremothers*

Film has always had a fascination with both women and weapons. At the beginning of motion picture history, film relied on the audience’s interest in the realistic replication of motion, as well as the medium’s ability to show its audience

things that they would never see otherwise. Much of early filmmaking, such as the Edison Company's work, feature relatively scantily clad women dancers and kissing (acts that were considered risqué in public). Later, movies like Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) feature shootouts, hold ups, and a famous shot of a cowboy pointing a gun directly at the camera and firing. These images were received with great excitement at the time and have become synonymous with early film. This fascination with violence provides an important framework for cinema's current interest in the topic.

As cinema developed, women were generally relegated to subservient and stagnant gender roles. Judith Mayne notes that classical cinema had an "obsession with sexual hierarchy," and that it is easy to amass "evidence of woman's exclusion and victimization" (Mayne 86). Even in the rare cases of early westerns (which were considered a kid's genre), such as *Calamity Jane* (1953), women remained uncomplicated and powerless. Of course, there are plenty of examples where women take guns into their own hands and make some of the most memorable moments in film history. In Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952), Gary Cooper's pacifist wife kills a would-be murderer to save her husband, and in *Casablanca* (1942) Ingrid Bergman threatens Humphrey Bogart with a gun in order to extort him. But generally, the action stars were all male in the early days of cinema.

In the 1940s, film noir introduced the *femme fatale*. In her canonical book *From Reverence to Rape*, Molly Haskell describes these women as "the sultry (and diabolical) femmes fatales of traditional male fantasy, those silky icons of the film noir whose self-possession represented a force beyond man's control and who were

responsible for his 'fall'" (Haskell 374). Haskell notes these characters' ease in manipulating the male heroes and the plot. While they did generally wield guns at the end of the movie, they can hardly be considered action heroes. Instead, they consistently went out in a rather non-heroic blaze of self-destruction during the last act of the film. In other cases, like *Double Indemnity* (1944), a man murders the femme fatale, which serves as a reaffirmation of male power.

Beginning in 1934 the motion picture industry supported The Production Code, a form of self-regulation that outlawed explicit sex and violence, "two sure-fire box office draws" ("Hollywood Censored: The Production Code"). Because the movie industry was being stifled under this code, filmmakers eventually began ignoring it. After its fall in the late 1960s, action movies were ready to explode. They were no longer restrained, forced to make only hollow movies that would fit the code's bill. In *Hollywood Bloodshed*, James Kendrick states, "violence in movies of the 1960s and 1970s... is frequently viewed as a kind of formative moment in the aesthetic and ideological development of screen bloodshed" (ix). For most theorists, this era produced a particularly American aesthetic driven by Production Code backlash. Movies became more violent and sexually overt and saw an increase in everything that was not previously permissible under the Production Code. This ethos gave birth to the modern action movie.

The 1970s were dominated by male action personas like Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson, with very few exceptions. Even when actresses like Pam Grier starred in a variety of action-packed blaxploitation movies, such as *Coffy* (1973) or

*Sheba, Baby* (1974), they remained outside of the Hollywood mainstream and were relatively isolated. Action movies were waiting for their female heroine.

The 1970s produced many movies in which women used firearms, but they were still not “action heroes” as per our definition. They were, however, incredibly subservient, and their future was generally tied to whatever male action star they were sleeping with. For instance, in *The Omega Man* (1971), Lisa (Rosalind Cash) is a strong survivor. She leads a group of survivors in postapocalyptic Los Angeles, shoots threatening mutants, and does it in style. However, when she meets Charlton Heston, she sleeps with him and must then rely on him to save her. While she does use violence to survive, Lisa’s character emphasizes the patriarchal power structure that has survived the apocalypse.

This formula remained the case until Ridley Scott and Sigourney Weaver created a new kind of action heroine, Ripley (Weaver), in the groundbreaking movie *Alien* (1979). Throughout the movie, the audience watches Ripley develop from a passive tomboy to a gun-toting alien hunter. In the sequel, *Aliens* (1986), she is the take-charge action heroine audiences had been waiting for. These movies spawned a subgenre of action movie in which women were the ones heroically perpetrating violence.

### *The Three Major Issues*

The bulk of the literature on this topic has been written from feminist perspectives. While some theorists consider these characters to be strong women who can force their agenda on the male characters around them, many others see

them in a negative light. These critics confront the characters in question on three major issues: their actual gender, fetishism, and agency.

The first is a question of whether these characters are even women at all. Feminists generally abhor violence as displays of patriarchal power (McCaughey and King 2). Thus, when women act violently, they become masculinized or “phallic women,” which raises questions about whether these movies simply reproduce male violence in female drag (McCaughey and King 2). Do these action heroines abandon their femininity and thus transform into men? Characters like Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) in *The Matrix* (1999) or Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) even physically resemble men. In an essay discussing the horror film, Carol Clover makes an important observation about gender in film. She states, “what filmmakers seem to know better than film critics is that gender is less a wall than a permeable membrane” (Clover 208). According to Clover, these women have both feminine and masculine traits. While it is usually important that such characters are coded female, they can actually be both genders at the same time. This emphasizes the character’s humanity, rather than her gender.

It is not, however, difficult to understand where these theories come from. Ideologically masculine women show up across all genres. Bonnie (Faye Dunaway), in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), is the violent and sexually aggressive member of the gang, while Clyde (Warren Beatty) is impotent. In the television show *Firefly* (2002–2003) and the resulting movie *Serenity* (2005), Zoë (Gina Torres) plays a jaded and ruthless soldier who is married to the soft-hearted, funny pilot of the ship, Wash (Alan Tudyk). Even the “Final Girls” in slasher movies like *Halloween* (1978)

generally fall into the same boat. Clover remarks “the gender of the Final Girl is... compromised from the outset by her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance (penetration, it seems, constructs the female), her apartness from other girls, and sometimes her name” (Clover 210). In fact, Clover’s observation about penetration constructing the female is a defining factor. Women who refuse to be victims almost always face questions about their gender. This is often evident in the rape-revenge subgenre where, very outwardly, women who have been made victims refuse to be victimized anymore and take on traditionally masculine traits in order to get revenge. *Ms. 45* (1981) serves as a perfect example of this when the heroine Thana (Zoë Lund) is raped twice in one day and responds by attracting rapists and killing them without hesitation. Thana puts aside her femininity and dons the masculine persona of the hunter in order to get vengeance.

The second reason that critics take issue with girls with guns movies is the danger of sexualization. In her canonical essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which examines how the look works in cinema, Laura Mulvey explains that the audience is forced to identify with male protagonists, but “man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like” (842). Her argument is that male viewers are forced to align their look with the male protagonist and prefer not to look upon other males. The fact that even female members of the audience are encouraged to identify with the male protagonist constructs the male gaze as a universal and the female is then objectified as the man sees her. A good example of this is the scar competition between Riggs (Mel Gibson) and Cole (Rene Russo) in *Lethal Weapon 3* (1992). As the two characters show off their scars, clothing begins peeling off. The audience is

aware of the sexual tension in the air, and Riggs takes things a little too far when he removes his pants to show a knife wound. While Russo is still almost completely clothed, the audience sexualizes her because they identify with Gibson's character, while Gibson escapes the gaze almost completely. Because Riggs is the male character and hero of the movie, the audience aligns their look with him. When Riggs sexualizes Cole and tries to get her naked, the audience wants to see it happen.

Lastly, critiques of these films are made on the grounds that the female character's motivations are often subjugated. By diluting their potency, film creators undercut the character's strength. In her essay "Action Heroines and Female Viewers: What Women Have to Say," Tiina Vares interviewed women about their responses to violent movies. One woman named Robyn states, "I think the difference between male and female violence is that few women would mindlessly use an action of violence. They do it as a last resort to an intolerable situation that they can't deal with any other way" (Vares 231). Like Robyn, many female viewers appreciate the motivations on which these women act violently. In the interview transcripts, even some of those who are appalled by violence appreciate violent women on screen (Vares 229-230). Carol M. Dole suggests that "Hollywood deflected audience discomfort with the figure of the licensed-to-kill woman by incorporating into the film's dialogue the question of why a woman would place herself in men's turf" (81).

For instance, in Dole's analysis of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), she notes that Clarice (Jodie Foster) is not willing to be sexualized, is smart, is capable, and eventually uses violence to save the day. However, she is still feminized via multiple

father figures. Rikke Schubart sees feminization in terms of different feminine archetypes. In his book *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero In Popular Cinema, 1970–2006*, Schubart refers to the mother and the daughter archetypes. Clarice Starling is a perfect example of a daughter archetype. She is a productive FBI agent and human, but father figures throughout the movie subjugate her. Her need for approval from these father figures is what ultimately drives her.

Sarah Connor, on the other hand, falls under the mother archetype. Throughout the *Terminator* series, she is portrayed as the mother of humanity. Her role as mother is revealed in *The Terminator* (1984) when she finds out that she will give birth to John Connor, the savior of humankind, and is personified in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, as her entire motivation is to protect her son. While Connor is obviously a strong female, her motivations are traditionally feminine. Dole argues that these motivations keep the audience from becoming uncomfortable with the character's venturing onto traditionally masculine turf.

In her critique of *Kick-Ass*, Carrie Polansky wrote in her blog, "I am interested in a movie that lets Hit-Girl be a superhero and defeat the bad guys, and I want to see her do so for her own reasons, on her own volition. That's a feminist film I would enjoy." Thus, Polansky is not troubled by Hit-Girl's vulgar language or hyper-violent behavior; rather, the problem lies with her sense of agency or lack thereof. She believes that Hit-Girl's motivation is not her own, but rather her father's, which undercuts Hit-Girl's ability to become a true heroine.

These three issues serve as a snapshot of the battlefield on which these characters are debated and discussed in terms of their representation of

womanhood. Molly Haskell mentions that, in the early 1970s, feminists could rejoice in the fact that, if the next few years didn't show a massive surge of feminism in film, they would at least see a trickle of strong feminine heroes. "Instead," she states, "women virtually disappeared from the screen, as sex objects or as anything else, for over a decade" (Haskell 375). While she did list a few notable exceptions, including Ripley from *Alien*, she worried about how the movie industry stood when she republished the book in 1984. However, despite the fact that this drought continued throughout the 1980s, the exceptions helped spark a female action subgenre that has since flourished.

The literature surrounding this subgenre is plentiful, but a critical treatment engaging all three of these factors is still missing, especially given the recent flux of girls with guns movies. Pop literature has been eager to acknowledge these movies, but little academic research has been done in the last few years. This thesis will address all three of these issues through case studies of various movies. Each chapter will deal with one major criticism of girls with guns subgenre: phallic women, fetishization, and feminization.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Phallic Women

#### *The Death of Freud?*

One of the most obvious approaches to studying female action stars is through a psychoanalytic lens. However, this poses a problem for film theorists, as psychoanalysis has many critics who believe that it is “without significant experimental or epidemiological support” (Crews 55). In fact, Drew Westen makes an interesting and entertaining observation that “Probably no one’s death has been heralded as many times, over as many years, as Sigmund Freud’s” (1061). Freud is so often written off as “dead” or “irrelevant” that many people discount him completely. The psychology community has all but discarded Freud’s work. A study done at the University of Michigan of 150 highly ranked universities shows that one is more likely to study psychoanalysis outside of the psychology department than within it (Redmond and Shulman 391).

However, there remains a significant presence of Freudian thought within film studies. According to Patricia Cohen of *The New York Times*, “The humanities and social sciences have welcomed psychoanalysis without caveats” (1). In fact, it is common practice for film studies, along with the other humanities, to invoke Freud’s name and theories regularly. Theorists like Laura Mulvey have used the psychoanalytic lens to investigate gender roles and to better understand film’s

ideological mechanics. Freud cannot be discounted within film studies for two major reasons.

The first is simply that Freud's ideas were very popular and have been diffused throughout our society. While it is widely accepted that much of his theory is not psychologically relevant, filmmakers and audiences are still bombarded with his ideas on a regular basis. Freud is referenced regularly in all forms of media, from Hollywood to literature. In fact, Edward Bernays, Freud's nephew, is known as the "father of public relations" (Curtis) and developed our current concept of advertising. Because these ideas are so prevalent in society, filmmakers often times reference them. While the mind does not necessarily work the way that Freud theorized, the psychoanalytic lens provides a good framework for interpretation. Because so many artists know Freud's theories, they purposely incorporate them into their works.

The second reason the psychoanalytic lens is a useful tool for film theorists is that not all of it is defunct. In *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud's Worst Nightmare*, Robin Wood responds to the criticisms that he relied too heavily on Freud in his previous work, *The American Nightmare*, in which he discussed horror movies in terms of the "return of the repressed." In the foreword, Wood laments that "Few today appear to read Freud or Marx with a view to sorting out what is still valid, what can best be cast off, and what needs to be rethought" (xv). Among other topics, he discusses how, in particular, George A. Romero's *Living Dead Trillogy* (1968–1985; it was only a trilogy when Wood wrote about it) celebrated an "active and increasingly resourceful heroine who eventually learns to free herself from

male domination and social formations” (Wood xvi). Wood surmises that Freud’s perceptions of the masculine and the feminine are still valid and that one can use them to understand how female characters are perceived within media, especially in a subgenre defined by its use of women.

*Girls, Guns and Castration Anxiety*

The Penis. This organ appears in the form of... sharp, penetrating weapons and tools such as drills and swords; tools and all sorts of complicated machinery and apparatus in general; tubes that can shoot, squirt, or give off smoke such as firearms, cigarettes... cigars, hoses, Roman candles, fountain pens, and the like.

—Lawrence M. Porter

In Freud’s terms, a weapon is almost always considered a phallic object. Thus, when women wield a firearm, it is often times uncomfortable for the male viewer. Freud describes this in terms of castration anxiety; because the phallus represents masculine power (violence, etc...), the viewer sees this act as the woman possessing something that is not hers (see Dole 83). Not only does the heroine undermine the male power structure, but her possession of the gun represents a threat to the viewer’s very manhood. Often times, in order to subvert this castration anxiety, the filmmakers (who are almost always male) sexually objectify or feminize the female character.

There is, however, a large group of action heroines who are hard, deadly, and rarely sexualized. These women wield large firearms, perform dangerous stunts, and share traits with characters like John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) and John McClain (Bruce Willis). Despite the female characters’ use of phallic firepower, male

audiences flock to movies like *Knight and Day* (2010), which made \$76 million, and *Salt* (2010), which made \$118 million (“Box Office Mojo”).

“As many critics have pointed out, the image of heroines wielding guns and muscles can be conflated within the binary gender codes of the action cinema to render these women as symbolically male” (Brown, “Gender and the Action Heroine” 53). Because these characters are physically female, yet ideologically male, they are arguably without gender or, at worst, a man in woman’s clothing. This has led some critics to not take them seriously as feminist heroines. As Carol M. Dole noted, “academic feminists have sometimes derided action heroines as gender transvestites” (Dole 79).

In *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*, Yvonne Tasker counters this theory in an analysis of *The Quick and the Dead* (1995) by arguing that “Ellen’s (Sharon Stone) ‘masculine’ status does not render her asexual (something that Stone’s image might not allow)” (57). While Ellen is presented as a strong and powerful gunfighter, she is able to draw on her feminine qualities to get what she wants. Tasker’s observation that violent women can be coded as women, despite the fact that they often act in ways that are traditionally considered masculine, is key to this chapter. Tasker notes that Ellen is not “asexual”; that is, the audience views her as a woman who has feminine traits, but is expected to act in a historically masculine manner. By incorporating this type of character, filmmakers avoid making male audience members uncomfortable while still subverting the patriarchal power structure.

In *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol Clover discusses the one-sex and two-sex models. The one-sex model is one in which we consider the sexual organs as the same; one is merely inside the body, and one is outside. This model emphasizes that a woman can become gendered male in the right circumstances, or vice-versa. The two-sex model is one where male and female stand in opposition. In this model, to be female is to not be male. The one-sex binary, as she describes it, “is a universe, in other words, of slippage and fungibility, in which maleness and femaleness are always tentative and hence only apparent” (Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* 14).

This chapter will deal specifically with these slippages. The films discussed feature shifts between male and female, which specifically help the male viewer disavow castration anxiety. I will present close analysis of two characters—Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) from *Terminator 2* (1991) and Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) from *The Matrix* (1999)—in order to better understand how this phenomenon works.

*Terminator 2* is one of the quintessential female action movies. Sarah Connor touts automatic assault rifles and ruthlessly hunts those who she believes to be her enemies. In her review in *The New York Times*, Janet Maslin noted, “Although this fast-paced sequel locks the Terminator and T-1000 into an extended gladiatorial duel over the fate of Sarah and her son, Sarah looks like more than a match for both of them” (Maslin, “*Terminator 2: Judgment Day* - Review/Film”), and she later describes Connor as “vicious and feral.” My decision to look at Connor is based on the fact that she is a distilled and much imitated version of the masculine female

archetype. Eight years later, *The Matrix* changed the moviescape in the same way that *Terminator 2* had. Not only did it give rise to a new wave of stylized violent movies, but Trinity's characteristics, such as her tight leather look, short haircut, and take charge attitude, would show up in many action movies like *Aeon Flux* (2005), *Blade: Trinity* (2004), and the *Resident Evil* series (2002–2010).

So-called phallic women are defined by their amazing physical condition, tight and/or revealing clothes, and their ability to transfix our gaze for long periods of time. They are, however, not directly sexualized (at least not regularly), Similar to how men are viewed within action movies. In his paper "Hard Bodies and Sidelong Looks," Nicky Falkof discusses how the audience views classic '80s action stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, arguing:

These bodies were necessary to inculcate the 'new' or revitalized masculine ideal but their visuality, the presentation of male physicality as the object of to-be-looked-at-ness, was saddled with a set of concurrent ideological implications and complications.  
(Falkof 21)

The problem that Falkof illuminates is that it is uncomfortable for the predominantly male audience of these action movies to watch an almost naked man on screen. The in-shape male body is fetishized immediately, and because it is an object of desire, the director must disavow sexual desire in order to counteract any charges of homoeroticism. Falkof notes that "what action cinema explicitly avoids is an eroticization of a male physique that could be too easily read as one constructed for voyeuristic pleasing in viewing" (23). Action movies do this in a number of ways, but the most common is using violence to disassociate the body from homosexual intent. By making these characters hyper-violent, the viewer can watch the movie in

the context of what the body is doing, rather than what the body looks like. This method of subverting the gaze through violence is how phallic women are allowed to take action without alienating the audience.

In this chapter I will first give some background on movies featuring phallic women, which will then tie into my individual analyses. I will argue that the phallic women in these movies should not be discounted for their masculinity. Instead, viewers should see them as an effective critique of the male power structure. Both Sarah Connor and Trinity are not to be viewed simply as women in male drag, but as people who assume the gender roles that are necessary for their lives. This subverts the traditional power structure by making gender unimportant in terms of assigning power.

*Terminator 2: "Good morning Dr. Silverman. How's the knee?"*

In chapter one, I left the history of girls with guns movies at its foundation: *Alien* (1979). Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) is a tomboy space trucker who is the only crewmember of the seven on board (six if one does not count cyborgs) who manages to evade and kill the alien hunting them on their spaceship. The second half of the movie is her journey from dockworker to action heroine. At the beginning of the movie, she is in the middle of the chain of command. She ineffectually tries to get her crew to follow protocol in leaving the infected people in quarantine outside of the ship. As the movie continues, she adopts a ridiculously large flamethrower (phallic object) and takes charge of the ship as the men above her gradually fell prey to the alien. This act subverts the masculine command/power structure in place at

the beginning of the movie. Ripley is effective where her masculine counterparts are helpless. Thus, by the end of the movie, Sigourney Weaver is a “phallic woman.”

Five years later, a similar story would take place in James Cameron’s *The Terminator* (1984). Like *Alien* before it, *The Terminator* is a coming-of-age story about Sarah Connor. Sarah begins the story as a struggling waitress who is into dating, getting dressed up, and going out. Throughout the movie, the audience is witness to her transformation from a young single girl to a rugged survivalist. The last line that Sarah has before smashing the Terminator is, “You’re terminated fucker!” thus emphasizing her overwhelming defeat of the Terminator and her transformation into a phallic woman. As James Kendrick notes, “because quips almost always follow an act of violence in which the hero dispatches a villain, they function also as a taunt, a verbal assault following the physical assault to further degrade the enemy and underscore the hero’s victorious status” (*Hollywood Bloodshed: Violence in 1980s American Cinema* 102).

Shortly after this, Cameron wrote and directed *Aliens* (1986), the first sequel in the *Alien* series. Although Ripley escaped her situation from the first movie, she is still in survival mode and is no longer comfortable in her normal surroundings. When she leads a platoon of marines to the planet where they originally found the alien, she slips into her combat mode in order to defend the group and escape. Ripley is the one who volunteers for the dangerous jobs, burns up the alien nest, and eventually faces down the giant queen alien alone in hand-to-hand combat. Her character is distilled from *Alien* into a sort of essence of action. As Thomas Doherty noted, in *Aliens*, “once the first blood is shed and the onslaught begins, Cameron up-

shifts from cool suspense to supercharged combat action” (Doherty 187). The movie changes abruptly from a horror/thriller to an action movie, and Ripley changes with it, becoming a full-fledged action heroine in the process. This is countered by the strong motherhood themes presented, especially in the director’s cut, which I will deal with in Chapter Four.

Like *Aliens* had done five years before, *Terminator 2* expounded on the first movie in terms of the heroine’s character growth. The difference is that, where *Aliens* develops Ripley from the character we know from the end of the previous film, *Terminator 2* skips years of Sarah’s metamorphosis. The last time viewers saw Sarah, she was a pregnant woman cruising down the road in her Jeep toward her destiny. A boy says the now cliché line “A storm’s coming,” to which Sarah replies “I know,” emphasizing her acknowledgment of her fate. The first time we see Sarah in her mental hospital room in *T2*, she looks part warrior and part wild animal. She is immediately fetishized, but in an interesting way that is more than reminiscent of the way that one would fetishize a male action star. The camera starts on a close-up of her biceps during her pull-ups, emphasizing her well-built body. She is also extremely sweaty and not made up at all. While her body is relished and looked at, Cameron avoids any sexual implications by making Sarah violent—in essence, a male character. Cameron does not want us to look at her and see how beautiful she is. That was the old Sarah. This woman has been doing nothing but preparing for the end of the world since the conclusion of the first movie. She looks at her doctor and says, “Good morning Dr. Silverman. How’s the knee?,” a rather mean-spirited quip aimed at her psychiatrist, whom she stabbed in the leg with a pen during a

recent escape attempt. The stark differences between Sarah *T1* and Sarah *T2* are undeniable. At the end of *The Terminator* Sarah is still feminine. While she did destroy the Terminator, quite violently, she was still essentially effeminate. The beginning of *Terminator 2* is thus the audience's introduction to Sarah the "phallic woman."

From the very beginning of *T2*, it is made clear that Sarah is the master of her own destiny. She breaks out of the mental institution and tries to kill Miles Dyson (Joe Morton) in order to change the future of humankind. Her first shot is more than reminiscent of the way one would fetishize a male action star, for instance John Rambo making his knife at the beginning of *Rambo* (2008). In both scenes, the audience concentrates on the hard bodies of the subject, but they are also aware of the power they wield.

The imagery of Sarah Connor is a direct descendent of Ripley from *Alien*. Rikke Schubart notes that Ripley "is the prototype after which later mother heroes—Sarah in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*...—are fashioned" (169). Ripley has few to no feminine traits in the movie, but the viewer still assumes from the start that Ripley is feminine because she is a woman genetically. However one consciously or unconsciously realizes that she is not fitting into the gender roles that are normally assigned to women. Like Ripley before her, Sarah Connor is tough as nails and has no feminizing characteristics except for her motherhood. In *T2*, Cameron distills Ripley in order to make Sarah. Her motherhood, the one feminine trait that is emphasized in the movie, is biological (unlike Ripley, who is arguably only a mother symbolically throughout the entire series) and more broad because

Sarah is effectively the mother of the human race. However, Cameron chooses not to emphasize the loving and nurturing side of Sarah's motherhood. When Newt (Carrie Henn), the child figure, is introduced in *Aliens*, Ripley hugs her and comforts her. In contrast, Sarah's reaction to her son John (Edward Furlong) is to check him for bullet holes rather than to be close. Sarah is a more distilled version of Ripley: She is stronger, more prepared, and more masculine.

After Sarah breaks out of the mental institution, she, her son John, and the Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) make their way to Mexico to see an old friend. Here, it is revealed that Sarah has been stockpiling weapons for years. Whereas Ripley had one phallic flamethrower in *Alien* and a series of machine guns in *Aliens*, Sarah is given an entire bunker of giant guns with which to take down the bad guys. While revealing the bunker, John says, "One thing about my mom, she always plans ahead." Being prepared in the context of Sarah's motherhood is warped. Rather than remembering diapers or saving for college, Sarah's motherly instinct is to bring extra guns. She is a violent mother, one who wields a bunker's worth of masculine power symbols.

Watching Sarah brandish giant firearms and assault men is potentially disconcerting to a male audience. She occupies a position within the narrative structure that is historically reserved for men. Because of this, she is masculinized in order to fit the role. Sarah confronts the viewer with a concept that Yvonne Tasker calls "musculinity." Tasker notes, "some of the qualities associated with masculinity are written over the muscular female body" (Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 149). When the viewer looks upon Sarah's bulging biceps, they see masculinity.

From the beginning of the movie, Sarah is masculinized because of her physique, and because the viewer associates masculinity with her image, Sarah fits into her role as action heroine.

Sarah Connor is a distilled phallic woman. She exhibits the traits of many of her predecessors, but in a much more concentrated manner. Since its release in 1991, her character has been reproduced in numerous movies and even a spinoff television show, *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008–2009). Sarah represents one means by which violent female characters can be successfully incorporated into action movies. Many have argued that she is, at least ideologically, a man. The contrast between Sarah's biological femininity and her masculine acts and looks creates a tension in which gender roles are challenged and even reversed. Sarah is a strong woman fighting her way through a man's world (and, in fact, a man's genre). Eight years later, another phallic woman would arrive on the scene and forever change the action landscape.

*The Matrix: "Dodge this."*

In the documentary *Return to the Source: Philosophy and 'The Matrix'* (2004), the philosopher Dr. Cornel West states that "The Wachowski Brothers are very, very concerned with piercing through the mundacity, piercing through the superficiality" (Oreck). *The Matrix* does, indeed, present viewers with a series of interesting philosophical ideas and situations, not the least of which is the leading female character, Trinity.

At the beginning of the movie, the audience is invited to listen to a phone call between a man and a woman. As the tension builds, we cut to a police raid in

progress. The police break down the door to a hotel room to find a figure in a chair facing the wall. Kim Edwards notes that the character is “suggestively male: from behind we see square shoulders, boy-cut hair and leather jacket, and this *mise en scene* coupled with the swift transition since the voice-over implies we are about to meet the male speaker from the phone call” (K. Edwards 117). The character is, of course, not a man at all. Trinity jumps out of her chair and promptly dispatches all of the police in the room in a particularly stylized fashion (this is the first use of the now often copied “bullet time”). Like James Cameron did with Sarah at the beginning of *Terminator 2*, the Wachowski Brothers make a clear statement about how Trinity’s character is going to work. The directors give the audience an image that contrasts with itself; Carrie-Anne Moss has short, manlike hair and is dressed in a way that suggests masculinity, even as her skin-tight clothes exploit her classical beauty, thus muddying the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity. Trinity’s contrasting characteristics are used in the same way that Sarah’s are in *Terminator 2*.

Edwards later notes that “the freedoms of cross-dressing and sexual ambiguity are celebrated and exacting male/female dichotomies become demonized” (K. Edwards 118). In this way, *The Matrix* considers a new kind of “phallic woman.” Trinity still takes on many masculine traits, but without compromising her gender, which the Wachowskis emphasize by consistently contrasting her masculine traits with more feminine traits. She is both feminine and masculine, but never one exclusively. For instance, immediately after she escapes from the police raid, she gets trapped in a phone booth trying to escape the Matrix.

Instead of looking at her mannish haircut from behind, the audience is aware of her feminine face and her styled bangs falling across her face. This gender confusion is then emphasized in a scene a few minutes later, in which Neo (Keanu Reeves) realizes that Trinity is, in fact, a woman. Neo goes through the same realization about Trinity that the audience did just a few minutes ago. When he states that he thought she was a man, she replies, "Most men do."

Later, when planning on breaking back into the Matrix and retrieving her leader, Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), Trinity uses her seniority to thwart the male power structure. She notes that she is the senior officer on board and that if Neo doesn't like it, he can "go to hell." Her undermining of the traditional power structure is complimented by her use of guns for the next five minutes. In fact, during a shootout in the lobby of the building of interest, she rips a guard's shotgun away from him and shoots him in the stomach. In this case, Trinity is metaphorically castrating a man in a position of power. The security guard represents laws and rules and Trinity strips him of his power and destroys him with it. However, the filmmakers avoid any feelings of anxiety because Trinity has yet to step into her feminine role (being Neo's love and support).

During the climax of the movie, Trinity declares her love for Neo. This is a tension-filled scene that is made more poignant by a sudden acknowledgement of traditional gender roles. The woman is admitting her love for the male hero. While it would be easy to consider this admission of love an undermining action for Trinity's tough and masculine character, it is also the first time that we really see femininity in the film (with the exception of the woman in red). During her

confession, the viewer discovers that the Oracle (Gloria Foster) predicted that she would fall in love with “the One.” In this way, by professing her love for Neo, Trinity is endowing him with his power and, in fact, bestowing life to him (the most feminine thing somebody can do). All of a sudden, Trinity’s character brings femininity back into the movie right before the end, thus preserving the muddled masculine/feminine dichotomy that the Wachowskis established for her in the first scene. At the end of the movie, she is presented as a woman who can wield traditionally masculine power at will.

Trinity’s character shatters the mundane and the superficial. She is exciting, beautiful, and yet strangely masculine. She is presented to the audience as a phallic woman even as she constantly subverts this character type through imagery, action, and words.

### *The Difference*

There is an interesting binary between perceived masculine and perceived feminine traits. Sarah Connor and Trinity both constitute phallic women because they reflect many “masculine” traits, but each represents a different variation on this archetype. Sarah embraces the masculine and only shows signs of femininity when she has a breakdown. She physically takes on a manly shape, a process that Tasker refers to as “musculinization.” Her ability to look, talk, dress, and act masculine allows her to become a strong woman in the context of the film.

Trinity, on the other hand, is boyish. She is purposely dressed to both accent her shape and remain reminiscent of a young man. For the majority of the movie, her actions are quite masculine, but her big moment of femininity at the end serves

the purpose of contrasting those actions as well as emphasizing her power. Even when other characters are stationed higher within the movie's power structure, she maintains a sense of control over her situation.

The women in this category are always in charge and ready to kill. They are, however, rarely sexualized. The fetishization of these characters is undeniable, but not in the way one might think. They are almost always fetishized as if they were a man. Linda Hamilton is photographed as a body builder, bringing to mind images of Stallone or Schwarzenegger. Carrie-Anne Moss has a masculine hair cut and dress style. The other end of the spectrum presents action women who are fetishized specifically because of their femininity. *Barb Wire* (1996) is an example of a movie that uses a woman's sexuality to critique these same issues.

While many abhor the idea of phallic women, it is impossible not to notice the utility of these characters. They challenge gender roles, threaten historically male-dominated power structures, and open doors for women into movies that have been dominated by men since the action genre's inception. These foremothers have created an environment in which "our viewing pleasures may not only tolerate, but they may even partially depend on, gender posturings that challenge conventional mythologies of sexual difference" (Willis 109). Now, more than ever, challenging gender stereotypes is an acceptable part of mainstream cinema.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Action Chick Fetish

#### *The Fetishized Killer Female*

In short, men do not have to look good in order to be heroes. It is different with women. The first step to qualify as a female hero in a man's world is to be young and beautiful. If not young, then she must be botoxed to look young. If not beautiful, then she must have silicone breasts, be aided by plastic surgery, wigs, makeup and never ever a wrinkle on her pretty face.

—Rikke Schubart

Schubart's observation highlights the difference between the female and the male within cinema. Pick any movie poster and one will see an attractive woman, if any woman at all. Men can be hideous, lacking in acting ability, unpleasant, or even unable to effectively speak English, but will still be accepted by an audience. It seems, however, that a woman must be pleasant to look at in order to get a part.

As Laura Mulvey points out, "Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motiff of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire" (Mulvey 841). The act of watching a movie, combined with the dark conditions that isolate viewers from each other, creates an environment that fosters a sort of voyeurism. Women rarely escape their roles without becoming what Mulvey describes as the "bearer of the look" while men generally are agents of action. In fact, there are many movies that specifically rely on a fetish built around the female body.

The movies that I discuss in this chapter are ones that exploit female sexuality in order to develop the character. Violence, however, provides an interesting backdrop for the sexualized female. While the object of the gaze is powerless and without voice, action women use “masculine” violence in order to affect the world around them. In this section I will show that, in some cases, the contrast between fetishization and violence can criticize and undermine classical notions of the look. While the surface is oftentimes vaguely pornographic, the underlying theme is that those who choose to fetishize these women are in danger of being punished.

I discuss two movies that explicitly sexualize their characters. The first, David Hogan’s *Barb Wire* (1996), is constructed around the character Barbara Wire (Pamela Anderson). This movie is an interesting case because Barb’s “objectified appearance has led to complete dismissal by feminist critics” (M. Edwards 40). In the movie, she marches around wearing almost nothing and relying on Anderson’s porn star persona. The movie, however, attempts to criticize the viewing audience for objectifying her. The second movie I will discuss, Zach Snyder’s *Sucker Punch* (2011), is structured around four young girls acting out their fate in an insane asylum and two different levels of the imagination (in neither of which are they very well clothed). The character Baby Doll (Emily Browning) imagines that she is forced into being a stripper/prostitute, counting down the day until she is essentially sold into sexual slavery. Both movies rely heavily on the actresses they cast and their willingness to show skin, but both also use interesting mechanisms to critique the very fetishization they engender.

These movies are interesting as objects of analysis because of these mechanisms and the manner in which they try to use objectification to critique itself. While I do not believe that these are feminist masterpieces or even good movies, I do think that they are overlooked as tools that can help us understand how sexualization works in film.

### *The Look*

The look is an important, and much theorized, concept within the psychoanalytic branch of film theory. Essentially, those who subscribe to the theory believe that the one who looks holds power over the one being looked upon. Many feminist critics have latched onto this concept because it presents a dichotomy between the man who looks and the woman who is objectified by that look.

E. Ann Kaplan observes, "Within the context of the film text itself, men gaze at women, who become objects of the gaze" (15). Because the man holds the power of the gaze, the woman is objectified. She is powerless and helpless and is thus subjugated to the man. Mark Jancovich notes that "The gaze is associated with activity and control, and women are therefore either refused the active gaze or punished for exercising it" (57). For instance, in Billy Wilder's classic *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), forgotten Hollywood silent film legend Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) controls the protagonist Joe Gillis (William Holden). She spies on him, forces him to stay in her house, and tries to make him fall in love with her. At the end of the film, when Gillis makes it clear that he will no longer live under her thumb, she takes her revolver and shoots him. In this case, as with most femme fatals, Desmond is punished for her power. No matter how much influence she

exerts over Gillis, she is destined for failure. Regardless of her money, her fading looks, or her ability to gaze upon him, Desmond is helpless. Rather than trying to escape or play the crime off as self-defense, Desmond goes insane and is arrested.

Kaplan goes on to discuss the nature of the look in relation to the actual cinematic apparatus. She states, “the spectator, in turn, is made to identify with this male gaze, and to objectify the women on the screen; and the camera’s original ‘gaze’ comes into play in the very act of filming” (15). The camera, and thus the viewer’s, gaze is on the female as well, as the audience identifies with the male protagonist. All of the looks within and external to the film are aligned on the female. This emphasizes the voyeuristic pleasure of the movies. The audience gets to look in on a world and derive pleasure from it without the risk of interacting with or being affected by it.

When the female gazes back, she is, in effect, disrupting this pleasure. Because the audience has identified with the male protagonist, if the female looks upon him, it is as if she has broken through the cinematic device and is engaging with the audience, thus violating the pleasure of voyeurism. According to Laura Mulvy’s canonical essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” because the woman cannot look back at those who are gazing on her, she exists solely to be looked upon.

In both *Barb Wire* and *Sucker Punch*, there are no male protagonists with whom to identify. Both women see what is going on in their environment, but are being viewed by the presumably male audience. This creates an issue regarding the comfort of the audience. In both cases, the camera fetishizes the woman, but the

characters who try to do this within the movie are punished. The directors of each movie try to use this collision of looks to critique the fetishization, but fail to do so.

*Barb Wire: "Don't call me babe"*

In her response to *Barb Wire*, Marlo Edwards "challenges the tendency to view representations of the sexualized female body as inevitably regressive" (39). She is certainly right about Barb representing the sexualized female body. Every character in the movie looks at her sexually, and when she does wear clothing, there is not very much of it. She is also correct in noting that Barb does not get the credit she deserves for being a complicated character who consistently challenges normative gender roles. Whether these complications redeem the misogynistic overtones of the movie is debatable.

*Barb Wire* is a science fiction remake of Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942). It takes place in the year 2017 during the second American civil war in the last free city in the country, Steel Harbor. Barb's nightclub, the Hammerhead, is the place to be. One night, Barb's ex-lover Axel (Temuera Morrison) shows up looking for help. He is trying to sneak Dr. Corrina Devonshire (Victoria Rowell) north to Canada to make public her knowledge of Congressional Directorate bioweapons.

In order to do this, Axel must track down, with Barb's help, a pair of contact lenses that will get Devonshire through security and onto a plane heading north. When Barb comes into possession of these lenses, a series of events unfolds that leads to the classic *Casablanca* ending: Axel and Devonshire flee on an airplane and Barb stays behind with Police Chief Willis (Xander Berkeley).

The movie's opening credit sequence features Barb on a trapeze, bathed in flashing blue light, wearing a tiny black leather dress and a pair of stilettos. At first, the audience is not aware that she is in a strip club; just that she is doing a strip tease and being sprayed with water. About one minute into the dance, we see the audience for the first time. The scene comes to what the audience might assume would be the natural ending point, but the dance continues. As the film's audience becomes more and more aware of the company with whom they are being forced to identify (the men in the strip club), the potential for discomfort increases. The men spraying Barb with the water are wearing ponchos, which give the appearance of giant prophylactics, constituting giant squirting phalluses. After an uncomfortable four minutes, Barb reaches down, removes one of her heels, and shields her eyes from the lights to see a man who is cat-calling her. When the music ends, she throws her shoe and hits the man between the eyes. She then says in voice-over, "If one more person calls me babe..."

The scene is straightforward in terms of style and identification. The first shot engages the audience in gazing at Barb. She seems unaware of her surroundings and dances for her male voyeurs' pleasure. As Mulvey put it, she exists only to be looked at. When the viewer is introduced to the strip club audience, it is quickly made clear that he is to identify with these perverse men. This is an uncomfortable situation for the viewer, but the alignment of the camera's gaze with the vulgar patrons makes it impossible not to identify with them if only on a purely sensory level. Just when the viewer feels the most uncomfortable, Barb returns the gaze. She peers out into the audience, finds the worst offender and

thrusts her shoe, violently stabbing the man in the face. It is as if Hogan is punishing the audience for looking, rather than punishing Barb for encroaching upon the male gaze. Her aversion to the condescending word “babe” emphasizes this concept by stating that she is not to be trivialized. The friction caused by Barb violating the rule of the look is left completely unchecked and thus criticizes the viewer for looking.

This opening scene foreshadows the way that director David Hogan and writers Chuck Pfarrer and Ilene Chaiken (most famous for her work on the series *The L Word* [2004–2007]) will use Barb for the rest of the movie. Whenever Barb begins to slip into her feminine role, she resorts to an over-the-top display of violence in order to maintain her power. She is almost always in charge of her situation, and men continuously underestimate her because of her gender and her appearance. This interaction is applicable for both the characters in the movie and the movie’s audience.

After the strip tease scene, Barb proceeds to rescue a young girl who is being held captive in the bar. She sneaks around in the back of the building until she finds where the girl is locked up. When the owner of the club tries to stop her, Barb uses her femininity to woo him into a false sense of security, poisons him with a dart, and takes the keys. As the escape continues, it becomes evident that Barb resents the job. When the girl screams as they rappel from a high window, Barb says “Shut up!” When Barb is expected to react maternally she shuns the daughter figure. In the context of the story, Barb resents the young girl, but on another level, she resents the audience’s tendency to force her into a typical maternal category. Again the audience is chastised for watching Barb.

In fact, there is only one time in which Barb demonstrates unchecked femininity. Axel appears in Barb's bar looking for help. When he approaches her, Barb reacts violently, punching him and referring to something that happened in Seattle. Later, about halfway through the movie, the audience is treated to a flashback that explains why Barb is so angry. She is standing on the tread of a helicopter, ready to escape a war zone. The man standing behind her tells her that they have to go, and Barb replies simply, "No, he'll be here." Another soldier appears out of the smoke and tells Barb that the man she is waiting for will not be coming, and the helicopter takes off and flies to safety. The scene seems extremely passive for the character and essentially undermines Barb by making her a victim. In any other part of the movie, she would have used violence to take control of the situation. While one could argue that the scene is a flashback in which Barb is a lesser version of the woman presented in the film present, it runs contrary to the essence of her character by establishing that Barb's motivation is her scorn over a man. She is no longer sexually or emotionally independent.

The movie never does anything to correct this relationship. Barb is never independent again. Despite how angry she is with Axel, she moves through the remainder of the movie in the same manner as before; but, as the audience now knows, she is motivated by him. That Barb does not act by her own sense of agency undermines her behavior. Even when it is clear to the audience that Barb will be holding onto the debit card full of money at the end of the movie, it is clear that her true feelings are for Axel.

In the final scene, the last thing Axel does during his and Barb's goodbye is to touch her lips very sexually, a gesture that affects her deeply. Hogan tries to recover with the last lines in the film in which police chief Willis states, "I do believe I'm falling in love," to which Barb responds "Get in line." Here, Hogan is trying to emphasize that Barb does not need a man to survive, but what he actually underscores is that Barb *is* fetishized by every man who looks at her. Thus, the film ends in the same way that it started, with Barb as the object of the gaze and an understanding that we are supposed to admire and lust after her body.

Yet, the film consistently complicates any viewer association with those who objectify Barb. Hogan provides the audience with a series of repulsive male figures with whom they are to identify for very brief periods of time. The conflict between identifying with those who gaze on Barb and identifying and sympathizing with Barb simultaneously creates a tension that punishes the viewer. The movie, however, ultimately fails because this mechanism is nullified by her relationship with Axel. "In many films that feature action-hero women, the challenges she presents are minimized (to some extent) by either desexualizing her to underplay her femininity or by containing that sexuality and domesticating her/it in a traditional heterosexual, maternal, and/or father-daughter relationship" (M. Edwards 41). In this case, the challenges are minimized because she is acting for Axel. It is also important to note that, while the movie tries to portray Barb as powerful because of her sexuality, she is in fact, subjugated by it through her relationship with Axel. Thus, even though the movie falls short of its goals, it is able to raise an interesting question: Are these sexualized and objectified women

necessarily regressive? Hogan uses Barb's character and Anderson's physical features to criticize the very sexualization they stimulate.

*Sucker Punch: "You have all the weapons you need"*

Director Zach Snyder is famous for high-tech comic book adaptations. His movies *300* (2006) and *Watchmen* (2009) earned him a reputation for stunning special effects, incredible violence, and sexually charged imagery. *Sucker Punch* (2011) is the first project over which he had full creative control. As often occurs when young filmmakers earn enough clout to make the high-budget movie of their choosing, Snyder made a movie in which he had more interest than his public. Snyder, it seems, was trying to build a feminist text that would parody the action genre and the nature of film itself by turning clichés into a grand metaphor that equates female sexuality with violence.

The movie was released to largely scathing reviews, with a Tomatometer rating of only 22% (Rotten Tomatoes). One reviewer stated that "Zack Snyder's *Sucker Punch* unfolds like a video game-addled adolescent boy's wet dream wrapped in pseudo-feminist fits of girl power" (Kendrick, "Sucker Punch"); another said "as is often pointed out, simply giving female characters weapons and fishnets and then sending them on a mission to blow up some bad guys does not exactly create empowered and self-actualized female characters" (Walber). It is clear from its reception that rather than empowering women, the movie makes a mockery of progressive filmmaking. While clever, Snyder's device for creating the metaphor of sex as violence fails because it is weak at its core. Rather than empowering them, *Sucker Punch* further objectifies its female characters.

The movie opens with a 10-minute dialogue-less sequence that reveals the catalyst for the rest of the film. Baby Doll (Emily Browning) accidentally kills her younger sister who is about to be raped by their stepfather (Gerard Plunkett). He then has Baby Doll committed to an insane asylum by claiming that she has gone crazy after the death of her mother (thus hurting her daughter). He pays off an orderly to forge some papers and have her lobotomized in a week. This is the conflict for the rest of the movie, and it presents the first problem within the movie's ideology. Snyder proposes to empower women by equating sexuality with violence. While the motivation of the crime is greed (the stepfather has been left out of his dead wife's will), the nature of the crime being committed is sexual. Then, when Baby Doll tries to use violence to overcome her enemy, she is punished. The first time a woman's sexuality is called into question, Baby Doll and her sister are punished. The conflict of the movie is a consequence of her attractiveness and her use of violence.

Once in the insane asylum, Baby Doll enters an imaginary world where she and the other inmates inhabit a bordello where they dance for and go to bed with the customers. The club's owner, Blue (Oscar Isaac), has promised Baby Doll's virginity to someone who is only described as "the High Roller." Baby Doll attends the girls' daily dance class in order to put together a routine for the customers. This is where the audience is introduced to the narrative mechanism that Snyder will use for the remainder of the movie to justify his fantastical action sequences. The dance instructor (Carla Gugino) tells her, "Don't be afraid. You have all the weapons you need." When Baby Doll finally begins to dance, the audience sees her begin to sway

and she enters another layer of her imagination. Here, Baby Doll is endowed with a flashy silver handgun and her very own katana by a wise man and pseudo-father-figure (Scott Glenn). For the rest of the movie, whenever Baby Doll begins to dance, she enters a new scenario in which she and her friends must complete a violent mission. When the movie comes back from this mission, the audience realizes that all of the men who watch Baby Doll dance are mesmerized to the point that her friends can steal the items they need to make their escape.

This narrative device is extremely problematic, starting with the fact that Baby Doll's power comes from her being gazed upon. Generally, the looker maintains power over the situation because he knows what is happening and the one being looked upon is unaware. In this case, the men who look upon Baby Doll are mesmerized and oblivious to their situation. This is, however, contradicted by the actual act that Baby Doll must perform. Because of her power, Baby Doll becomes Blue's favorite girl and is bought and sold as he pleases. This is emphasized by her name. "Baby" refers to her infant-like state and the fact that she has no power over her situation and no ability to make decisions regarding her own well-being. Even more debilitating is the word "Doll." She is presented as a lifeless mass that should be used to amuse her owner. Her power over men literally objectifies her (even more than the rest of the girls). Snyder may also be alluding to Elia Kazan's film *Baby Doll* (1956), in which the title character, a teenage girl who is wed to a sleazy older man who promises to wait until her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday before having sex with her. Both characters are overdetermined female objects of male desire.

The second issue with this device is that Snyder undermines the girls within the text of the dream world. Instead of being in charge of their own mission, they take orders from the wise man. The power that Snyder wants to give to these woman action heroes is contained within the male father figure's turf. In the next chapter, I will discuss the daughter archetype and how it is used to undermine the motivations and actions of these characters.

The final way that this device creates problems stems from Snyder's stylistic decisions that completely undermine any power the women might have. In the action scenes, Baby Doll and her cohorts are dressed in provocative costumes, and Snyder never seems to miss a chance to shoot an up-the-skirt shot during the stunts. While the special effects and stunt work are all very well done, they are stale and boring. The overdone and monotonous action sequences cause the audience's attention to drift, which draws further attention to the girl's sexuality.

Snyder then goes on to undermine the device itself when the viewers are transported back into the bordello. Everybody in the room is transfixed by Baby Doll. It is evident that whatever dance we just missed was the most amazing part of the movie. The viewers are left wishing that they could have seen this dance and just forgotten about the action sequences all together.

In her book *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, Elisabeth Bronfen discusses a character from Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady*. In the novel, the evil and vindictive Lovelace pursues Clarissa, and at the end of the novel, Clarissa dies from his cruelty. Lovelace then plans to steal her body and have it embalmed so that he may always possess her.

About this situation, Bronfen states, “Lovelace’s fantasies about preserving Clarissa’s corpse suggest both an anxiety about her bodily dissolution and a desire to demonstrate his unlimited right to possess her” (95). Ownership is the epitome of the male/female relationship within a patriarchal society. Before Clarissa was dead, she could fight back or run away from Lovelace. However, once dead she presents Lovelace with the perfect gift: She is an object with no motivation, ability to enjoy, or ability to reason left. She is an empty vessel with which Lovelace may do as he pleases.

Snyder presents the same issue in *Sucker Punch*. At the end of the movie, Snyder brings the violence back into the bordello when Blue kills all of the girls except Baby Doll and Sweet Pea (Abbie Cornish). Baby Doll stabs Blue with a stolen knife, and she and Sweet Pea proceed to leave the hospital. An issue arises when they get out of the hospital and there is a group of men waiting in the courtyard. In order to save Sweet Pea, Baby Doll submits herself to the men as a distraction. Ultimately this means that Baby Doll does not escape and is instead lobotomized. Like Clarissa in the previous example, Baby Doll becomes an empty vessel. The audience, and those within the story, make her into something they can own. Essentially, Baby Doll’s violent acts of rebellion culminate in all of her power being taken away from her. The “empowered” woman in the film is punished for abusing the gaze and usurping masculine power in the name of femininity.

Daniel Walber notes “this whole method of portraying women as strong, violent and badass superhero types is problematic at its core, and it completely trips up any positive representation ‘Sucker Punch’ might have given us” (Walber). Thus,

rather than positively representing empowered women, Snyder cuts them off at the knees. Regardless of which world they are in (real, imaginary, or other imaginary), the women are ultimately at the mercy of the men in the story. Even in Sweet Pea's "happy" ending, she must be saved by a bus driver who is not incidentally the wise man of Baby Doll's imagination.

### *Failed Fetish Criticism*

Both *Barb Wire* and *Sucker Punch* represent failed attempts to critique the cinematic objectification of women. By implementing a hyper-attractive female in order to parody the genre, both directors are merely adding to the problem because both Barb and Baby Doll are eventually punished for their use of violence. Barb never gets her true love. Hogan tries to clean it up by giving her the debit card full of money, but Barb is clearly powerless to Axel's love. The girls in *Sucker Punch* are killed, left alone in the world to wander, or lobotomized, the latter of which is the epitome of the male fantasy: a functional body with no mind to discern pain or pleasure.

These women complicate gender in a few surprising ways, but in the end, they are powerless over their fate. This is especially interesting in the case of *Barb Wire* because Barb's character is based on Rick from *Casablanca* (1942). Even a part written for a man becomes problematic for women. While Rick is established as powerful, sexy, and the epitome of manliness, he remains unproblematic. Barb, virtually the same character, is problematic because of her power and sexuality. Because of their femininity, both *Barb Wire* and *Sucker Punch* subjugate their female characters in order to legitimize their violence.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Restraining Her Motives

#### *Defusing Castration Anxiety*

Gun-wielding women create a special kind of tension in male viewers. As Carol M. Dole notes, “the female hero’s possession of the phallic gun generates a castration anxiety” (Dole 83). In terms of psychoanalysis, the female is, in essence, holding a penis and everything it symbolizes (masculinity, power, etc), which makes men feel threatened by the displacement of what is traditionally theirs. The male viewer does not feel comfortable being subjugated by females.

In the second chapter, I discussed the “Phallic Woman” and noted that there is a perceived gender binary where certain traits are male and others are female. “Thus, within this strict binary code the action heroine, who fights and kills on a par with the men, confuses the boundaries and is seen by some critics as a gender transvestite” (Brown, “Gender and the Action Heroine” 53). The women in such films are specifically coded female, and thus come with a series of expectations. Violating these expectations has the potential to make the male viewer uncomfortable. In order to maintain audience enjoyment, filmmakers must subvert any sense of castration anxiety or any other potential discomfort. Carol M. Dole notes that films can deflect discomfort by subverting the character’s power (87). This can be done in many different ways (physically, sexually, etc), but one of the most prolific is by feminizing the woman through her family ties.

This chapter discusses two archetypes, which Rikke Schubart defines as the mother archetype and the daughter archetype (Schubart). By reconstructing violent women within the context of their feminine relationships with other characters (i.e., mother, daughter, wife, etc...) the filmmaker defuses any threat they may hold over the audience by feminizing them. I will discuss two characters who fall under the mother archetype: Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) from the *Alien* series and Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) from *The Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). They both serve as prime examples of extraordinarily violent women whose motivation is framed by their maternal characteristics. I will also discuss Nikita (Anne Parillaud) from Luc Besson's *La Femme Nikita* (1990) and Hit-Girl (Chloë Moretz) from Matthew Vaughn's *Kick-Ass* (2010), as they are good examples of how daughterly-ness can undercut a character's sense of agency. Within my discussion of each archetype I will also address a movie in which the relationship is biological and one in which the relationship is symbolic. In both cases, the archetype functions in much the same way.

These characters' lack of agency is considered to be an issue by many feminist critics. Within the narrative, these women are almost always given some sort of feminized motivation. Nikita and Hit-Girl act in their father's interests, rather than their own. By feminizing the women's motivation and making the characters subservient to male agendas, filmmakers reinforce the idea that female characters cannot simply be characters; they must be feminine. I will argue that this is not necessarily so. While I believe there are some very important androgynous female characters in cinema history, for instance, Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld) from Joel

and Ethan Coens' *True Grit* (2010), others should not be written off as regressive simply because they are feminine. In the cases of these films, the women's feminine relationships make them capable of making powerful statements about the power of femininity.

### *The Mother Archetype: Alien*

As I stated in previous chapters, *Alien* helped jumpstart the girls with guns subgenre in Hollywood cinema. Ridley Scott presented the audience with Ripley, a tomboy space dockworker who, along with her crew, discovers an alien race of hyper-aggressive monsters that preys upon humans. Ripley is a strong-bodied woman who holds a traditionally masculine job as a futuristic sailor.

Throughout the movie, Scott does very little to feminize Ripley. The movie opens with a montage establishing a cold-looking spaceship: *The Nostromo*. A computer bursts to life and wakes up the ship's rather crass crew. The viewer first gets to see them interact with each other at the breakfast table while everybody has a cigarette. Neither of the female characters is wearing makeup, they are dressed in gender-neutral clothes, and Lambert (Veronica Cartwright) even has a short boyish haircut. Scott makes them look like men.

As the movie continues, it is made clear that Captain Dallas (Tom Skerritt) is the film's protagonist. While Ripley is not feminized, she is consistently undermined by her crew. This is not surprising as science fiction is known for relegating women to subservient roles and keeping them "barred from full admission to the upper echelons of the space crew" (Doherty 194). Ripley, the first mate on the ship, is constantly ignored and disrespected. For instance, about 23 minutes into the movie,

Brett (Harry Dean Stanton) and Parker (Yaphet Kotto) have a conversation in a steamy hallway about how the two mechanics want better shares of the profits. Ripley yells her reply to them, and leaves for the bridge. Once she is gone, Parker turns off the steam, revealing that he had just been trying to make Ripley miserable, and tells Brett that she is a “bitch.”

The ship, it turns out, has brought its crew out of hyper-sleep to investigate a potential distress signal. Next they are informed by the crew’s science officer that the signal may represent intelligent life other than human and that they are, therefore, required by their contract to check it out.

Once on the alien planet, the crew sends out a search party consisting of Captain Dallas, Kane (John Hurt), and Lambert. They find an alien space ship with a large mummified alien body on board. As they dig further into the depths of the craft, they find a room full of hundreds of small pods. Kane, who is sent to check out the hull of the ship, leans over to check out one of the pods. At this point, the pod opens and ejects a small creature through his helmet. This “face grabber” is the first introduction to the conflict of the movie. Kane is rushed back to the landing craft where the landing party meets resistance from Ripley, who will not open the airlock until a 24-hour quarantine is over. Ash (Ian Holm), the science officer, opens the hatch, directly disobeying Ripley and the law.

When the “face-grabber,” which has proven to be impossible to pull off Kane, disappears and is found dead, the crew decides to take off and get back on their way. During dinner that night, Kane begins to spasm and a small creature bursts from his chest. The little creature grows quickly, and the next time the viewer sees it, it is

eight feet tall and a killer. It murders the mechanic, Brett, and later Dallas, leaving Ripley in charge. Dallas's death is a key moment in the movie, because the audience had assumed he would be the protagonist. Ripley becomes the main character and "enters manhood." By shifting the movie's emphasis from Dallas, a man, to Ripley, a woman, the film subverts the gender expectations of the science-fiction genre.

For the remainder of the movie, Ripley takes charge. She and her remaining crew manage to kill Ash, whom it turns out is an android with strict orders to preserve the alien for the company even at the expense of the crew's life. The remaining three survivors determine that they will destroy the ship and take their chances in the escape pod.

While making final preparations for their escape, the other two characters find themselves cornered and are quickly dispatched. Meanwhile, Ripley, who is acutely aware that she is now alone, stalks through the ship with a gigantic phallic flamethrower. It turns out that Ripley is not the subservient sci-fi girl, but rather Clover's Final Girl. She is "watchful to the point of paranoia; small signs of danger that her friends ignore, she registers. Above all she is intelligent and resourceful in a pinch... The Final Girl is boyish, in a word... she is not fully feminine" (Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* 39–40).

On her way out of the ship, Ripley does something funny. Despite an incredibly tense encounter with the alien, she decides to pick up the ship's mascot, a cat named Jonsie that gets toted around the ship under Ripley's protection. Ripley's maternal need to care for the animal overrides her own sense of well-being. After spending the entire movie as a gender-neutral character, Ripley succumbs to her

motherly role. She kisses the cat goodnight and puts him to sleep in his hyper-sleep chamber, thus fulfilling her newly appointed motherly duties. She then strips down, baring her body for the camera. This act both sexualizes her, something which Scott has been careful not to do for the entirety of the movie, and prepares the audience for the final shock of the movie by relieving the tension of the scene. In her final stand, she ejects the stowaway alien from the escape pod, killing it once and for all.

*Alien* treats gender and motherhood in a very peculiar way. There is a distinct absence of female gender traits in either of the female characters. They work in traditionally male jobs (sailors, truckers, explorers who venture past the final frontier) and behave like their male counterparts. Doherty notes that “the generic reversal of the space bimbo motif in the person of Ripley, the then-unfamiliar Sigourney Weaver, was the most audacious narrative twist in *Alien*: in this future world, the natural order of things really was upside down” (194). Dallas, the quintessential heroic sci-fi protagonist, is definitely self-confident, even though he consistently makes the wrong decisions. Meanwhile, Ripley is keenly aware of the danger the crew faces and is ignored at every turn. When Dallas is killed, she takes charge of the crew, picks up her oversized phallic weapon, and ultimately dispatches her monster. From then on, she is, essentially, male.

Feminist criticism of this movie has been strong. Many critics believe that Ripley represents a transvestite rather than a strong female role model, an argument supported by the fact that the script originally called for an all-male cast (Lauzirika). These aspects are further complicated by the introduction of the mother archetype. Although Scott goes through great pains not to feminize the

character, motherhood is an overriding motif within the film. Throughout the movie there are references to motherhood and birth. The alien bursts forth in a bloody mess from Kane's chest. This act, in a very elementary manner, represents childbirth, and when one considers the horrific nature of the birth, it is obviously portrayed as a nightmare. Later, Ripley endears herself to the cat despite being in mortal danger, and Schubart notes that "the alien spaceship which Dallas, Lamber, and Kane find on LV-426 was designed organically in the form of a horse shoe with two protruding 'legs' between which were vagina-shaped openings" (Schubart 171). These symbols of motherhood obscure the obvious absence of female traits within the characters. Motherhood serves as a contrast to the masculine Ripley. When she compromises her male traits and embraces motherhood it changes the way her character is perceived. Because men are discomforted when women take on roles that are not traditionally theirs (i.e., picking up big guns), they must be contained. By metaphorically making Ripley a mother that fear is contained. Mothers are allowed to defend their young; Ripley is allowed to defend Jonsie. Her motherliness thus compromises her masculinity.

### *The Mother Archetype: Terminator 2*

Sarah Connor is perhaps the most rugged and motherly character in action cinema. In the second installment of the *Terminator* franchise, Sarah is a hard, ruthless killer. Unlike Ripley, Sarah's entire motivation is motherhood, and her maternity is no metaphor. She is the mother of John Connor, who will grow up to save the world. She is therefore, in a sense, the mother of all humanity.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Sarah is consistently masculinized. In her room in the mental institution she is fetishized as if she were a male action star. When she goes to kill Miles Dyson (Joe Morton), she is dressed as a man. As one writer noted, “with all those guns blazing and the muscles she developed for the role by training in Arnold Schwarzenegger’s portable gymnasium, she [Linda Hamilton] looks very tough” (Janusonis E-05). Per writer/director James Cameron’s design, Sarah Connor is essentially a man.

In *Terminator 2* Sarah is given two father figures with whom to partner. While she is still in the mental hospital she has a dream in which she finds Kyle (Michael Biehn), John’s dead father, in her cell asking, “Where’s our son... He’s the target now!”<sup>1</sup> Kyle acts as a motivator when all other motivations have failed. Like a good co-parent, he rallies Sarah when she is unable to help John by herself. This relationship builds entirely off the first movie, but establishes a nuclear family within the film’s relationship structure.

Later in the movie, Sarah reluctantly acknowledges John’s second father figure. In a voiceover, Sarah says:

Watching John with the machine, it was suddenly so clear. The Terminator would never stop. It would never leave him. And it would never hurt him. Never shout at him, or get drunk and hit him, or say it was too busy to spend time with him. It would always be there. And it would die to protect him. Of all the would-be fathers that came and went through the years, this thing, this machine was the only one who measured up. In an insane world, it was the sanest choice.

Despite Sarah’s hatred for the machines, she realizes their potential. The Terminator is there, in essence, to serve John. This crystallizes the franchise’s

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<sup>1</sup> This scene was not in the original theatrical version of the film. It was released in the Director’s Cut.

definition of parenthood. The machine mechanically looks after the boy's interests without any regard for its own. Again, this father figure motivates Sarah. Although she, John, and the machine could wait out the impending war in Mexico and prepare John for his destiny as post-apocalyptic leader of the human resistance, she decides she wants more for him, even at her own expense. Like Kyle, she is willing to give her life that her son may live his. This instinct leads her to jump back into the fray and try to kill the man who would ultimately build Skynet. At the end of the movie, the Terminator carries out the same task when he destroys himself to adjust John's fate once and for all (or so they believe until *Terminator 3, 4* and the TV series).

Unlike Ripley, Sarah is keenly aware of her motherhood and acknowledges it in many places. She reveals that her fury with Skynet has its roots in motherhood when she says to Dyson, "You think you're so creative. You don't know what it's like to really create something. To create a life. To feel it growing inside you. All you know is death and destruction." Rather than being born and raised in love, Skynet would be built and eventually achieve consciousness as a weapon. Sarah is motivated by her love for her son and the human race (her metaphorical child). She is, without question, a violent woman, but Hollywood generally "undercut(s) its armed women with narrative devices that reduce the heroes' power" (Dole 80). This issue has been repeatedly reintroduced throughout this genre. Could Sarah be a viable and profitable character without her motherhood? While many feminists may argue that violence is patriarchal and oppressive, they often enjoy watching women act violently against their male oppressors (McCaughey and King 2). The fact that Sarah is characterized as a mother is not necessarily regressive.

The mother archetype is a useful tool when establishing a strong female role model. An overly simplistic and popular analysis is that relegating these women into traditionally feminine roles is antifeminist. If a person who is coded female cannot act violently without being characterized as a female, how could it possibly be progressive? In the big picture, rather than being the feminist nightmare, Ripley and Sarah's characters embody Clover's permeable membrane (Clover, "Her Body, Himself" 208). The fact that these phallic women take on traits that are both masculine and feminine challenges the idea that masculine and feminine traits should be classified as fundamentally oppositional. Dion Farquhar puts it in these terms: "there is a range of strategic responses to subjections including the multiplication of resistances, the scrambling of master-codes, and the nurturing of new and hybrid forms" (Farquhar 213). These hybrid forms are a progressive way to look at gender stereotypes. These characters, which embody both male and female traits, disassociate these traits from gender. These women are, ideologically, without gender and so are the traits associated with them.

The mother archetype is, above all, untamable. These women always act within their own guidelines and refuse the patriarchy. This is exemplified in the butting of heads between Ripley and her crew and Sarah's refusal to resign to a fate dictated by men (first Kyle and then the Terminator). Her motherliness allows her to act outside of patriarchy's predefined parameters in the name of her child's well-being. Ripley acts in the interest of her subordinates, while Sarah acts in her biological son's interest (and the rest of the world's).

### *The Daughter Archetype: La Femme Nikita*

The daughter archetype is much like the mother archetype. Each is based on the relationship of the primary character with another character, or characters, around her. As defined by Rikke Schubart, the daughter consists of three major themes: education, masquerade and prostitution (Schubart 196), each of which is essential to the development of the character. Jeffrey A. Brown finds “the modern action heroine confounds essentialism through her performance of traditionally masculine roles” (Brown, “Gender and the Action Heroine” 56). Like the mother archetype, filmmakers use a daughterly motivation in order to limit the character’s power and decrease male viewer castration anxiety.

Luc Besson’s breakout movie *La Femme Nikita* initiated this archetype in modern action cinema. Nikita represents the prototypical daughter who would be imitated and even copied (*Hei Mao* [1991], *Point of No Return* [1993], and the television series *La Femme Nikita* [1997–2001]). Despite Janet Maslin’s comment that the movie “is best taken lightly, and appreciated for the high-gloss effectiveness of Mr. Besson’s methods” (Maslin, “*Nikita*”), *Nikita* has achieved a place in the upper echelon of action movies. It is hard to ignore the movie’s influence on both Hollywood and independent cinema.

*La Femme Nikita* opens with a drugstore robbery gone bad. A neurotic and high Nikita murders a police officer in cold blood. She is subsequently arrested, tried, and jailed for life. While in jail her suicide is faked and she awakes in a bedroom with no clue as to her surroundings. A man, whom the audience will later know as her mentor Bob (Tchéky Karyo), enters and explains to her that if she

refuses to work for her government, she really will be killed. When she agrees to join the program, she enters into her first stage of daughterliness.

Her education begins. The question the daughter poses is, "Why is she the way she is?" This implies that there is something wrong with her; something not feminine. For instance, Nikita is a violent criminal. The education phase seeks to control and/or eradicate the masculine and reeducate her. She must learn how to be more feminine. The entire first half of the movie is dedicated to this act. Nikita is enrolled in everything from firearm and hand-to-hand combat training to computer classes. While these may seem like masculine endeavors, they both focus and control her raw violence from the beginning of the movie. At first she struggles. Nikita refuses to cooperate with any of her instructors and generally runs amuck. It is not until the management threatens her life and Bob is forced to give her an ultimatum that Nikita begins to show significant progress.

The second phase of the daughter archetype is the masquerade. In 1929, the famous English psychoanalyst Joan Riviere wrote an essay titled "Womanliness as a Masquerade." In her analysis of a married patient, Riviere noted that the patient tended to interact with men other than her husband in a flirtatious manner. Riviere theorized that the woman reverted to this behavior because of an unconscious fear of reprisal from men for encroaching on their territory: "womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (Riviere 37).

The masquerade is a show that women use to appear explicitly feminine to avoid seeming masculine or encroaching on masculine territory. At the beginning of

the film, Nikita does not respect these boundaries. Then she walks into Amande's (Jeanne Moreau) office. Amande's role is to teach Nikita about her masquerade. Nikita learns how to pick out clothes, do her makeup and hair, and trick people into believing that she is a "lady." Amande says, "Smile when you don't know anything. You won't be any smarter, but it's nice for those who look at you." The woman is teaching Nikita how to mask her masculine self. Rather than looking like a killer, it is important for Nikita to come off as an innocent girl. Amande achieves this look by physically masking Nikita's imperfections as well as giving her personality a veneer that appears sophisticated and fragile (two things which Nikita is not).

The final theme of the daughter archetype is prostitution. The nature of the relationship between the woman and her father figure is of a sexual nature. She is always plucked from her life to be "fixed." Her mentor, for instance, chooses Nikita when she has reached the ultimate low. She is in prison, never to get out, being punished for flexing her "masculine muscles." He then proceeds to give her some "valuable skills" and dress her up to look acceptable. She does his bidding, literally to save her life.

In this scenario, the man teaches the woman how to be feminine. Rather than being a biological function, femininity is a mask the daughter dons in order to impress her mentor. In *La Femme Nikita*, for instance, there is a growing attraction between Nikita and Bob throughout her time at school. When Nikita is invited out to dinner with Bob, he takes her to a romantic restaurant. She wears a flattering cocktail dress and pearls and he wears a suit, making them appear to be an older man and his mistress. This incestuous relationship is indicative of most characters

within this archetype. The character's desire for her father's attention crosses a line. Because the character has spent so much time trying to become the father's ideal woman, the need for approval is ever-present.

This prostitution creates a metamorphosis for the character. Schubart refers to it as the third self (Schubart 216). The first self is the character as we meet her, the second is the character within her masquerade, and the third self is her personal self. The second half of *La Femme Nikita* shows the actualization of that self. While Nikita lives in Bob's compound during the first half of the movie, her entire self is based on what Bob wants her to be. The second half is spent outside of the training facility, where Nikita has a chance to develop a personal life. Both her fiancé, Marco (Jean-Hugues Anglade) and her apartment, represent this third self. Nikita takes her education and becomes the person she wants to be. The masquerade is always in conflict with the third self. For instance, Nikita struggles desperately to maintain her relationship with Marco, but finds it impossible as long as she is working for the government agency. Nikita chooses to take her chances on her own. Rather than stay under her father figures thumb, she escapes her captors (the patriarchy) by leaving her life and everything in it, using the skills that she was taught in the agency.

At the end of the movies, these characters are left with a choice: cut and run, establishing a new life away from their father figures, as in *La Femme Nikita*, or stay involved with the relationship—as Sydney Bristow (Jennifer Garner) does in the TV series *Alias* (2001–2006).

### *The Daughter Archetype: Kick-Ass*

In 2010, director Matthew Vaughn introduced the world to Hit-Girl in the movie *Kick-Ass*. The reinterpretation of a popular graphic novel is about a high school-age boy who decides to become a super-hero named Kick-Ass (Aaron Johnson). He meets a real father-daughter team of superheroes, one of whom is played by 11-year-old Chloë Moretz. She behaves in many ways one would not expect to see such a young girl. She is a killer, trained in martial arts. She is proficient with firearms. She also dresses up in a purple and black jumpsuit and purple wig in order to fight crime on a nightly basis. But what really catches audiences' attention is her age. In discussing the movie, Roger Ebert brings up an interesting point. He states, "A movie camera makes a record of whatever is placed in front of it, and in this case, it shows deadly carnage dished out by an 11-year-old girl, after which an adult man brutally hammers her to within an inch of her life. Blood everywhere. Now tell me all about the context" (Ebert). Moretz brings to the screen a new way to interpret violence. Her amazing abilities, her foul mouth, and her relationship with her father all complicate any previous understandings of gender in action heroines.

The first time Hit-Girl is introduced, her role as daughter is already the focus. She is dressed as her alter ego, mild-mannered Mindy Macready, and is standing in some desolate part of the city with her father, Damon Macready (Nicolas Cage), who is the superhero Big-Daddy. Damon comforts his daughter, using condescending terms like "child" and "young lady." As they continue talking, the viewer realizes that Damon plans to shoot her in the chest. He then raises his pistol and shoots her.

The moment is incredibly visceral. The girl's limp body flies back about six feet and she lands on her back with a thud and a poof of feathers as stuffing pours from her ripped jacket. The audience waits for a second, and then she moves. Then laughter comes. She is wearing a bulletproof vest. The scene purposely contrasts extreme violence and radical abuse with comedy and the father-daughter dynamic.

In this case, the nature of the daughterliness is biological. Hit-Girl was selected by her father simply because of their preexisting relationship. At the opening of the movie, she is already thoroughly into her education phase. Immediately after the shooting, Mindy and her father go to the bowling alley to celebrate her outstanding performance. Mindy reveals that she wants a puppy and a doll for her birthday, and Damon is visibly distraught. Much to his relief, she is only joking with him, and offers her real desire: a Benchmade Model 42 butterfly knife. The dynamic revealed here contradicts the classic daughter archetype. Rather than being taught how to be more feminine, Big-Daddy has reeducated his daughter into a classically hyper-masculine state. Hit-Girl is not punished for encroaching on masculine territory; she is celebrated.

This parody represents the postmodern phase of the daughter archetype. At this point in history, the character is so well known that it welcomes this type of humor. Feminist critics, however, often respond negatively to this feminine image. Carrie Polansky, a feminist film critic, had this to say about Hit-Girl:

In many ways, Hit-Girl is an empowering character for young girls. She is the sort of role actress Chloë Grace Moretz had always fantasized about playing, and the idea of superhero and action movies creating space for girls to play aggressive, powerful characters is innovative and refreshing. My overall feeling once I left the theatre,

however, is that Hit-Girl was a feminist character trapped in a dreadfully anti-feminist film. (Polansky 1)

While parodying the daughter archetype, Hit-Girl still has all of the characteristics of a daughter. Mindy is being trained by her father to reflect his values. Their relationship is characterized by a daughter who, rather than playing with dolls and tea sets, is completely devoted to her father and a father who selfishly molds his daughter into a tool.

Her masquerade necessarily follows the education that her father has given her. Rather than resorting to femininity when encroaching on masculine territory, Hit-Girl resorts to over-the-top violence and profanity in order to squelch any sort of femininity. Whenever Kick-Ass treats Hit-Girl according to her age or gender, she responds with a biting remark. When the gun-crazy bellhop tries to help the helpless little girl find her mommy, she sticks a silenced pistol in his mouth and shoots somebody else through his cheek. The intention here is to criticize the tendency for men to feminize, sexualize, and condescend to women. Hit-Girl's age and her gender work in tandem in juxtaposition to her violence. Because she is 11 years old, we do not expect her to act violently, and because she is a little girl, we do not expect her to act masculine. Every character who feminizes, sexualizes, or condescends toward her is treated to a punishment – ranging from the “c” word to a bullet to the head (with the exception of her father).

In an article discussing the recent wave of “petite” killer women in popular media, Maria Ricapito notes, “the violent femme, of course, is an enduring male fantasy, a Lolita who just can’t help herself around a gun” (Ricapito 1). This observation reveals Vaughn’s mechanism. He uses a girl with a gun (something that

men cannot help but be drawn to) and then, right as the audience is enjoying itself the most, he shocks them with brutal violence, gore, or language.

The film also contains a strange form of prostitution. Mindy and her father's relationship is extremely complex. "The father-daughter relationship is both charming and shocking: Their bond is based on love, yet the end result of all Damon's teaching, planning and plotting is supremely brutal" (Wallace). Damon's love for his daughter is left without any question, but his intentions toward her are suspect. His hatred for the evil Frank D'Amico (Mark Strong) is so obsessive that Damon is willing to put his daughter's life on the line in order to kill him. And Hit-Girl does it willingly. Damon pays her with elaborate presents, hot chocolate, and compliments, and Mindy gives up her childhood and risks her life. In fact, Mindy is so dedicated to her father that at the conclusion of the movie she commits to the suicidal act of storming the D'Amico penthouse. And to make matters worse, she puts her faith in the hands of the inept Kick-Ass.

In every case in which the daughter archetype is deployed, the daughter figure necessarily acts within the patriarchal structure. Nikita is imprisoned by men, trained by them, and does their dirty work for years. It is not until the end of the movie that she disowns her father and leaves her fiancé, effectively abandoning her patriarchal chain of command. Like Nikita, Hit-Girl is essentially imprisoned by her father. She is not forcibly detained or threatened, but she has no choice but to do his bidding as it is all that she knows. Neither of these characters' motivation is their own, a point of contention with feminist theorists.

Though Mindy never refuses her father's will, at the end of the movie she does, essentially, break the mold in which she was brought up. Like Nikita, she is starting a new life, away from what she has known. Unlike Nikita, Mindy has a friend with which to start her new, "normal" life. Her third self is finally imagined in the last shot of the movie as Mindy happily goes to school like a normal girl her age, but still enjoys beating up the bullies who try to take her lunch money.

While these women lack their own sense of agency throughout the majority of their respective movies, the most important aspect of said characters lies in their third selves. After spending the entire movie under the brutal tyranny of their father figures, at the conclusion they break free of the patriarchal structure that has contained them. Both Nikita and Mindy return to the lives they had lost previous to the film's beginning.

### *Where They Went Right*

Ripley, Sarah Connor, Nikita, and Hit-Girl represent a staple of Hollywood filmmaking. Filmmakers use these types of relationships in order to subvert feelings of castration anxiety. This is a natural tendency that gives the audience a chance to identify with the main characters.

Classifying these women as mother or daughter does feminize them, which is often considered problematic in feminist circles. One might ask why these women are feminized rather than just playing violent characters. However, their feminization gives them the chance to criticize the way patriarchy works. In every case, the masculine power structure established at the beginning of the movie is disrupted. Sarah breaks out of prison, Ripley takes charge of the crew that

disregarded her authority, Nikita uses her newly learned abilities to escape her father figure, and Hit-Girl gets out of her father's environment of violence.

The reason that girls with guns movies are such powerful tools is that they have the power to challenge gender stereotypes without alienating their audience. They can be a compelling force to confront issues of gender, and by complicating their motives via feminization they can criticize norms while avoiding castration anxiety. Violence confuses and complicates the relationships between characters on screen and between the movie and its audience. While these tools can lead to treacherous waters, it is readily apparent that they remain powerful ways to criticize the culture surrounding them.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

#### *The Status Quo*

Girls with guns have grown from being simple plot points to a significant part of popular media. If one chooses to deny this, one must only turn on the television to be proven wrong. It is likely that one will find *Rizzoli & Isles* (2010), *The Closer* (2005), *Law and Order SVU* (1999) or any number of other current shows that are applicable. Hollywood is producing girls with guns and audiences, specifically American audiences, are consuming them.

Since *Alien* (1979) there has been a steady, and increasing, tendency towards incorporating these types of violent women into popular movies. While these characters did exist before this era (*Charlie's Angels* [1976–1981] etc...) it is undeniable that they are most prevalent now. The best way to understand these characters is to ask “Why are they here now?” and “How do they affect us?” By understanding the answers to these questions, it is easier to distinguish between regressive and positive characters and to discover and celebrate their strengths.

#### *Why Here and Now?*

Violence is often criticized by feminist critics as being regressive and representative of patriarchal power. Susan Douglas stated that *Charlie's Angels* celebrates the “objectification of women” and “patriarchy” for many of the reasons I have discussed throughout this thesis (Douglas 212). For instance, the Angels work

for Charlie (John Forsythe), a voice over the phone and a father figure. Indeed, these criticisms are echoed by both men and women across the board. About *Colombiana* (2011), Mike Hale of *The New York Times* wrote that Mr. Besson “can claim to have created and continually perfected the lethal-woman-in-her-underwear genre” (Hale). While the degree to which each character is sexualized and/or feminized varies from story to story, it is a consistent trait of these films.

The films are, however, growing in popularity. To what can one attribute this proliferation and widespread acceptance while critics continue to suggest that these movies are regressive? One possibility is that these movies are made because audiences like them, and filmmakers respond to their success by creating more films in the same vein. Genre theorist Thomas Schatz observes:

There is a sense, then, in which a film genre is both a *static* and *dynamic* system. On the one hand, it is a familiar formula of interrelated narrative and cinematic components that serves to continually reexamine some basic cultural conflict... On the other hand, changes in cultural attitudes, new influential genre films, the economics of the industry, and so forth, continually refine any film genre. (691)

Schatz’s observation recognizes the fact that movies reflect our culture, and culture is changed by the movies. In this same vein, Wood states, “a genre’s evolution is strongly influenced by cultural-political evolution at least as much as by the genre’s internal evolution” (xiii). A film genre, or in this case subgenre, continually refines itself. Movies are affected by economic and cultural factors, as well the movies that precede them. In response to the cultural impact that these films have and the vast and quickly growing library

of texts, this subgenre is quickly being refined and the industry will likely continue to develop these characters.

Maria Ricapito postulates, “perhaps Americans feel powerless in an era of gushing oil, ongoing wars and a slippery economy, and want to believe that the little people can vanquish the big bad guys” (Ricapito). When taken in the context of a strained America and exhausted population, this makes sense. Part of the pleasure we derive from cinema comes from being able to watch something we would normally be unable to see or experience. Seeing something that could never realistically happen—an 11-year-old girl destroying an entire criminal empire, for example—resonates with many people who feel disenfranchised by the current political/economic situation.

The most recent phenomenon is that of the small violent girl. In recent years, killer women have become smaller in stature. Small women like Angelina Jolie and Milla Jovovich are box-office superstars because of their abilities to hurt men more than twice their size. Television is filled with shows like *Burn Notice* (2007–current), which features the character Fiona Glenanne (Gabrielle Anwar), a former IRA demolitions expert who always brings overkill to her firefights. In fact, two films in the last year, *Hanna* (2011) and *Kick-Ass* (2010), featured child actresses who could take out endless armies of well-armed men.

#### *Receiving Them With Open Arms*

What many critics miss is that, while these women aren’t by any means perfect heroines, the films’ redeeming factor is that they are “about escaping, however fantastically, the agonizing constraints of gender, class, time, and place”

(Lipsitz). Rather than focusing on what real or manufactured ways one can discount these women, viewers should enjoy the breaking down of perceived binaries.

Characters like Ripley, Sarah Connor, Nikita, and Hit-Girl can be off-putting to some. They violate many of our society's established norms. But, this is, broadly speaking, what feminist culture seeks. By attributing "masculine" traits to these characters and then feminizing them, filmmakers are, in effect, feminizing, or at least neutralizing, those traits. For instance, when Hit-Girl uses the word "cunt," critics argued it was distasteful and disgusting. In fact, she was, in a way, criticizing the patriarchal use of bad language. This word has taken on a taboo equal to many racial slurs. Catharine MacKinnon says that this word reduces women to a body part (MacKinnon 199), thus reflecting what men think of women. They are good only for sex. Hit-Girl, an 11-year-old, uses the word comically against men. When she says it she is in no way a sexual object, nor does her use of the word sexualize men in any way. She deploys the word in an effort to neutralize it. Like the genre tries to do with violence, Hit-Girl takes something that would normally be directed toward her by the patriarchy and throws it right back at them.

In this case, as in many others, the character is deployed as a tool. The young girl can effectively change the meaning of the word simply by directing it at a man. While critics got caught up on how violent and foul she acted or on how she was motivated by her father, they missed how effectively Hit-Girl did her job.

Throughout this thesis I have discussed many ways in which these women are criticized without taking into account the effect of that character. In many cases,

the criticized traits are the very mechanisms the filmmakers use to make the character signify something progressive.

### *The Phallic Woman*

If a phallic object is one that represents the male sexual organ, then a gun is most certainly a phallic object (with very few exceptions). A gun resembles a penis, both physically and by its action (it shoots and pierces flesh). In Freudian terms, guns represent the power of men. A woman wielding this symbol of power, then, is problematic. She is essentially using this masculine power in order to subjugate others, oftentimes men.

There are two ways to look at this symbolic use. One, a female could be holding a phallic weapon in her hand as an object of sexuality. This is an often used and perhaps more often parodied act. For instance, in the beginning of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), Bonnie strokes Clyde's flaccid gun that he holds by his crotch. As film theorist Michael Rennett so accurately notes, "The shot represents the metaphoric copulation between the couple" (Rennett). Bonnie is allured by the power the gun represents. In this scene, Clyde (Warren Beatty) awkwardly wields this phallic power in order to try to subjugate Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) by taking advantage of her feminine attraction.

The second way a woman holding a phallic object can be understood is that she assumes the power that the phallus represents. In these instances, a woman takes a gun and uses it against others. Her ability to use violence is the key factor. Characters like Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie) from *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001),

Alice (Milla Jovovich) from the *Resident Evil Series* (2002–2010), or Ellen (Sharon Stone) from *The Quick and The Dead* (1995) are all examples of women who use their guns as weapons of power. Oftentimes “the narratives of these films deal with the woman’s gradual mastery of (phallic) power” (Brown, “If Looks Could Kill” 66).

I discussed this second instance in the second chapter. Because these characters wield a gun, they are often viewed ideologically as men. They can talk like men, act like men, and oftentimes even dress as men. This transplanting of historically masculine traits to the feminine threatens male viewers (castration anxiety). This “misappropriation” of power must be mitigated in some way, usually by either sexualization or feminization.

### *Sexualization*

In many cases movies use sexualization to alleviate castration anxiety. Every time the character seems too powerful, the filmmaker will put the woman in some kind of sexually compromising situation. For instance, in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), Co Bao (Julia Nickson) is John Rambo’s (Sylvester Stallone) sidekick and in many ways his equal. But right before she is killed, Rambo conquers her by kissing her and giving her a chance to reciprocate the feelings. Co’s power is effectively neutralized by her romantic feelings for Rambo. She may be powerful, but ultimately she is subject to the dominant male character.

While this method is often criticized, it is not necessarily regressive. For instance, in *Barb Wire* (1996), Barb’s (Pamela Anderson) violence is used to criticize the audience’s attraction to her. Marlo Edwards states, “there are too many moments in the film during which Barb seems to overtly threaten, or at least mock,

her off-screen viewers” (45). Every time somebody (including the male viewer) is encouraged to sexualize Barb, she responds with a gruesomely violent act in order to punish him.

The important thing to note about sexualization is that it is not inevitably regressive. There are many examples where sexualized women are used expressly to criticize society’s attitudes toward women.

### *Feminization*

Another way that filmmakers assuage castration anxiety is by restraining the character’s motive. There are many ways to do this, but two recurring archetypes are the mother and the daughter. In these instances, progressive or violent women are given a feminine motivation.

For instance, in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), smart, resilient, and even violent (at least at the end of the movie) Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) is given no less than three father figures. She has become an FBI agent because of her biological father, who died in the line of duty as a police officer. Her boss, Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn), takes her under his wing. And Dr. Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) guides her through her profiling of the notorious serial killer Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine). Though Starling is often praised as a strong woman, three men subjugate her in various ways.

Giving Starling three father figures makes her a daughter. She is feminized and is therefore no longer a threat to male viewers. While Starling does protect those who are weaker than she, Buffalo Bill’s victim is a woman. Clarice could not possibly defend a male from danger because he would already have his masculine

power intact. In fact, the criminal she defeats is, an aspiring transvestite whose masculinity is in question. Within the movie, “the female hero’s power is showcased but simultaneously contained” (Dole 87).

In the same way, a character may be subjugated to the role of mother. In *Wanted* (2008), Fox (Angelina Jolie) is arguably the most effective killer in an entire group of super-assassins. But she constantly has to take care of Wesley (James McAvoy). While not a biological mother, her motivations are sufficiently undermined by her need to take care of the inept new assassin, a job that none of the men could be bothered to do.

In the case of each of these archetypes, the objective of the filmmaker is to compromise the character’s motivation. This says that a woman may be violent if she is protecting her feminine interests. A little girl (Hanna [Saoirse Ronan], *Hit-Girl* [Chloë Grace Moretz] or Mathilda [Natalie Portman] from *The Professional* [1994]) must act to honor her father or father figure. In the same manner, a mother (Ripley [Sigourney Weaver] or Sarah Connor [Linda Hamilton]) must act in the interest of her child.

### *The Power*

There are characters who are strong women, without gender. They do not take on a transgendered persona, they are not sexualized, and they are not feminized. While it is admirable that there are filmmakers who strive to take on these three issues, it is equally important to recognize that a character does not necessarily have to avoid these characteristics in order to be a progressive character.

These women often challenge the idea of female traits. If a filmmaker can implement a character whose gender is more like Clover's permeable membrane, the traits that one associates with that character are likely to be neutralized by her gender confusion ("Her Body, Himself" 208).

I do not argue that sexualization and feminization always promote positive views of women within cinema; rather, I argue that, they can be effective ways to criticize gender norms.

For the time being, girls with guns is a growing trend. Women are featured in all kinds of media carrying all different kinds of firearms. To write off such a large section of our current media output would be to ignore an important part of our culture. The women in these films are more than just fun to watch; they are effective symbols, that criticize our society and women's place within it.

## APPENDIX

### Girls With Guns Movies

This list is a partial collection of movies that are crucial to the development of the girls with guns subgenre. While the movies on this list are all important, this does not represent the entire collection of girls with guns movies:

*Dawn of the Dead* (1978)-George A. Romero  
*Aliens* (1979)-Ridley Scott  
*Mrs. 45* (1981)-Abel Ferrara  
*Day of the Dead* (1984)-George A. Romero  
*The Terminator* (1984)-James Cameron  
*Aliens* (1986)-James Cameron  
*Blue Steel* (1989)-Kathryn Bigelow  
*License to Kill* (1989)-John Glen  
*La Femme Nikita* (1989)-Luc Besson  
*Night of the Living Dead* (1990)-Tom Savini  
*The Silence of the Lambs* (1991)-Jonathan Demme  
*Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991)-James Cameron  
*Thelma and Louise* (1991)-Ridley Scott  
*Alien 3* (1992)-David Fincher  
*Gun Crazy* (1992)-Tamra Davis  
*Lethal Weapon III* (1992)-Richard Donner  
*The River Wild* (1994)-Curtis Hanson  
*Copycat* (1995)-Jon Amiel  
*The Quick and the Dead* (1995)-Sam Raimi  
*Tank Girl* (1995)-Rachel Talalay  
*Barb Wire* (1996)-David Hogan  
*Courage Under Fire* (1996)-Edward Zwick  
*Fargo* (1996)-The Coen Brothers  
*The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996)-Renny Harlin  
*G.I. Jane* (1997)-Ridley Scott  
*The Matrix* (1999)-The Wachowski Brothers  
*Charlie's Angels* (2000)-McG  
*Tomb Raider* (2001)-Simon West  
*Resident Evil* (2002)-Paul W.S. Anderson  
*Kill Bill* (2003)-Quentin Tarantino  
*Tomb Raider Cradle of Life* (2003)-Jan de Bont  
*Underworld* (2003)-Len Wiseman

*The Matrix Reloaded* (2003)-The Wachowski Brothers  
*The Matrix Revolutions* (2003)-The Wachowski Brothers  
*Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003)-Jonathan Mostow  
*Blade: Trinity* (2004)-David S. Goyer  
*Dawn of the Dead* (2004)-Zack Snyder  
*Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004)-Alexander Witt  
*Aeon Flux* (2005)-Karyn Kusama  
*Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2005)-Doug Liman  
*Serenity* (2005)-Joss Whedon  
*Underworld Evolution* (2006)-Len Wiseman  
*The Brave One* (2007)-Neil Jordan  
*The Kingdom* (2007)-Peter Berg  
*Planet Terror* (2007)-Robert Rodriguez  
*Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007)-Russell Mulcahy  
*Wall-E* (2008)-Andrew Stanton  
*Terminator Salvation* (2009)-McG  
*White Out* (2009)-Dominic Sena  
*Knight and Day* (2010)-James Mangold  
*Resident Evil: Afterlife* (2010)-  
*Sucker Punch* (2010)-Zack Snyder  
*Kick-Ass* (2010)-Matthew Vaughn  
*Hanna* (2011)-Joe Wright

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