

Empowered or Objectified?
The Representation of Women in 21st Century Action Cinema

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Introduction

As with most film genres, certain character archetypes exist within the action genre. The male action hero may be the most well-known archetype within this genre, and throughout time, he has been represented in many shapes and forms. The action genre has presented a fair amount of female action heroes as well, especially in more recent films. However, some might argue that the female action hero has been less diversely characterized than male heroes as their bodies and behaviors are often erotically presented. Since before the 70s, feminist film theorists have criticized this need for female characters to be objectified and oppressed on film. During the 70s, this objectification may have been a result of the patriarchal standards which existed during that time. Women were expected to look beautiful for their partners, and thus, women on film were designed to look beautiful for the male spectators as well.

However, in our present-day western society, do such standards still exist? Particularly in the action genre, female leads are supposed to appear strong, intelligent, independent, and capable, just like male leads always have. Yet, the focus is often still placed on their beauty, attractiveness, and sexuality as well. But, is the display of sexual appearance and behavior always an oppressive fate for women? Perhaps, as women in the 21st century seek to 'own' their bodies and sexuality, this objective has translated to action films with female leads as well. However, to know whether this is the case, an analysis of important factors in the production of a film would seem relevant. These factors might, for example, be the directing, the characters, their appearance and behavior, and the camera-movements. With such a notion in mind, this thesis will thus attempt to answer the following problem statement:

How are women represented in the action film genre in the 21st century? More specifically, do they fall victim to an oppressive and objectifying male gaze, and to what extent? Or, do they manage to empower themselves via their actions and behavior, and how so?

Methods

This section will explain the methodological framework, which has shaped the structure of this thesis. Following this section, we wish to split the thesis into different sections, each with a title and goal. The first section will be a presentation of the historical contexts surrounding this thesis's problem statement. In the first subsection, we intend to review the evolution of feminist film theory to shed light on the relationship between feminism and the world of cinema throughout time. In the next subsection, we will examine women in action films and the concept of the female action hero. Furthermore, this section will include a presentation of certain female stereotypes within the action genre, which we will utilize in our analyses of our chosen films' female characters to determine if such stereotypes still exist in modern action cinema.

In the next section, we will present the theoretical framework through which we will conduct our analyses. The first subsection will describe the main points of Laura Mulvey in her essay titled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". The second subsection will explain the main points of Elizabeth Hills in her article titled "From 'Figurative Males' to Action Heroines: Further Thoughts on Active Women in the Cinema". In the last subsection of the theoretical section, we will then reflect on the relevance of our chosen theoretical frameworks and how we intend to utilize them together in our analyses.

Following our theoretical section, we will conduct four different analyses of four different action films. These films are *Charlie's Angels* from 2000, *Wanted* from 2008, *Mad*

Max: Fury Road from 2015, and *Atomic Blonde* from 2017. The reason we have chosen these four films is mainly due to the fact that they all present important female characters.

Furthermore, there exist certain differences in the types of roles these characters are given, which we find important as well. *Wanted* and *Mad Max: Fury Road* have lead female characters, Fox and Furiosa, who co-star alongside male characters, while the female leads in *Charlie's Angels* and *Atomic Blonde* exist independently from any male leads. In addition to this, we have a pre-existing impression of the representation of the female characters in all four films in terms of sexuality. Our impression is that some of the female characters are more objectified and sexualized than others, which we expect will make for an interesting and nuanced analysis and eventually discussion when applying our two chosen theoretical frameworks.

Each of the four film analyses will consist of three different subsections. The first subsection will be an introduction to the film and its plot. In the second subsection, we will analyze a selection of specific relevant scenes while utilizing the theoretical frameworks of Mulvey and Hills whenever applicable. In these analyses, we will use the terms “kernel” and “satellite”, as explained by Seymour Chatman in his book *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. A kernel is a part which “cannot be deleted without destroying the narrative logic” (Chatman 53), while satellites are minor plot events which “can be deleted without disturbing the logic of the plot” (Chatman 54). We intend to use these terms to determine whether the instances, in which a female character is objectified, hold any importance to the narrative. The last subsection of each film analysis will then be a sub-conclusion of our findings.

Based on our findings in each of the four film analyses, we will conduct a discussion in the next section. Here, we intend to compare these findings in relation to both theoretical frameworks, to ultimately determine the existence of certain tendencies throughout all four films.

This will lead us to the final section in which we will reflect on our initial goal with this thesis and eventually conclude on how we have reached this goal through our film analyses and our discussion of these.

Historical Contexts

Feminist Film Theory

Feminist film theory is a growing field that has been under development since the 1970s. In the beginning, the field was centered around concerns about how women were represented in Hollywood cinema through stereotypical portrayals. The key argument was that this would have a heavily negative impact on the female spectator. Feminist film theory's early goal was to erase the stereotypes of women in cinema and focus on a more positive image of the woman instead. As the field began to develop, it soon realized that a simple attempt at reimagining the woman in films was not enough. They needed to examine the root of the problem, which they pointed out to be the patriarchy and its imagery of women (Smelik 491). They approached this issue through a psychoanalytical discourse, which, for the better part of a decade, ended up being the dominant approach in feminist film studies. Cinema was viewed as a "cultural practice representing myths about women and femininity, as well as about men and masculinity" (Smelik 491). Myth is an important keyword when it comes to understanding how early feminist film critics viewed cinema's portrayal of women. These critics noticed that the image of a woman was constructed through idealist and ideological ways. According to them, the woman was reduced to a spectacle.

Claire Johnston, a feminist film theoretician, was heavily concerned with the way mainstream cinema upheld certain ideologies. In her essay, "Women's Cinema as Counter

Cinema”, she criticizes the mainstream cinema for its stereotypical portrayal of women and calls for a counter cinema that can challenge the ideology that the patriarchy puts forth.

Drawing on Roland Barthe’s notion of myth, Johnston investigated the myth of ‘woman’ in classic cinema. The sign ‘woman’ can be analyzed as a structure, a code or a convention. It represents the ideological meaning that ‘woman’ has for men. In relation to herself, she means no-thing. [...] women are negatively represented as ‘not-man’. The ‘woman-as-woman’ is absent from the text of the film. (Smelik 491)

In many ways, according to Johnston, the woman is constructed as an idealistic image that caters to the male spectator, while she is held in a position that emphasizes her role as a non-male. She only achieves a symbolic meaning when she is constructed through an ideological image. When Johnston talks about ‘ideological image’, she refers to the ideological meaning that the woman has for men. According to Johnston, the cinema constructs the woman through a sexist ideology that does not allow the woman to grow as a character within the plot. “As the cinema developed, the stereotyping of man was increasingly interpreted as contravening the realization of the notion of ‘character’; in the case of woman, this was not the case; the dominant ideology presented her as eternal and unchanging, except for modifications in terms of fashion etc” (Johnston 32). While feminist film studies emerged, this was one of the main concerns about the cinema and the way it presented women. Portrayals of women in classic cinema kept them in a role of timelessness, where they were rarely allowed to develop properly as a female character.

The pioneer in the field was Laura Mulvey, who coined the term ‘the male gaze’ in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” from 1975. She was greatly influenced by psychoanalysis and thus pushed the field towards a psychoanalytic approach for the majority of an entire decade. Today her essay remains one of the most influential contributions to feminist

film theory. Together with Claire Johnston, they were the two feminist film theorists who built the foundation for all the future debates that were to take place within the field. Like Claire Johnston, Mulvey was also concerned about the way that women were reduced to spectacles on screen. Mulvey, in particular, focused on the “cultural expectations of gender” (Neroni 26), that end up limiting or denying women their agency as they are repeatedly framed around stereotypical tropes.

It is important to note that feminist film theory was a field that emerged during the second wave of feminism. The field has changed significantly for the last couple of decades, and have arguably become more inclusive. The omittance of diverse approaches to female gender identity and sexuality meant that the earliest feminist film studies were heavily concerned with the white woman. Since the field emerged, there have been three main concerns in feminist film theory: “Identification, framing the woman’s body, and the importance of the female auteur”(17). The second wave of feminism brought a few concerns to light for the field which were heavily centered around the male spectator and the patriarchy that upheld the male dominance even in classical cinema. Their main argument was that the spectators always identified themselves with the male character, while the woman was kept in a passive position on screen and was rarely allowed any character development or importance to the plot.

When the third wave of feminism emerged, the field of feminist film theory began to change significantly in the way it viewed the female subject. The loudest voices during the third wave of feminism were the voices of black feminists and queer feminists. Especially the former shed light on the lack of representation as they began to develop several theories based on intersectionality. “Others, including black feminists, queer feminists, and third-wave feminists argued that film’s address to its spectator was much more contradictory, flexible, and

multilayered than early feminists had suggested” (Neroni 18). Early feminist film critics had a contested notion of identity that was later criticized by black feminists and queer feminists. When they emerged, they called for a more universal approach to female identity, while still maintaining “intersections between the universal and the particular” (18). Thus, they called for a more inclusive approach while still taking all the different facets of female identity into consideration. A woman is not just a woman. Her identity consists of multiple facets, such as, for example, class, sexuality, and race.

Identification is an important concept in film theory, but these theories of identification have greatly limited early feminist film critics. A lot of the early theories focus on the spectator and how they identify with the characters. The whole concept of the spectator is also where the field emerged with its main problem. “Feminist film theory intervened in the discussion by arguing that identification was a politically charged process that reinforced gender stereotypes, sustained hierarchies, and in general contributed to the oppression of women” (19). By viewing identification as a politically charged process, the way that films establish their narrative, camera positions, structure, editing, etc., becomes a part of the ruling ideology. For the second wave feminists, that ideology was patriarchy and its oppression of women.

To understand why the production of a patriarchal ideology is particularly harmful, one can turn to the psychoanalytic film theorist Jean-Louis Baudry. The creation of ideology in films is part of creating a fantasy, but it also explains the power that cinema has. According to Baudry, the established ideology dictates the act that individuals are supposed to follow. For instance, a patriarchal ideology that is part of a film’s narrative can dictate that a woman should be meek and submissive. “This fantasy is ideology itself. That is, it is the cultural belief system we are steeped in which then reinforces itself” (Neroni 19). Baudry sees the screen as a mirror which

transmits a fantasy. The ruling ideology is the apparatus that creates an idealistic fantasy based on what it desires. In the early stages of feminist film theory, this take on ideology was a “powerful tool to explain how culture reinforces women’s oppression” (20).

Feminist film theory began addressing the lack of gender awareness in the 1970s, but it is important to emphasize that as it emerged, it relied on already existing feminist theories and the feminist movement itself. The field and movement opened up the possibility for a more developed screen theory that included women or showed how they were excluded. One of the most influential theoretical groundworks for the field of feminist film theory was Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. This work was pivotal when it came to addressing the way that a woman views herself, and the way that others view her. “Beauvoir reveals that society as a whole relies on the idea that man is the subject and woman is his complementary other. This other is his prize, his inspiration, and, at the same time, what he fears. Woman is bound to the man, and her otherness defines his subjectivity. In this sense, according to Beauvoir, women are integral to society and yet necessarily inferior” (Neroni 22). In regards to this, and according to Beauvoir, society is what establishes the woman as the ‘other’, as it produces imageries for the woman, which she can use as an example of how she should behave (22).

In the 1980s, black feminists emerged with a critique of how feminist theories exclude the black woman from their narrative. This critique, of course, applied to the feminist film theorists as well. The greatest thing which early theories lacked was the question about identity and its functions. As mentioned earlier, a woman is not just one thing; she is multi-faceted. The way that early feminist critics approached the woman was through a contested notion of identity. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, famous for her theory of intersectionality, helped shed light on the paradoxes of female identity. Her work majorly impacted feminist film theory. She formed her

theory based on real-life experiences and evidence, which highlighted the way that the system stereotyped people according to ideas of gender and race. “She explains that cases would come through in which the court would accept a gender-centered case or a race-centered case. They would listen to the way a black woman was discriminated against because of her gender or because of her race but never the two together” (Neroni 30). Bearing witness to situations like that, made Crenshaw emphasize the importance of intersectionality.

bell hooks, American author and feminist, was the first to point out the lack of intersectionality and inclusion in feminist film theory. She challenged Laura Mulvey’s take on the spectator as being the only way to interact with a film. She created the notion of an oppositional gaze:

She points out that when the United States denied Black people’s rights, the oppression often included dictums that black people should not look at white people. This was a powerful form of racism and points to the power of the look. In response, hooks claims, black people cultivated an oppositional gaze to enact and symbolize rebellion. As hooks explains: “The ‘gaze’ has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally”. For hooks, the oppositional gaze is the key for interrogating the gaze of the oppressive social authority. (Neroni 31)

bell hooks thus showed the importance of intersectionality, while challenging the idea of identification as being fixed and only established through one particular way, which, in the early feminist film theory, was through the white male’s gaze. The lack of an intersectional approach meant that the feminist film theory field relied on exclusionary methods, and this was about to change with the emergence of both feminist queer theorists, and black feminists.

When talking about contributions to the field of feminist film theory, it is hard to ignore the importance of queer theories and queer feminists. The queer feminist critic, Patricia White, points out how the lesbian rejects the male gaze as they do not desire it, nor do they want it. White sees desire as part of a resistance and a way to create an alternative way of looking. While Mulvey sought to destroy desire, White argues that desire can also be seen as a way to reject the male gaze and be an act of resistance. Queer theorists, alongside black feminists, emphasized the multilayered and contradictory nature of identity, thus calling for a more nuanced and inclusionary approach when it comes to women in cinema.

As mentioned, there have been several movements and notable people, which have helped shape feminist film theory since the 1970s and continues to shape it today. The discussions about how a woman's body should be represented in cinema, and outside cinema as well, continue to be an issue which is still relevant today. It all began with the way feminists wanted to examine "how the consumption of woman as sexual objects for male pleasure fits into this larger patriarchal fantasy" (41). They approached the issue through awareness about the patriarchal order and their place within it. Feminist film theorists applied this issue to the cinema as they began analyzing the different ways the camera fetishized the woman in order to establish a patriarchal fantasy that could provide the male spectators with visual pleasure. As the feminist movement evolved, so did the theoretical field. More recently, discussions revolve around how women should be able to use their bodies to express their desire and sexuality freely. As many recent feminists would argue, this is a way for them to reclaim their sexualized bodies.

With the emergence of black feminists and queer theorists, it was established that gender should be approached in a more nuanced way that does not automatically categorize it as white and heterosexual, both for the male spectator and the objectified woman in question. These two

movements helped shape a more comprehensive understanding of the female body and everything it entails, alongside a woman's identity outside contested notions of femininity and masculinity. Furthermore, the emphasis on a multifaceted approach helped shed light on the need to embrace a woman's sexuality and view her outside oppressive frames where she is reduced to a patriarchal fantasy.

Women in Action Films

What exactly defines a female hero, or, more specifically, female action hero? Is it when a female protagonist adopts the traditionally masculine traits of the already existing male action hero, or can she exist independently with her own set of traits and features? In her book *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema* from 2007, Danish film scholar Rikke Schubart mentions how male heroes do not have to look attractive, and argues that this is different for female heroes: "The first step to qualify as 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" (11). Simply put, the female hero is required to look attractive, as it is part of her identity in action films. However, her identity consists of more than just this; she takes control, she commits violence, she saves the day – all things which male heroes do as well. "In the seventies, women entered film genres that until then had been thought of as "male" [...]. The world of action and violence was no longer a man's world. Kicking ass and shooting guns; acting as judge, jury and executioner; exploring; conquering; and going to war had been things *men* did" (11). Female heroes can now do all the things only men were previously able to do. They now adopt traditionally masculine traits to act active and independent.

Schubart mentions that the actresses of today's action films are even top paid, and that shows involving female heroes take up prime time TV (11). The combination of beauty and badass-behavior has granted the female hero a permanent spot in the film world. However, the question of whether she is a progressive sign of equality or a backlash against feminism with her artificial beauty has divided critics. Here, Schubart argues that "rather than choose a "correct" position, we must open ourselves up to another position: in-between. Just like the female heroine is placed between male and female gender roles, we, the audience, find ourselves caught between pleasure and guilt, between acceptance and denial" (12). Thus, Schubart proposes the idea that the female heroine should not always be labeled as masculine/feminine or active/passive or even progressive/oppressive. Rather, she is a mix of both, though not independent from, but inspired by, the male hero. Thus, Schubart's theory builds on a gender binary that splits everything into two different categories, each with its own set of traits. However, her main argument becomes that women and men can possess traits from either or both.

Schubart argues that the action film genre is a "male film genre", and that even though an action film may have a female hero protagonist, it is still considered a male genre. "The term acknowledges two things: first, that films with female heroes are written by men, produced by men, directed by men, and intended for a male audience; second, that the "heroic" nature of the protagonist in male film genres is mythologically, psychologically, and culturally designed to function as *a role model of masculinity*" (15). Thus, the female hero of a male film genre may take on specific masculine traits in order to hold significance to the narrative, yet, this does not exclude her from traditionally feminine and equally important features such as beauty and sex-appeal. Furthermore, it does not necessarily turn her into a mere spectacle available for a male

gaze either, as Schubart would argue. Instead, she is, as mentioned, an “in-between” phenomenon.

However, Schubart does at the same time argue that the female hero’s purpose is not to save the world, but that it always involves a man in some way: “In fact, most of the acts female heroes perform are about proving they are as good as men, better than men, or have had enough of men. [...] The female hero is a generic anomaly, and the narrative takes a lot of trouble to explain *why* she is in a man’s world, *what* she is doing there, and carefully *exports* her out of the plot” (29). Hence, the female hero takes on a mission that usually involves or revolves around men, and as soon as this mission is fulfilled, she can lose her hero persona. In Schubart’s definition of the female hero, she presents five archetypes, which have come to be by their repetitive appearances in action cinema; the dominatrix, the rape-avenger, the mother, the daughter, and the Amazon. These five archetypes each have unique motives and missions which they seek to fulfill.

The first archetype is the dominatrix. “In male masochistic fantasy she is the woman punishing the masochist and fulfilling his perverse pleasures. She is not really cruel, since she serves her victim, and he is not really a victim, since he is a customer buying a service” (Schubart 30). She serves not only to punish her male victim but to pleasure him as well. This puts her in relation to pornography, capitalism, and prostitution, as she mixes purchased services with visual eroticism as well as sexual pleasure. “She is too close to pornography and thus an embarrassment to mainstream movies. But she is a strong component in most femme fatale cinema and prominent especially in low-budget films tailored exclusively to a male audience” (Schubart 30). She seems to have found a permanent spot in action cinema by mixing beauty and sadism, as this allows for the female hero to show power and strength without exclusively

adopting masculine traits. However, the dominatrix outfit/performance does not serve a purpose in terms of being a character in a film. Instead, “the dominatrix is an erotic act rather than a person, and her actions are services rather than punishments. She is not perceived as a “person”, but as a male fantasy” (Schubart 32).

The second archetype, the rape-avenger, is “the woman who kills the man, or men, who raped her. She can even, as in *Ms. 45* (1981), kill men who haven’t touched her yet, merely because they belong to the “predatory” sex (Schubart 33). In the seventies, the rape-avenger is born and the female hero here becomes a femme fatale as she makes it her mission to kill the man who has hurt her. The rape-avenger is transformative; at the beginning of her mission, she goes directly from being sweet, fragile and innocent to becoming monstrous and lethal. “The rape-avenger is characterized by three elements: As the victim of rape she is the victim of a certain *kind of masculinity*. As an avenger of rape she acts out a certain *kind of male fantasy*. And as a female avenger of *male violence* she has feminist potentials” (Schubart 34). Here, her mission is not only to gain vengeance but to restore balance as the rape becomes a symbol of power and, therefore, oppression. She must break free from this oppression, and thereby also her innocence, by embracing a newfound sexual identity and confidence which will aid her in defeating the rapist.

The third archetype, the mother, is another transformative persona. She starts out as a good mother, then becomes a bad mother, and then finally goes on a mission to become a new and better mother. “The good mother is nurturing and reproductive, and constitutes the mental space of the family. She is not with her family. She *is* the family. She is the womb where the family grows. She is the cultural symbol of “mother nature” and “mother earth”” (Schubart 35). The good mother is then a mother who sticks to her traditionally motherly duties of caring for

her family and especially children. She becomes a bad mother once she wishes to break free from these motherly duties in order to seek different goals in life, such as having a job and a career, which are traditionally considered male goals. This is where her children start to suffer, and her family starts to fail. Here, her mission towards becoming a new and better mother begins. However, she must seek male advice in order to succeed: “It is striking how women in male film genres never learn from other women. They depend on men for education, help, fatherly advice, weapons instruction, and sensibility training” (Schubart 36). Consequently, this male advice will help the mother to become a better version of her original and good self. She evolves by integrating traditionally male traits into her motherly nature, “responding with violence when threatened, being brave, strong, resilient, committed, ambitious, intelligent”, thereby expanding her capacity as a mother.

The fourth archetype, the daughter, was established in the nineties. Here, the female protagonist becomes a hero because “daddy told her to. Or rather, Daddy *taught* her to “be this way.” He raised his little girl, educated her, trained her, gave her weapons, and handed her a job. The heroine is *his* little girl. His creation” (Schubart 38). She is given her mission by her father, not mother, as only he can transform her from “an ordinary young woman into an extraordinary hero” (Schubart 39). The father will not only teach her how to fight and be physically strong, he will also teach her how to look and act like an attractive woman. “This is a masquerade with the daughter putting on a costume in a drag-like overacted performance of femininity. Think of Charlie’s angels, his sweet little girls willingly masquerading as masseuses, strippers, hot and horny little devils almost giving a chauffeur a heart attack on the race tracks [...]” (Schubart 39). The female learns to perform both feminine and masculine traits in order to fulfill her mission. She switches between distracting and seductive femininity and aggressive and destructive

masculinity as she pleases. Even physically, she can dress in both female and male attire. Hence, the daughter can now perform multiple personalities in order to manipulate when necessary.

The fifth and final archetype, the Amazon, “is related to women and war” (Schubart 40). Like in Greek mythology, the Amazons are “aggressive and erotic creatures who kill, castrate, and even rape men to fulfill their own desires” (Schubart 41). Like the dominatrix archetype, this one is less a real persona or character and more a fantasy or a role. She cannot be controlled by men and is therefore considered evil. However, “in contemporary popular film we find two versions of the Amazon: the good Amazon and the bad Amazon” (Schubart 41). The good Amazon is deemed good because she is in favor of patriarchy. She is still independent and aggressive, but because she is young, heterosexual, and willing to marry, men do not fear her. The evil Amazon, on the other hand, does not favor patriarchy. She is “often lesbian and a generation older than the heroine – that unspecified age between young and old” (Schubart 41). Thus, the Amazon archetype is violent, independent, and strong, but can at the same time be beautiful and loving, depending on whether she is good or evil.

Another theorist who speaks of women in action films is Yvonne Tasker. In her book *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* from 1993, Tasker presents certain female action film stereotypes, where some hold resemblance to Schubart’s archetypes, and of which ‘the independent heroine’ and ‘the heroine as sidekick’ in particular are of the greatest importance to this thesis. Tasker mentions how the existence and representation of the action heroine have shifted over the years: “By the beginning of the 1990s a range of images of active heroines had begun to emerge [...]. These roles began to sketch out a different set of roles and new narrative possibilities for women in the Hollywood action cinema so that ‘heroine’ no longer necessarily signifies passivity” (18). She argues that in action cinema, the female body is

now physically tougher and stronger, both traits that are traditionally considered male traits.

“[...] a symbolic transgression enacted over the woman’s body emphasises the ways in which her body is rendered impenetrable” (Tasker 17). She is now no longer weak and instead possesses the immortality formerly associated exclusively with the male hero due to her newfound durability as a female action hero. Tasker points out that the surfacing of this new action heroine stems from previous stereotypes created in the 1970s with the influence of feminism in the film world. ‘The independent heroine’, for one, existed in films “centered around women who are independent of men, who are sexually free and who, to an extent, determine their own lives” (Tasker 18). As Schubart also points out, she did, however, not exist within action cinema the same way the action hero did. Often, film-makers would attempt to solidify the action heroine’s place within action cinema with the use of comedy (Tasker 20), where her purpose would be to heighten the mood by telling jokes, for example. Alternatively, film-makers would sexualize her, for example, by turning her into a dominatrix (Tasker 19); a powerful and aggressive but, at the same time, attractive and sexually pleasing character. Thus, it seems the independent heroine needed to hold a purpose or reason for her fate as a heroine in an action narrative other than just being the heroine, and that her actions needed to be justified somehow (Tasker 20). ‘The heroine as a sidekick’ could, as the independent heroine, exist as a significant and strong character as well. However, Tasker points out how she existed alongside the male hero, either to further his narrative or to highlight features of his character. For example, Tasker mentions that in *Rambo*, the sidekick character Co becomes Rambo’s object to be avenged after she is killed (26), and consequently becomes a tool in giving Rambo a purpose. She also mentions how the female sidekick could provide “a point of differentiation, emphasizing the masculine identity of the male hero” (27). Here, her importance in the narrative

was once again to further the male hero as a character somehow. Thus, both heroine stereotypes of earlier action cinema existed as physically strong and independent characters, and their demonstration of masculine skills and traits may have been the film world's response to the rise of feminism. Yet, simultaneously, their significance within the action narrative was slightly trivialized when they were in certain instances turned into comic relief, sexual spectacle, or tool to develop the male hero. However, this has, as Tasker points out, changed over time with the establishment of the muscular and invincible action heroine of the 1990s.

In his book *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, Jeffrey A. Brown analyzes the modern action heroine. Contrary to earlier feminists arguing that the action heroines of the 1970s were overly sexualized and fitted primarily for a male gaze, Brown argues that modern-day action heroines are far from passive: "She fights, she shoots, she kills, she solves the mysteries, and she rescues herself and others from dangerous situations. In short, she is in full command of the narrative – carrying the action in ways normally reserved for male protagonists" (25). One of Brown's main points in this argument is the fact that many modern action heroines are presented with more muscular and well-toned bodies that function as weapons, even. In his analysis of action heroines performing masculine action traits rather than it being part of their identity, Brown incorporates the work of gender theorist Judith Butler: "Butler argues that there is no natural gender identity or even form of androgyny that preexists socialization. A person is not born man or woman, but rather *becomes* one" (23).

This understanding of gender as performance allows for a new way of reading the action heroine along with her body and actions. Now, she can be regarded as active, strong, and capable, whether she looks or acts traditionally female or male. "Even as the action-heroine

hardbodies of the 1980s and early 1990s gave way to a more traditionally feminine and sexualized body by the late 1990s and into the 2000s, the emphasis on the strength and competence of these bodies remained” (Brown 25). Thus, she can be sexual and create a desire in other male characters as well as male spectators, but this does in no way affect the narrative negatively or hinder her capabilities as an invincible heroine. Brown mentions Ripley from the films *Alien* and *Aliens*, who can be (and was by the press) compared to popular male action heroes such as Rambo. “Both Rambo and Ripley were seen in numerous pictures wearing almost identical action hero uniforms: a muscle shirt, loads of ammunition, an oversized machine gun, and sweat dampened hair” (Brown 27). Female action protagonists having physical similarities with male action heroes while being involved with male love interests prove that they can perform as male heroes without having a male or lesbian identity. Brown points out how audience members would even respond positively to these new, muscular heroines: “Rather than blatant wolf whistles, there is a sense of awe and respect (from both male and female viewers) for the hard-earned muscularity that stands so far removed from even the well-aerobicized Hollywood norm” (33). Hence, movie-goers’ reception of the new, muscular action heroine seems to differ from earlier feminists’ response to the heroines of the 70s.

In addition to the muscular action heroine performing masculine actions, Brown also analyzes a more feminine action hero performing masculine actions. As an example, he mentions Maggie from the American remake of the film *La Femme Nikita*, titled *Point of No Return*, who frequently switches between wearing traditionally feminine clothing such as dresses and more traditionally male clothes such as black undershirts. She also switches between demonstrating traditionally feminine behavior, such as acting weak and innocent, and traditionally male behavior, such as being violent and handling weapons (Brown 35). The difference between

Maggie and the females of earlier action films is the fact that Maggie actively chooses between these looks and acts, which proves that some newer action heroines abandon gender absolutism in favor of a more fluid way of expressing their heroism. “[...] just because she looks like a woman does not mean she is one, and just because she acts like a man does not mean she is one” (Brown 36). Evidently, certain modern action heroines have been freed from feminine/masculine and active/passive labeling, as movie-goers’ opinions on gender and identity have generally changed as well.

In conclusion, the action heroine and her existence in action films appear to have changed over time. Additionally, the spectators and the media’s reception of her representation has changed, too. Certain female action personas have been and continue to be repeated in action narratives, which has resulted in their solidification as stereotypes, or archetypes, as Schubart refers to them. These archetype action females are, to Schubart, in-betweens of the binary splits between male/female, masculine/feminine, and active/passive. They are beautiful and sexually attractive, but physically strong, able, and aggressive at the same time. They are mesmerizing, but at the same time, know how to handle weapons and further the narrative. In the 1970s, though, the action heroine was by some feminists seen as overly sexualized and merely meant for male spectators to gaze upon. Tasker explains this notion well with her definition of the independent heroine and sidekick heroine as both being comical accessories in the male hero’s narrative. However, this does, as defined by Brown, change with the emergence of the muscular, violent, and weapon-wielding action heroines of the 1990s.

Theory

Laura Mulvey

In 1973, British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey wrote an essay titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. In her essay, Mulvey argues that women in film are merely spectacles adjusted in various ways for male movie-goers to gaze upon them to gain pleasure. She labels male protagonists as active as they control the objectifying gaze with which they derive pleasure from as they sexualize the female characters on the screen. Additionally, the male spectators can also derive pleasure as they identify with the male characters on the screen and their possession of the female characters. The female characters, on the other hand, are passive and hold no importance to the narrative since their purpose is to be styled and fetishized for the male gaze.

Furthermore, they are exhibitionists as they possess a need to be looked at. Through the years, this essay eventually became her most well-known piece of work due to the, at the time, pioneering way of combining a psychoanalytic framework with feminist film theory. Thus, it paved the way for the works of several other feminist film theorists then and continues to do so today. Although some might argue that the psychoanalytic approach in film theory is an outdated approach only relevant to Hollywood cinema around the time the essay was written, the most important points Mulvey makes still hold relevance in the analysis of present-day Hollywood cinema, especially of the action genre.

The main idea with Mulvey’s essay, as she states, is to destroy pleasure and beauty by analyzing it. To Mulvey, mainstream film, thereunder Hollywood cinema, tends to reinforce oppressive and patriarchal ideas by using women as “beautiful” objects merely meant for the male audience to derive (visual) pleasure from as they gaze upon them. She wishes to move away from these notions as she finds them far outdated: “The alternative is the thrill that comes

from leaving the past behind without simply rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, and daring to break with normal and pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire” (16). Thus, she wishes to create an alternative standard in which women are no longer only meant for male audiences to gaze upon and derive pleasure from. However, before an alternative can be established and adopted as the new standard, Mulvey firstly seeks to decode and reveal how and why these oppressive ideas within Hollywood cinema exist by applying a psychoanalytic framework.

Interestingly, Mulvey describes her use of psychoanalytic theory as a “political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (11). As Mulvey mentions, “the unconscious of patriarchal society” and how it has structured film form, she implies that patriarchal norms and standards existed during that time and that film-makers made conscious choices to transfer these oppressive standards to the world of cinema. Thus, according to Mulvey, a film can be regarded as a reflection of the present state of society. Furthermore, she states that “there is no way in which we can produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides, of which psychoanalysis is not the only but an important one” (15). Therefore, Mulvey intends to use psychoanalytic theory as a political weapon to change the world of cinema since it is a product of patriarchy and can thereby help shed light on how these oppressive standards work and why they exist on film.

The psychoanalytic approach used by Mulvey builds, for one, on Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud’s theory about ‘scopophilia’. “Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point, he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a

controlling and curious gaze” (16). According to Freud, this desire begins during early childhood in the pre-Oedipal phase, where children find interest or pleasure in looking at forbidden body parts, such as genitalia (Jackson, Hogg 2). However, the child’s ability to distinguish between the pleasure of looking (voyeurism) and the pleasure of being looked at (exhibitionism) does not form until the Oedipal phase, where the child also begins to code said pleasures as masculine and feminine respectively. “Classically, according to this view, the active voyeuristic function is distinctly masculine and phallic, whereas the passive exhibitionist view is distinctly feminine and castrating” (Jackson, Hogg 2). Furthermore, this desire continues to develop throughout our adult years, “because through it we derive erotic in either heterosexual or homosexual forms of sexual desire” (Jackson, Hogg 2). Here, the cinema becomes a way for spectators to live out this voyeuristic (sexual) desire as they are placed in a dark room in which they can gaze upon a projected image, thus blurring the barrier between reality and fantasy.

Additionally, to Mulvey, the exhibitionist desire is lived out by the spectators in the cinema as well: “Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world. Among other things, the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer” (17). For the four films this thesis will set out to analyze, the notion of scopophilia will be particularly interesting to apply in this analysis as all four films have several female characters who are each sexualized at some point, which allows male spectators to gaze upon them in a scopophilic manner and thereby feel a sort of pleasure.

In her essay, Mulvey mentions French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and his theory about the ‘mirror stage’ as well. “Jacques Lacan has described how the moment when a child

recognizes his image in the mirror is crucial for the constitution of the ego” (17). The child here not only recognizes himself in the mirror but sees the mirror image as a more complete version of himself than how he physically experiences it. “Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject which, re-introjected as an ego-ideal, prepares the way for identification with others in the future” (17). Thus, the child develops the I as he becomes self-aware and begins to identify with others through imagination.

How the cinema allows the spectator to lose their ego momentarily as they perceive the fantasy world and characters of the projected film is comparable to the image recognition a child experiences during the mirror stage. “While at the same time, the cinema has distinguished itself in the production of ego ideals, through the star system, for instance” (Mulvey 18). For example, as the male spectator views the male star on the screen, he experiences a form of satisfaction as he identifies with him. This notion of the mirror stage and the male spectator’s identification with the characters in a film will be equally interesting to apply in this thesis’ analysis as the notion of scopophilia since two of the films, *Wanted* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*, have male protagonists with beautiful female characters who fight alongside them. The other two, *Charlie’s Angels* and *Atomic Blonde* have male characters as well, both good and evil, whom the male spectators may identify with partially due to their ways of sexually possessing/interacting with the female characters of the films.

Mulvey acknowledges that these two aspects of the pleasurable structures of looking contradict each other. “The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the

constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen” (18). An example of the first, scopophilia, could be when a male spectator in the movie theater gazes upon a female character in an action film. This female character may or may not have any importance in the story of the projected film. However, she may be viewed by the male spectator as a sexual object (possibly due to her physical appearance) as a result of his sexual instincts (libido), which then causes him to feel pleasure solely through this gaze as he is not able to interact with her. An example of the second could be when the male spectator sees the male protagonist of the projected film and acknowledges a set of desires through his fascination with him. This is especially the case when the male protagonist has interactions, particularly sexual, with female characters, where the male spectator then experiences pleasure from imagining himself in the male protagonist’s position (ego libido).

Although the two aspects are different in terms of how pleasurable looking occurs, they overlap and interact with each other as they both serve to create a fantasy world in which the male spectator can derive pleasure through a gaze. “Both pursue aims in indifference to perceptual reality and motivate eroticized phantasmagoria that affect the subject’s perception of the world to make a mockery of empirical objectivity” (Mulvey 18). Thus, the cinema has come to serve as a place where illusions are created through this connection of libido and ego.

Furthermore, Mulvey mentions how desire “allows the possibility of transcending the instinctual and the imaginary, but its point of reference continually returns to the traumatic moment of its birth, the castration complex” (18). Therefore, gazing upon a projected image in a movie theater can be pleasurable and threatening for the male spectator at the same time when a woman is an object on the screen.

Besides her investigation into the male spectators and the pleasure that happens via their gaze upon the screen, Mulvey also investigates the female characters and how they are represented in film. She mentions how the act of looking can be active and passive, where active looking (voyeurism) is considered a male action, and passive looking, or being looked at (exhibitionism), is considered a female action. "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (19). The female character on the screen then becomes a spectacle; she exists within a narrative, but at the same time "tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey 19). Her place within the narrative holds a passive function; she is to be looked at, which causes the male protagonist and his storyline to develop as gazing upon her inspires love, fear or concern for her, which provokes him to act a certain way. Thus, the female character exists only to inspire certain emotions within the male protagonist and holds no function or importance to the narrative apart from this. This is somewhat seen in *Charlie's Angels*, where the female protagonists are frequently styled sexually or perform sensual acts such as dancing, which thus turns them into spectacles despite being the protagonists of the narrative as well. In *Wanted* and *Atomic Blonde*, the female protagonists suffer the same treatment as they are in certain scenes momentarily presented as erotic spectacles. The split between the active and passive functions of the male and female characters respectively on film is, according to Mulvey, a result of the sexual imbalance existing within the, at the time, patriarchal society.

Another result of the societal sexual imbalance on film is the way the narrative often revolves around the male protagonist being the one to advance the story and make things happen. "According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up,

the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like” (Mulvey 20). The gaze by the spectator upon the male protagonist is, therefore, not an erotic look comparable to when he gazes upon the female character. It is instead, as mentioned, an identifying look which gives the spectator the idea that he is as powerful and perfect as the male protagonist, and able to take ownership of the beautiful female. Thus, the female character exists to pleasure and develop the male character as well as the male spectator. In all four films chosen for this thesis, some of the female protagonists and characters are indeed sexualized and fetishized noticeably more than the male protagonists and characters, which indicates that this part of Mulvey’s theory will be another interesting point to examine in the analysis.

Visual pleasure is not the only thing the female body awakens in the male protagonist and spectator. As previously mentioned, gazing upon the female character on the screen can be threatening as well due to the castration fear it awakens in the male spectator. Mulvey mentions how, in psychoanalytic terms, the fact that the female lacks a penis cause unpleasure for the male as it implies a threat of castration:

Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of the *film noir*); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into

a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence overvaluation, the cult of the female star). (Mulvey 21)

This is where Mulvey splits the gaze into two different modes: fetishistic scopophilia and voyeurism. For the male spectator to avoid or rid himself of the castration fear from gazing at the female character in a film, certain measures can be taken in the production of said film. With fetishistic scopophilia, the female character is fetishized, styled in a certain way physically, and presented through various close-ups in order to distract the male spectator from her lack of a penis, so he can freely gaze upon her and gain pleasure without feeling any form of fear. As Mulvey mentions, this fetishization can also happen with the use of a fetish object. In her article “Gender, Genre and Excess”, Linda Williams argues that in horror films, the male spectators switch between identifying with the powerlessness and, later, empowerment of the girl-victim, and that this empowerment can happen through the use of a phallic/fetish object: “[...] when the girl-victim of a film like *Halloween* finally grabs the phallic knife, or ax, or chain saw to turn the tables on the monster-killer [...]” (7).

Additionally, Jeffrey A. Brown mentions the use of weapons as phallic symbols in his book *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism and Popular Culture* as well, and uses the film *Die Another Day* as an example: “[...] whereas Bond’s gun reinforces his power and authority in clearly phallic terms, Jinx’s still sheathed knife is an almost humorously exaggerated example of fetishization, of phallic compensation for her apparent lack” (8). Hence, when male characters use weapons, it empowers their already existing masculinity, but when female characters use them, it is to compensate for their inherent passiveness and lack of masculinity. With voyeurism, Mulvey compares this mode of looking to sadism: “pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjugating the

guilty person through punishment or forgiveness. This sadistic side fits in well with narrative” (22). Here, the voyeuristically induced castration fear prompts the male protagonist to act and develop the story in order to rid himself of the fear. This happens when he either punishes or saves the guilty, mysterious woman.

Lastly, and to conclude on her essay, Mulvey mentions that the “voyeuristic-scopophilic” look can be further explained in detail:

There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent distancing awareness in the audience.

(25)

The aim with a narrative on film is always to create an illusion in which spectators forget that they are watching a film projected onto a screen. The goal is for them to feel as if they are part of the film themselves as a result of the subtle camera presence as well as editing the film to make it feel realistic. Spectators find themselves placed in a phantasmagoria where they experience pleasure by just gazing at the sexualized female characters and identifying with the male protagonists and the actions they actively take. Even when the female characters threaten to break this illusion by inducing a castration fear, they are fetishized in specific ways, so the male spectator does not realize this fear.

Elizabeth Hills

In Elizabeth Hills' essay, "From 'Figurative Males' to Action Heroines: Further Thoughts on Active Women in the Cinema" she discusses the problematic and binary approach that many feminist film theorists use when they analyze female characters. Her focus is on the action genre, and how action heroines have been perceived as almost a parody within the genre, and in their casting as the lead role. She criticizes the way that many theorists from the field frame the action heroine as merely an aesthetic role, or as figuratively male, in which the action heroine's actions are read in terms of being traditionally masculine. Hills criticizes this reading as it alters the action heroine's agency as a female subject. With her reconceptualization of the action heroine, Hills then raises an important question: is there always removal of feminine qualities at work when it comes to the action heroine? Moreover, in which ways can the action heroine achieve empowerment in an arguably predominantly male space?

Elizabeth Hills takes a point of departure in Yvonne Tasker's concept of the action heroine. Hills sees the action heroine as a transgressive character that has undergone much change in the past couple of decades. This change in the formation of the action heroine in Hollywood cinema has been on its way since the 70s. Hills points to Sigourney Weaver's role in the *Alien* series, as an example of one the action heroines who greatly transgresses traditional codes and conventions within the genre. According to Hills, these action heroines "transgress both cinematic genre codes and cultural gender codes which position female characters as the passive, immobile, and peripheral characters of Hollywood action cinema" (38). With a male lead in action films, the woman is, more often than not, reduced to a love interest that needs saving. Thus, a female lead who takes on the role of the action hero(ine) is a sign of someone

who surpasses the conventional codes for the action genre, especially because the genre is seen as a predominantly male-dominated genre.

Elizabeth Hills argues that the binary approach and logic excludes the spectator's ability to see women as proper action heroes if they are viewed through a psychoanalytic framework because the emphasis on their traditionally masculine nature takes away the focus from their roles as women. Furthermore, Hills emphasizes that her aim is not to dismiss the methodological approach that is commonly used in feminist film theory, but it is simply an attempt to move away from conventional thinking that has marked the field since its beginning. She discusses the consequences that derive from viewing action heroines through a psychoanalytic lens and warns against viewing the active female subject synonymously with phallic and male. To conceptualize a new framework for how to read active women, Elizabeth Hills centers on the issues that she sees within the field of feminist film theory, around the character Ripley from the *Alien* series. She argues that this character, in particular, "responds to new modes of being" (40). Ripley is portrayed as an active subject that transgresses the usual codes for female subjectivity within a binary framework. Thus, it further emphasizes the need for a counter-narrative in regards to reading women in film, and in this case, more specifically, women in the action genre.

Hills calls for new modes of being for female characters, in which the female subject is active on her own without the male counterpart, and thus it cancels the binary between active versus passive. If the female character can be read as active without inherently being male, she can enter a state where she challenges the patriarchal structure without being denounced as 'lacking' in Freudian terms. This allows her to gain control over her subject, while she fights off gendered conventions by proving that a woman can be empowered both through her looks and actions. For example, in *Charlie's Angels*, there are several instances where the Angels'

sexualized looks could be read in terms of empowerment, as they, to a degree, control the gaze through the way they use their sexuality to manipulate with their male counterparts.

As Hills points out, Ripley is a character that has been widely discussed by feminist film theorists, but the way that Sigourney Weaver's character has been perceived has raised a significant amount of concern. Ripley was the first action heroine of her type. She is someone who swiftly conquered the role of a hero and commanded the scene. Thus, Hills emphasizes Ripley's importance when it comes to the concept of action heroines:

Ripley has been an important site over which changing theoretical responses to sexual difference and film have been mapped. Whilst this paper aims to continue this project by linking Ripley to a new theoretical framework, the main reason I choose to focus on her is because of her ability to adapt to the new to negotiate change. Ripley illustrated the importance of creative thinking in response to the new signs which occur in her environment, a willingness to experiment with new modes of being and the ability to transform herself in the process. (40)

Ripley's character carves the way for a new theoretical approach, because she, according to Hills, changed the way that action heroines were usually coded. "She provides a spectacular example of the kind of dynamic subjectivity which I see as being crucial for feminist film theory"(40). Hills wants to create a new reading position when it comes to the way that action heroines are seen. In her essay, she highlights the dichotomous logic that has been applied to readings of Sigourney Weaver's character in *Alien*, to establish why those kinds of readings are highly problematic and regressive. When it comes to prior interpretations of Ripley, there appears to be a consensus about the fact that her heroic traits belong to that of a male hero. More

recent feminist film theory has already established that the approach to identity should not be read as fixed or one-sided, but as multi-faceted.

Newer approaches to feminist film theory, such as Elizabeth Hills', argues that, in simple terms, a woman can be whatever she wants. As Hills points out, the problem with psychoanalytic approaches to feminist film theory is that the concepts of masculine and feminine remain mutually exclusive. If a woman is masculine, she stops being a woman and turns into someone who is 'figuratively male'. To illustrate how the field of feminist film theory has approached the action heroine, Hills accounts for a select number of readings of Ripley's character, in which the reading has been focused on criticism, rather than the possible empowerment of women in action cinema. While this thesis focuses on action heroines in the 21st century, it is important to account for what a predominantly psychoanalytic framework may situate when one examines female characters in action cinema, in order to possibly move in a more transgressive direction.

To renegotiate the way that the female subject is seen, Elizabeth Hills turns to Gilles Deleuze, and his work written in collaboration with Félix Guattari, to propose a new methodological approach when it comes to how one can read, and interpret, action heroines. Hills is particularly interested in Deleuze's notion of "Body without Organs" (44). Opposite psychoanalysis, Deleuze is not interested in which organs a body has since that is not what forms the body's reality, or how it should be understood. A Body without Organs is just the idea of viewing the body outside gendered expectations since the emphasis is put on the idea of fluidity and the ability to achieve multiple functionalities with the body, depending on the kind of context that one finds themselves in.

For the action heroine, her body should not be imagined inside a binary frame that confines her gender to traditional and outdated ideas about what a woman's body is capable of

doing. A good example of this is Furiosa. She greatly transgresses traditional ideas about what a female body is capable of doing. Her body should be framed in accordance with her context as an action heroine, which means that naturally, her body is both active and capable of enduring a great deal. From a Deleuzian perspective, this means that the psychoanalytic framework, and its creation of binaries, provides a wrongful image of what a body is capable of doing. The organs do not dictate action and desires, and no gendered and binary rules apply to the body and its actions. An active female character is thus not merely figuratively male because she is active. Hills mentions how women can connect their bodies with, for example, technology:

For Deleuze, then, the body lived to its fullest potential is not organized according to the particular organs it has, indeed for him it is a ‘Body without Organs’, consisting instead of a multiplicity of independent parts, what he calls ‘desiring-machines’- which can connect and reconnect with other machines, elements or objects from multiple frames of reference to produce particular types of ‘assemblages’ – such as the assemblage of women and technology. (44)

With this in mind, a weapon is not a phallic symbol, then. Instead, it can be seen as a component that is added to the body, to produce a new one, since it is an extension of the machine (the body). The action heroine holding a gun has often been read in phallic terms, but with this new approach in mind, the gun becomes an extension of her, as she recreates her body into something she needs. The way that the body connects with other objects is transgressive and experimental. As Hills clarifies, there are no rigid behavioral patterns, that the body should follow, depending on the gender it belongs to: “[...] because these assemblages are not restrained by expectations about ‘appropriate’ behaviors or connections, they can be associated with contesting notions of gendered identity and fixed subjectivity” (44-45).

Hills points to Deleuze's concept of "becoming" (45), which is the notion that the body is in flux, ever-changing, and therefore not governed by rigid patterns and presumptions about what it should do. Elizabeth Hills references the feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz, who points out that, "[...] if the body can be reconceptualized as a site of experimentation and transformation, then this means that the female body is capable of being imagined outside the notions of 'passive', 'lack' and 'other'" (45). This complex conceptualization of the way that the action heroine moves places her outside "essentialist frameworks" (45) and instead emphasizes her transgressiveness.

As Deleuze mentions, a Body without Organs can then be regarded as a desiring machine, which can produce assemblages. The notion of assemblages is an important concept for Hills. The concept of assemblages argues that the body consists of certain components and that these are open and able to connect with other external components. Thus, as two components connect, an assemblage is formed. The original concept was based on the way that one's unconscious produces desires like a machine. "Deleuze and Guattari theorize the machine in terms of desire, in that desire is a productive force that forms relations between different aspects of an assemblage" (Ringrose and Coleman 125). This means that the body itself is capable of forming a new context, in which it can express itself, according to its desire. "Deleuze and Guattari argue that the objects that the children play with are not symbolic (e.g they aren't representatives of the phallus), but machinic, meaning they give desire the means to not merely express itself, but form something constructive" (Buchanan 125). An action heroine's use of weapons, particularly those that can be read as a phallic symbol, is therefore not a sign of her penis envy in Freudian terms, nor is it a way to lessen the castration anxiety for the man that is part of her narrative, whether that is as a spectator, or as a character in the film.

Elizabeth Hills mediates her understanding of Deleuze's concept of desiring-machines and assemblages as she suggests a new way of reading the action heroine. From a Mulveyan approach, the action heroine would be read in terms of 'lacking', or in terms of being a highly sexualized object, that is there for the male gaze's pleasure. The problem with confining women to aesthetic roles is the assumption that she falls under the category of being 'passive'. The corpus of action films that this thesis deals with consists of a group of action heroines that are far from passive when it comes to the narrative. Their active nature stems both from the way that their bodies move, but also the mindset that they express. For instance, all three protagonists from *Charlie's Angels* express an impressive capability of using their bodies in fights, but at the same time, they are also highly intelligent women who can manipulate technology. In this regard, they are neither damsels in distress, nor are they helpless and lacking. The psychoanalytic approach within the feminist film theory field would masculinize these women and remove their female subjectivity. Elizabeth Hills argues that "the use of phallogentric logic to position resourceful, intelligent and courageous female survivors as 'figuratively male' seems to me to be a 'particularly grotesque' form of selection and interpretation and one which has severe political consequences" (44). Therefore, she suggests that Deleuze's approach to the body, in particular, will help frame the action heroine's body and actions in a more positive and nonconforming way. Furthermore, it will help maintain the action heroine's transgressive character and help her create a more dynamic subject.

Violence is another key aspect of the typical action heroine. Earlier readings of the action heroine defined her as masculine due to her violent nature. Hills argues that this violent trait which she possesses should be understood in a different light, as it does not exclude her from being a woman. Being violent is a trait that is ascribed to any action hero, as it is a part of the

genre and part of how an action hero is coded: it is about the action, violence, and speed. Again, Hills exemplifies this through Ripley from *Alien*. Her character expresses a violent nature, but that is due to her role within the genre, and the fact that she must use violence as part of her assemblage to defeat obstacles, such as the Alien. “[...] if action heroines become empowered and even violent through their use of technology, this is not to say that they are somehow no longer ‘real’ women, but that they are intelligent and necessarily aggressive females in the context of their role as the central figures of action genre films” (46). Thus, the female subject in action cinema can be both active and violent without being compared to the male subject, and without being confined to a phallogentric frame. From a Deleuzian perspective, this violence is just a part of the desiring machine, or rather an extension of it, as the body’s desire searches for ways to express itself and create something constructive and useful. For the action heroine, this extension of her desiring machine (body), then becomes a weapon with which she exerts violence.

Violence and the way that these action heroines use their bodies can be seen as a form of empowerment, and the way that they are coded is not necessarily phallogentric. It is a way for them to renegotiate the frames and the binaries that they are often tied to. It is about transformation and action, not about passivity or the phallus. It is important to point out that the concept of a Body without Organs does not mean that the female subject ceases to be female, and it does not make the action heroine genderless. “This does not mean that she has moved beyond sexual difference to an androgynous, non-differentiated state, but, rather, to a non-hierarchical state of pure difference” (46). A body without organs allows the action heroine to step outside gendered hierarchies as she reassembles herself into a new structure of meaning that does not confine her to a rigid identity. It allows her to maintain a fluid and dynamic identity as a woman.

By integrating an assemblage of ‘action’ and ‘heroine’, she surpasses the limits that a binary may dictate, while also rejecting rigid gender identities.

Reflections

The two theoretical frameworks have been selected based on what this thesis will attempt to investigate. Laura Mulvey and Elizabeth Hills both provide valid tools that can be used to investigate the representation of females in 21st century action films. More specifically, both frameworks offer ways to analyze whether these females in action films are empowered and transgressive or fall victim to the objectifying male gaze.

As mentioned, Mulves makes use of a psychoanalytic framework to highlight how oppressive and patriarchal societal standards have influenced classic Hollywood cinema. She argues that women on film exist solely for men to pleasurably gaze upon, due to their passive, exhibitionist nature. Likewise, males control a scopophilic and voyeuristic gaze, which, due to castration anxiety, requires an eroticization or fetishization of the female object on the screen. In the argumentation of her use of psychoanalysis, Mulvey mentions that “there is no way in which we can produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides, of which psychoanalysis is not the only but an important one” (15). As Mulvey argues, since psychoanalysis is a product of patriarchy, it, therefore, becomes a legitimate method to analyze it through. The binary coding of psychoanalysis theorizes how females are “lesser” than men, which Mulvey parallels to the world of cinema. This notion can then be used to highlight possible societal tendencies which have been transferred to the world of cinema, where women are placed in positions of oppression.

Mulvey's essay was published in 1973 and, as mentioned, focuses on classic Hollywood cinema. However, her analytical approach still holds relevance in present-day cinema, as women herein continue to be represented as sexualized and eroticized. Especially in modern action cinema, the focus is put as much on the attractiveness of the female characters as on their capabilities as women within an action narrative. While female characters in modern action cinema may not fall under Mulvey's notion of passivity, their sexualization can be regarded as a form of fetishization that caters to the scopophilic desires of the male characters and especially also the male spectators of the film.

As an opposing theoretical framework to that of Mulvey's, Hills' essay has been chosen as she proposes a new method of analyzing women in action films that focuses on their actions instead of their appearance. "Whilst shots of Ripley in her bikini briefs certainly eroticize her image, her *actions* supply a strong counter-narrative" (43). Here, Hills argues that the actions of the female characters can remove the focus from their sexuality and instead underline their identity as action heroines. Hills then reimagines their bodies as machines capable of creatively reassembling themselves and adapting to new environments. While Hills herself does not speak of the sexualization of females in action films, her Deleuzian notion of bodies as sites of experimentation inspires an alternative method of reading this sexualization. With her theory, Hills mainly seeks to disprove feminist readings of action heroines as 'figuratively male'. However, in addition to this, this thesis will utilize Hills' theory to argue that sexuality and fetishization can be read as additions to the female characters' machinery. Thereby, their sexuality can be regarded as tools that they actively use to empower themselves.

Thus, by utilizing such two opposing frameworks, the analyses and the discussion of this thesis will gain a twofold perspective. Mulvey's theory offers a useful method to analyze the

sexual framing of the female characters of the four films chosen for this thesis. However, her theory utilizes psychoanalysis, a tool that is oppressive as it regards women as lacking.

Therefore, to base a film analysis from it as the sole theoretical framework could be risky since it narrows the scope of the study. When only analyzed through the lens of Mulvey's theory, female characters might then be read as oppressed anytime they are sexualized. This is where the theory of Hills offers a tool which transgresses binary thinking. Especially on the topic of sexuality, both theories offer important tools to analyze whether the female characters are designed for a male gaze or if they transgress such objectification by empowering themselves.

Analysis

Charlie's Angels (2000)

Introduction

The film *Charlie's Angels* was released in 2000 and is directed by Joseph McGinty Nichol. It takes place in Los Angeles, California and is about three American women named Natalie, Alex, and Dylan, who are also referred to as the "Angels". They work as private investigators for an anonymous man named Charlie. The film opens with a scene where the Angels work together to finish an unspecified job. Here, their statuses as action heroines are asserted from the get-go, and Charlie then introduces them in the following scene. Then, Charlie calls them into their office to present them and their sidekick, Bosley, with a job. The Angels must find a man named Knox, a software genius who is believed to have been kidnapped. The alleged perpetrator is Roger Corwin, who owns a satellite-communications company named Redstar. While undercover at a party hosted by Corwin, the Angels discover a suspicious-looking man, the "Thin Man". They decide to follow him and eventually fight him after which he gets away. Instead, they find Knox,

who has been tied to a chair and blindfolded. The Angels suspect that the Thin Man works for Corwin, and he is the one who stole Knox's voice-recognition software. Next, they go undercover at the Redstar headquarters to access the satellite network.

While Dylan is at Knox's place to protect him, they sleep together, after which Knox reveals he is the bad guy and that gaining access to the Redstar satellite network was all part of his plan. Knox believes his father was killed by Charlie in the Vietnam war, and therefore intends to use his voice-recognition technology together with the satellite network to locate and kill Charlie as revenge. Knox's business partner, Vivian, and the Thin Man show up as they are in on Knox's evil plan as well. Knox attempts to shoot Dylan but fails as she dodges the bullet and instead falls out of a window. Meanwhile, assassins are sent to attempt to kill Natalie and Alex. However, they fail as well, and Natalie forces her assassin to reveal that Vivian sent them. The Angels all reunite by Charlie's office, which explodes shortly after they arrive. They then find a radio transmitter which they use to communicate with Bosley, who has been captured by Vivian and is being kept at an abandoned lighthouse.

In the final part of the film, the Angels travel to the location of the lighthouse, where they intend to free Bosley and prevent Knox from locating Charlie. However, they eventually realize they are too late. Alex fights the Thin Man, Dylan gets captured by Knox but manages to escape after fighting a group of guys, and Natalie frees Bosley after fighting Vivian. As the Angels all fight the Thin Man and Vivian together, Knox shows up in a helicopter, and he proceeds to blow up the lighthouse. The Angels survive and track down Knox with the help of Bosley. They board the helicopter where Alex manages to reprogram the missile to target Knox instead of Charlie. After the Angels jump down into the water below and the missile blows up and kills Knox, the Angels rush to Charlie's beach house only to realize he is already gone. In the last scene, the

Angels relax on a beach with Bosley, while they talk to Charlie over a speaker. Charlie reveals that he is not the one who killed Knox's father. The Angels and Bosley then playfully run around by the water when the camera switches to a person in the distance who Dylan suspects might be Charlie.

Charlie's Angels is a mix of action and comedy, and the form of the film reveals that even though a man directed it, its target audience might be female spectators. The colors are vibrant, the soundtrack is upbeat and includes the empowering song "Independent Women Part I" by Destiny's Child. The story mainly focuses on three women with three different personalities who are all beautiful, stylishly dressed, and desired by many men. They are sensual and sexy but also strong, deadly, and skilled with many things such as technology and martial arts. They mainly fight men and manage to eventually win every time they are challenged. This may sound like the recipe for an empowering action film with female protagonists. However, *Charlie's Angels* involves levels of sexualization and fetishization at the same time. Often, the focus is put on their sexuality with scenes that reveal their cleavages, bottoms, and backs. They dress up in costumes inspired by stereotypically fetishized personas to distract men. Thus, this film makes for an interesting analysis when utilizing the theories of Laura Mulvey and Elizabeth Hills. Based on psychoanalysis, Mulvey might argue that the three Angels are designed for male spectators of the film to gaze upon, which thus oppressively reduces them to erotic spectacles. Hills, on the other hand, argues that women's bodies are to be regarded as machines that reassemble themselves to fulfill specific tasks or purposes, for example. She might then consider the Angels as capable women who consider their sexuality a tool that they use to empower themselves with to ultimately finish their job.

Scene Analyses

The initial and opening scene of the film takes place on a plane. Here, Dylan, who is dressed as an African man, grabs an alleged “bad guy” since he carries a bomb. She then proceeds to jump off the plane with him to prevent it from exploding. This is where Alex jumps out from a helicopter where she meets up with Dylan and the bad guy in mid-air. Alex then proceeds to remove the bomb from him right before it explodes. Dylan opens her parachute, Alex grabs the bad guy again and opens her parachute too, and below Natalie sails a speedboat in which she catches all three.

This scene helps set the tone for the rest of the film, in terms of who the three main characters are and what they are capable of. These three protagonists are intelligent, capable, and beautiful women who are not afraid of dangerous challenges. In this scene, Dylan dresses up as an African man to fool the suspect into exchanging illegal goods for a bomb. Perhaps this is done as the deal would have not happened had she been a regular looking woman or man. The Angels dressing up in various costumes becomes a large part of their methods as private investigators since they use this to fool and manipulate people. As they all land in the speedboat, the suspect seems confused that the African man has done this to him as he screams: “Ah, you crazy fucker!” (00:04:45). Dylan then removes her voice changer and responds: “I think you mean crazy bitch” (00:04:48), after which she removes the mask from her head. Here, she does two things; she makes him aware of the fact that she is a woman to underline that women are just as capable of manipulation and dangerous things just as men, and she uses the derogatory term “bitch” when she refers to herself to assert her dominance and power over him and to prove that she does not consider it an oppressive term. Furthermore, as Dylan puts on a disguise, this can be viewed as a display of the Deleuzian notion of “Body without Organs” in full effect, with which

she here creates a new assemblage with (Hills 44). She uses the costume as an additional part of her own body in order to fulfill a task.

A point worth mentioning here concerning Mulvey's theory is the fact that Dylan's disguise is of a male. This disguise is of a more serious persona than most of the Angels' other disguises later in the film as well. Whenever they go undercover as female personas, they do so in a less serious sense and as a distracting form of masquerade instead. Here, a serious exchange of goods is supposed to take place, so they chose a male persona to seem more genuine. This underlines Mulvey's notion about females existing to be gazed upon by men, as an attractive female persona may have seemed too distracting and less authentic and caused a different result. However, as mentioned, the Angels use both male and female personas as disguises to manipulate men, which proves that they rely on the use of neither. While they do mainly masquerade as sexy, female personas, this one disguise of Dylan's proves that it is not necessary for them to always dress up as fetishized personas and that they are capable of both.

Other than Dylan's capabilities, Alex's are introduced as well. To jump out from a moving helicopter is no task for someone weak and unskilled, but Alex flies and navigates through the air with ease and even saves a man's life as she removes a bomb from the suspect. She is fit, capable, and intelligent enough to handle bombs. Elizabeth Hills references feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz, who argues that "the body can be reconceptualized as a site of experimentation and transformation" (45), and this is exactly what Alex demonstrates here. As she navigates through the air and removes the bomb from the bad guy simultaneously, she uses her body to create new assemblages as well. As she performs various skills at the same time, she experiments with her body and transforms it into something new and even more capable.

Lastly, there is Natalie, who casually sails a speedboat at high speed and thereby effortlessly proves her capabilities as well. Like Alex, Natalie uses the speedboat in the same sense as she attaches it as a new part to her body to be able to move on water. As Hills would argue, they prove their statuses as action heroines since they both demonstrate new modes of thinking (47) as they navigate through this action-packed environment.

Despite the Angels asserting their statuses as independent female action characters, it can be argued that some sexualization happens in this initial scene of the film as well when it is analyzed through the lens of Mulvey's theory. As mentioned, Natalie shows up wearing a golden bikini top, which reveals her body and especially her cleavage. Thus, the focus is put equally on Natalie's sexuality as on her capabilities. Furthermore, the multiple close-ups of her put her in a spectacle-like position. As the camera reveals her smile multiple times, the audience sees her perfect skin, white teeth, and shiny blonde hair. Below is a still from this scene:



Screenshot 1: *Charlie's Angels* (00:04:23)

The reason Mulvey might argue that she becomes a spectacle here for the male spectators to gaze upon is because of her clothes, or lack thereof, and since the multiple shots of her upper body are unnecessary to the narrative of the film. "Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of

erotic spectacle: [...] she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combines spectacle and narrative” (Mulvey 19). Thus, Natalie’s lack of clothes will, according to Mulvey, pause the narrative of the film to invite an objectifying gaze momentarily and thus create a desire in male spectators of the film. The display of sexuality in this scene then becomes something which is combined with the actual narrative of the film to make it more visually appealing, especially to male spectators. Apart from this notion, it might also be argued that this excessive focus on the looks of the Angels undermines their talents as private investigators as just as much time is spent asserting the fact that they are beautiful and attractive as on their display of skills and capabilities.

Another important part to take note of is when Alex and Dylan remove their head-wear. As Alex removes her helmet, she swings her hair from side to side and smiles in slow-motion, as seen in the still below:



Screenshot 2: *Charlie's Angels* (00:04:33)

Dylan does the same when she removes her mask in another close-up, although not in slow-motion. These scenes seem unnecessary to the narrative and the Angels’ statuses as action heroines as well, and might merely be there to, once again, reveal their spectacular beauty. As

Mulvey argues, “[...] conventional close-ups of legs [...] or a face [...] integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative; it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon, rather than verisimilitude, to the screen” (20). Thus, these close-ups of their beautiful, smiling faces and long, flowy hair may put the film’s spectators in awe of the Angels’ perfection and prompt them to momentarily disregard the narrative of the film, almost as if they are watching an advertisement. Though, as the Angels’ beauty is a large part of how they perform and succeed as private investigators, it is a way for them to empower themselves at the same time. As Dylan refers to herself as a bitch, she underlines that they are not here only to be decent and beautiful women but are able to be uncomfortable and inflict damage as well.

In the next scene, the Angels are introduced to the spectators of the film by the voice of their boss, Charlie. In the first part, a young Natalie fools around at her driving test, where she tilts the car sideways as she laughs. In the next part, a young Alex wins a prestigious horse-riding competition where she receives a big trophy. Then, a young Dylan dressed in a Rock n’ Roll-inspired outfit smokes cigarettes in a public bathroom with two other girls and then flips off a security camera. Lastly, the Angels are presented as adults – Natalie wins a large portion of money on a TV quiz show, Alex has become an astronaut, and Dylan is a soldier, but is seen leaving the place after she punches her superior who yells at her.

Charlie starts the introduction of the Angels by saying: “Once upon a time, there were three very different little girls” (00:05:13). As Charlie points out, the emphasis is put on the fact that these three girls, now women, are indeed different and possess a variety of personality traits and features. These traits and features are all important to the narrative of the film as well, as they are used frequently in the girls’ jobs as private investigators. Natalie is a physically skilled

and intelligent woman who learns quickly, but at the same time, she loves fun and smiles while performing dangerous tasks. For her character, the emphasis is put on the fact that she loves fooling around but, at the same time, impresses people in the process because of her intelligence. Alex is highly intelligent and beautiful, and with her character, the emphasis is put on her way of always being able to succeed prestigiously and impress people with her looks at the same time. These introductions of Natalie and Alex continue the given impression of them as transformative characters, a status which they have seemingly held since a young age. As they both manage to learn new skills easily, they display their abilities as capable women who, whenever needed, can transform their bodies to fit their environment. As Hills mentions, “[...] Deleuze posits a notion of ‘becoming’ which is the process of transformation created when a body disconnects from its habituated modes of acting and thinking in favor of a multiple and changing process of experimentation” (45). From a young age, the Angels have then held this ability to transgress ideals and go beyond what is expected of them.

Dylan appears to be slightly different from Natalie and Dylan as her goal in life is not to impress people with beauty or intelligence. In fact, she appears to be disobedient as she breaks the law and practices violence on people who dare tell her what to do. Physically, she dresses less traditionally feminine than both Natalie and Alex as well, proving that her goal in life is not to impress men with her looks or sexuality. She is her own person and follows her own rules, which makes her an independent woman, and although she is beautiful, it is in a more unconventional way. Important to point out, though, is when Charlie claims: “But they have three things in common; they’re brilliant, they’re beautiful, and they work for me” (00:05:51). Here, he says the last part right when Dylan punches her Army superior to perhaps indicate that he is lucky to have such an otherwise independent and slightly disobedient woman working for

him. Dylan does not care to display her capabilities to other people like Natalie and Alex do. Instead, her disobedience and aggressiveness become her assemblages. She chooses to disregard the rules to succeed in her environment.

The three Angels are all smart, beautiful, and independent in their own ways. However, the fact is that they do work for someone else, a man. He gives the orders and tells them what to do, where to go, and whom to deal with. When Charlie introduces the Angels as once being “little girls” (00:05:16), he is established as a sort of father figure to them. This father-daughter relationship resembles Schubart’s daughter stereotype, where the heroine gains her skills and purpose from her father. “[...] He raised his little girl, educated her, trained her, gave her weapons, and handed her a job. The heroine is *his* little girl. His creation” (38). Like with Schubart’s daughter stereotype, the Angels were, in a sense, adopted by Charlie as well, as he is not only their employer but their protector as well. Although they never see him in person at any point, Charlie has employed a sidekick for the girls who acts as an extension of Charlie as a father figure. Bosley is the funny, warm, and slightly awkward person who, even at one point, gives the girls advice about men, much like a father would.

Furthermore, Schubart points out that with the daughter stereotype, the father is the one who teaches the heroine how to be feminine as well. This may be true with the Angels, as they in this scene change from their wilder and less elegant younger selves into more refined adult women, which implies that Charlie influenced this change. Either way, as mentioned, they are controlled by Charlie, which in binary psychoanalytic terms puts him in the active position as the one who gives demands and furthers the plot.

Despite being employed by a man, the Angels are, as mentioned, intelligent, fearless, and skilled at the same time. Although the fact is that they work for Charlie, it is not specified

whether these traits and skills are something only Charlie has taught them. In fact, this scene reveals that they have possessed these traits from a young age, before being employed by Charlie. While it can be argued that the girls are not entirely independent as they are employed by Charlie, it can also be argued that they most likely chose this out of a free will, and that being employed by a man is not inherently an oppressive fate. As Hills might argue, the Angels are self-taught and thereby “self-assembled”. As mentioned, Hills references Grosz, who argues that “[...] if the body can be reconceptualized as a site of experimentation and transformation, then this means that the female body is capable of being imagined outside the notions of ‘passive’, ‘lack’ and ‘other’” (45). They have liberated themselves from predetermined gender-binary traits because they desired to be aggressive, powerful and strong, and professionally so, hence the agreements to their jobs as private investigators. Also, in this scene, these three girls are represented as three different types of personalities. Natalie is energetic and fun-loving. Alex is sophisticated and intelligent, and Dylan is wild and rebellious. This proves that women in any form or shape can be highly skilled investigators and that it is neither a position exclusively reserved for men nor does it mean women in these positions should be regarded as male or masculine as all three Angels possess traditionally feminine traits.

Throughout the film, there are several scenes in which the Angels develop as characters but which, at the same time, hold little importance in the development of the film’s main plot. From time to time, little glimpses into the Angels’ love lives or love interests are revealed. These moments can be considered side-narratives which are developed mostly in parallel to the main narrative. One example is when Dylan, in one scene, lies naked under the sheets of a bed, which belongs to a slightly odd and pajama-dressed sailor named Chad. Chad cooks Dylan breakfast and hints at the fact that he wishes to have sex with her again, but after Dylan receives a phone

call from Charlie, she decides to abruptly leave Chad's boat instead, which saddens him.

Evidently, Dylan is not interested in a serious relationship with Chad as she disregards his feelings and efforts. However, she is interested in a sexual relationship with him.

In another scene, the spectators are invited into Natalie's dream. Here, she dances on a large dance floor in a sort of disco-club together with a group of handsome men while they are cheered on by an audience. The men are all wearing black attires while Natalie wears a sparkly blue sequin dress, which puts the attention of the surrounding audience exclusively on her. Next, she wakes up from the dream and dances on in her bedroom while dressed in a T-shirt and underpants. She moves and shakes her bottom, which the camera allows the spectators to focus on, as seen below:



Screenshot 3: *Charlie's Angels* (00:09:14)

Her doorbell rings, and by the door waits a mailman. She receives the package while still wearing underwear, saying: "You know, I signed that release form so you can just feel free to stick things in my slot" (00:09:20). Natalie seems unaware of the sexual double-meaning here, although it seems to interest the mailman as he clumsily says a delayed "thank you". Natalie's relationship with men is quite different from Dylan's, as Natalie is out to have fun as a priority.

Judging from her dream, she enjoys the attention of men, especially when they will support and join her in her fun. This tells the audience that she is open to love and attention but still prioritizes herself and her needs first. The fact that she seems oblivious to the mailman's attention and interest in her proves that she is not seeking love, though. She is sexually attractive, but maybe not as aware of this herself as the men in her life, as well as the spectators or the film, are. Thus, Natalie is established as being a sexual and attractive character in the film, and the fact that she is relaxed about showing her body allows the spectators to enjoy her beauty freely. She is not yet in a relationship at this point, but the dream she experiences may indicate exhibitionist desires. She enjoys being gazed upon by the audience and the dancing group of men.

While it appears that she is indeed having fun, she is at the same time imagining herself as a beautiful and attractive spectacle desired by men. Mulvey argues that "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (19). Hence, this way of reducing the female character to an erotic object puts her in a passive role, where the male characters of the film, as well as the male spectators, are free to gaze upon her. Furthermore, the focus on her bottom as she dances in her bedroom as well as showing off her body to the mailman emphasizes her exhibitionist nature. The male spectators might here feel the erotic impact as they gaze upon her as she dances. When the camera focuses on her panty-clad bottom, she once again becomes an erotic spectacle available for an objectifying gaze and can, therefore, be regarded as passive as she is not in control of such gaze.

In addition to the two scenes about Dylan and Natalie's relationships and interest in men, the film has a scene in which Alex is with her actor boyfriend, Jason. They playfully enact a made-up film scene, after which Alex finishes baking some muffins. Here, it is revealed to us

that Jason is not aware of Alex's identity as a private investigator. Instead, he thinks she is a bikini-waxer who works for someone named Charlie, not knowing whether this is a man or woman. After Alex receives a call from Charlie, she speeds off in her car, barely saying goodbye to Jason. Unlike the other two Angels, Alex is currently in a relationship. However, she does not seem entirely invested in it as she keeps certain information from him and sees no problem in suddenly leaving him for Charlie. Just like with Dylan and Natalie, Charlie is the main priority in Alex's life.

As seen in these three scenes, the Angels arguably prioritize work over the men in their lives. However, they do reserve time to nurture their relationships with these men, or the thoughts of them, as in Natalie's instance. Natalie fantasizes about being gazed upon by men and thereby reveals that she wishes to be desired, perhaps even sexually. Dylan subjects herself to a relationship with a man she is not even interested in. She does not wish to be in a real relationship with Chad. However, she wishes to be in a sexual one. Alex's situation is like Dylan's, as she is so far from committed to Jason that she fails to be honest with him. Yet, she stays in the relationship to be desired by him and because she needs his attention. When analyzed through Mulvey's theory, these scenes in which the Angels express their wishes to be desired by men will show male spectators that the Angels are attainable. Mulvey argues that there are two pleasurable 'looks': "that of the spectator in direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed for his enjoyment (connoting male fantasy) and that of the spectator fascinated with the image of his like set in an illusion of natural space, and through him gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis" (21). In these scenes, both types of gazes may occur from the male spectators as Natalie is presented as a spectacle, and as all three Angels are presented as possessable characters. Furthermore, these scenes can be regarded as satellites, as

they are unnecessary to the main narrative and only reveal information about the Angels' sexuality and relationships with men.

An essential scene to analyze is the one in which Alex goes undercover as a masseuse to "feel" Corwin out, as Charlie puts it (00:14:26). Corwin lies on a massage bed, and Alex gets ready to serve him. She charges towards him and jumps on top of his back and then proceeds to put him to sleep temporarily by cracking his neck a certain way. She then calls in Natalie and Dylan, who are dressed as Asian-looking masseuses as well. While Corwin is asleep, they gather important information together from Corwin's belongings in his locker. As he wakes up, Alex is back in the massage room with him, where she massages his back.

In this scene, the Angels once again go undercover to manipulate and gather information with ease. However, this time, the use of costumes is done differently than in the first scene where Dylan dresses up as an African man. The Asian masseuse is a stereotypically fetishized persona sometimes connected with not only massaging services but also sexual services. By being in a place where pleasurable services are offered, Corwin has momentarily let his guards down, and the Angels, or Charlie, sees an opportunity to take advantage of this. While they could have used different methods that did not require Alex to go undercover as a masseuse, they chose to do so in order to gain as much control over the situation as possible. This could be considered as a way for Charlie to exploit the Angels and their sexuality, and perhaps a way for the director of the film to cater to the sexual fantasies of the film's male spectators. This becomes an interesting point of analysis with Mulvey's theory in focus.

As mentioned, Charlie is the boss, or father, of the Angels. He gives the orders, and he tells them to dress up as fetishized female personas to distract males. Mulvey categorizes this as "fetishistic scopophilia" (21) and sees it as a way of distracting the male spectator from the

female subjects' lack of a penis, thus submitting her into a passive position so the male does not feel scared. Here, Corwin is distracted from Alex's true intentions as she is presented to him as a fetishized persona. He does not see her as a threat, but rather as a sexual object to gain pleasure from. Likewise, the male spectators of the film may regard Alex as such, as they are reminded of the Asian masseuse fetish. Furthermore, Alex rolls her eyes at Corwin's offer to join his team, which means she does not enjoy this situation. This emphasizes the theory that Charlie exploits the sexualities of the Angels, possibly even against their will. As mentioned, this relationship seems oppressive to the Angels as they perhaps do not enjoy these types of sexualized disguises.

While this scene can be regarded as oppressive and exploitative towards Alex, it can, at the same time, be regarded as empowering when it is analyzed through the lens of Hills' theory. The point of her theory is neither to erase gender and sex nor to deny females of being females and males of being males. Thus, sexuality and attraction still exist within her framework, and when a body is viewed as a machine, it means sexuality can be a tool for it to utilize, just like weapons can. Thus, when Alex dresses as a masseuse, she actively manipulates Corwin's sexual desires, but not because she is sexually interested in him too. To Corwin, this is a way for him to live out a fetish, but to Alex, this is a way for her to manipulate him to gain information about him. Thus, whether this is regarded as a sexual and oppressive situation depends on whose intentions are taken into consideration. Alex does not feel oppressed because she did not place herself in this situation for sexual purposes. Instead, she has reassembled her body to fool someone into thinking that she has. This erases the active/passive, or receiver/giver, relationship, as they are technically both receivers here. Corwin does receive the services he has requested, but at the same time, Alex manages to empower herself via a disguise and consequently receives the information she seeks.

Another short but important scene is the one where the girls pull up to a drive-thru at a fast food place in the car they stole from Corwin. As they park, Alex leans over Dylan to fix the glitchy intercom so they can order their food. Meanwhile, Natalie reviews and enhances security footage on a laptop to figure out a possible suspect in the kidnapping of Knox. As they receive their food, Alex gathers information from Corwin's schedule. The worker in the window seems stunned as they drive off, perhaps at their attractiveness, or perhaps at the fact that they supposedly did not pay for their food.

In this scene, there are several important things to take notice of in terms of gender and empowerment. First, the scene shows a close-up of Alex's bottom and the backside of her revealing top as she leans over Dylan. It happens quickly but is an obvious display of sexuality. The shot is unnecessary but seems intentional as Alex could have been placed in a seat closer to the intercom but was not. This specific part is shown in a still below:



Screenshot 4: *Charlie's Angels* (00:16:52)

Here, the spectators are free to sexualize her as they gaze upon her bent-over body. Surely, her character did not intend to act sexually on purpose; however, as Mulvey would argue, the camera here momentarily reduces her to an erotic spectacle for the spectators of the film.

On the contrary, Alex fixes the intercom while Natalie digitally enhances security footage, which is a display of high intelligence and being skilled with technology, and more specifically, “hacking”. In a similar fashion as when she removed the bomb from a person in mid-air, Alex changes her body into a technologically able one who can fix something for a gain. On the topic of utilizing technology, Hills categorizes bodies as “desiring machines”, and argues that they “[...] can connect and reconnect with other machines, elements or objects from multiple frames of reference to produce particular types of ‘assemblages’ – such as the assemblage of women and technology” (44). Thus, Alex is a desiring machine, who uses her body to interact with an element that is the intercom in order to interfere with it.

Lastly, the girls speed off without paying for their food as the worker watches in a dumbstruck manner. Besides the display of beauty and sexuality in this scene, there is a display of power as well. The girls stole a car, breached an intercom to alter it, hacked their way to security footage, and drove off without paying for their food too. They may take orders from another person, but many of the ways in which they gather information or make progress in their given task are by taking it without permission or even disregarding the laws and morals of other people and institutions, such as in this scene. Stealing food was entirely unnecessary here, but seeing that the worker seemed frozen at their beauty, they took advantage of that. This instance is, therefore, comparable to the scenes where they dress up; fully aware of their statuses as beautiful spectacles, they exploit it and their male admirers for their own gains. Not only when they are on a job, but even when they do simple tasks such as ordering food. Hence, this ability to manipulate is something the Angels possess and utilize outside their jobs as private investigators as well, which means Charlie is not the only one who encourages sexualized behavior from them - they themselves do it too.

Important to analyze is the scene in which the Angels and Bosley attend Corwin's party and later fight the Thin Man. Alex and Dylan enter the party undercover as the dates of Bosley, who is undercover as someone important as well in order to be able to speak to Corwin. Natalie is undercover as a caterer for the party. Bosley speaks to Corwin to gather information while the Angels listen in and guide him via a digital implant in their teeth. Natalie speaks to a guy who seems interested in her, and they decide to go on a date. Shortly after, Alex notices the Thin Man at the party, and they decide to track him down after he sees them and escapes. What follows next is an extensive fight scene between the Angels and the Thin Man. However, he manages to escape by foot. Instead, the girls discover Knox, who has been blindfolded and tied to a chair.

The first important thing to notice is the fact that for once, the Angels are not the ones who manipulate others with their disguises. Instead, Bosley takes on this role. However, the girls do give Bosley instructions and ensure he does not blow his disguise, meaning they are still ones taking charge and being in control of the situation at the party. It is no surprise that Bosley, although being a sort of sidekick to the Angels, exists mostly as comic relief in the film. Overall, Bosley seems less intelligent, capable, and confident than the Angels, and this may have been purposely decided by the director to further underline the dominance, intelligence, and capabilities of the Angels.

Another important part of this scene is when Natalie meets and converses with a guy named Pete, who seems interested in her. Once again, the film presents several close-ups of her face as she smiles, which highlights her beauty and attractiveness for Pete as well as the spectators of the film. She says a few lines which she, at first, does not realize can be understood in a sexual way. When Pete seems baffled, both at her beauty and inappropriateness, Natalie intends to leave. However, Alex and Dylan convince her to continue to flirt with him. These

scenes which involve the love lives of the Angels can, as mentioned above, be regarded as side-narratives. They may be important in the development of the Angels as characters but hold no importance in the development of the main narrative of the film. Thus, this part of the scene is another satellite that could have been removed from the film without altering the main narrative.

What can be concluded from this is that the Angels are independent but are at the same time still affected by or interested in the attention of men. Perhaps, underneath their independent exteriors lies a desire to be possessed and sexually desired by a man. When referring to the scene in which Natalie dreams of herself being gazed upon by men, it would be no surprise if she wishes to be desired and gazed upon by Pete as well. In Mulveyan terms, she once again reveals her exhibitionist and submissive nature, which shows male spectators of the film that even strong and, at first, seemingly unreachable private investigators such as the Angels are available for male attention and sexual desire and that they need it. As mentioned, Mulvey argues that in psychoanalytic terms, a male spectator will form an ego-ideal when he gazes upon and identifies with a male subject in a film and recognizes him as a more perfect version of himself (17). In this scene, this may be what happens to male spectators when they realize that the Angels are attainable by random “onlookers”. As the male spectators see Pete succeed when he flirts with Natalie, they may identify with his success and therefore regard her as an object to be possessed by themselves too.

The last part of the scene is equally important to include an analysis of, as this is where the girls are seen in a physical fight for the first time in the film. In their fight against the Thin Man, they demonstrate physical strength with the use of several different fighting techniques as well as a superhuman level of agility, which allows them to dodge bullets. Even though the Thin Man does manage to harm them back, the Angels dominate and almost beat him by the end,

which causes him to flee the fight. While they are slender in shape and do not display physical muscles, the Angels display strength comparable to that of the Thin Man, who, despite being thin as well, is a male. As Jeffrey A. Brown mentions, the modern action heroine shows strength while not necessarily being visibly muscular (25), and this scene proves that *Charlie's Angels* emphasizes this notion. Brown even argues that modern action heroines express their heroism more fluidly: “[...] just because she looks like a woman does not mean she is one, and just because she acts like a man does not mean she is one” (36). Thus, to Brown, female action heroines can express traditionally female traits such as slender bodies and perfect hair and not be regarded as female or feminine. They can also display physical strength and not be regarded as male or masculine. However, while Brown argues for gender-fluidity in modern action heroines, this notion stays within the gender-binary framework, which categorizes personality traits, physical appearance, and acts as either feminine or masculine.

In this scene, Hills would once again argue that the Angels are desiring-machines who here desire to overcome an obstacle. Consequently, they reassemble their bodies and add skills in martial arts to their machinery in order to physically battle out the Thin Man. The fact that the Angels are slender in shape, beautiful, and perfectly styled becomes important here, as it proves they remain exactly the women they have been the entire film, and the director does not force them to adopt traditionally male traits such as muscles, marks and scratches and loud, groaning noises, for example. Instead, they remain stylish and attractive and they are heard yelling with their unchanged female voices as well. Thereby, this scene proves that utilizing martial arts to fight is only an addition to their personas, or assemblages, and becomes a way for them to transform their bodies in a way that does not change their gender identity. As they creatively

transform their bodies and behaviors, whenever necessary in their given environment, they transgress traditional gender expectations.

Additionally, the Angels do not use weapons to fight in this scene. However, Alex does use a broom at one point when fighting, which proves that she can use tools to further her strength as well. Here, Mulvey would argue that this is a phallic way for Alex to compensate for her bodily lack as a female. Mulvey refers to this as a “fetish object” (21), where the female subject is given a phallic object to remove the castration anxiety which will otherwise be induced in the male spectators. However, this notion is easily countered, as the Angels rarely use tools when they fight. In fact, they do not use weapons at all. They resort almost entirely to martial arts when they fight, and successfully so. Therefore, regarding this usage of a broomstick as a compensation for a phallic lack seems far fetched. Besides, the Thin Man manages to break this broom, which proves that it is not essential or needed when she fights. To Hills, the usage of tools or weapons can be another way to assemble a new body. By picking up the broom, Alex does not do this to compensate for a lack. Rather, she does so because she recognizes it as a useful addition to her machinery, which might help her defeat the obstacle in front of her.

Another notable scene, in which the Angels go undercover, is the scene at the racetrack. Corwin speaks to a group of people, while the Angels, who are dressed as race car mechanics, do maintenance work on a race car. While Natalie flirtatiously distracts Corwin, Dylan enters the vehicle, which Corwin came to the racetrack in. She playfully distracts the chauffeur of the vehicle while Alex sneaks up behind the car to attach a camera onto Corwin’s briefcase located in the trunk. After this, the Angels notice that the Thin Man is present as well. He gets into a race car and drives off, and Natalie gets into a race car as well to chase after him. They both exit the racetrack and later meet up on a bridge where they face each other. As they proceed to speed

towards each other, which results in a collision, the Thin Man is knocked off the bridge and into the water below.

Once again, the Angels go undercover to distract and manipulate. Dylan puts her sexuality on heavy display as she moans for the chauffeur while she reveals her cleavage to interest and ultimately distract him for a while. The chauffeur is so paralyzed by her behavior that he is not aware of his surroundings, Alex included. When he briefly turns his head because he hears the truck being shut by Alex, Dylan forces him to face her, thus showing dominance over him as well. Like with many of the other insignificant male characters in *Charlie's Angels*, this chauffeur is here reduced to someone more interested in sex than his actual job. Dylan distracts him from his purpose by simply showing him a little bit of cleavage. In the two scenes after the racetrack scene, the Angels are dressed as sexy belly dancers and Swiss yodeling-girls in short dresses. Here, they distract the first man in order to obtain his fingerprint from a beer bottle, and the other to scan his eye for a copy of his retina. Once again, the existence of these men in the film is reduced to horny males who are so sex fixated that they either fail to do their job or manage to give out top-secret information.

Like with previously mentioned dress-up scenes, these can be regarded as an exploitation of the Angels' sexuality when viewing them through the lens of Mulvey's theoretical framework. Surely, for private investigators as intelligent and capable as the Angels, the existence of more effective methods than fetishized costumes to obtain information seems likely. However, instead, the Angels are once again momentarily reduced to erotic, exhibitionist spectacles available for male characters of the film, as well as male spectators, to pleasurably gaze upon. Though, as previously mentioned, these dress-up scenes can be regarded as the Angels exploiting the weaknesses of males to empower themselves too. As Hills would argue, these costumes become

additions to the bodies of the Angels as they attempt to fulfil a task. The Angels give the unsuspecting men the illusion that they are sexual objects or spectacles in order to obtain the information they seek. Thus, they are the ones overpowering males with manipulative techniques.

In the last part of the scene, Natalie asserts her dominance by purposely colliding her race car with the Thin Man's. On top of showing advanced skills in racing, she shows that she does not fear the Thin Man, or even death, as this crash could have been fatal for her. Natalie here connects her body with the car to reassemble a new, capable machine. Fearing death, or being immortal, was traditionally a trait appointed to the male action hero. Yet, throughout *Charlie's Angels*, these three female Angels undeniably reveal their possession of this trait, and with Brown's analytical framework in mind, this underlines their status as modern action heroines.

An especially memorable and equally important scene to analyze is the one in which Alex dresses up as an "efficiency expert". At the beginning of the scene, a car drives in front of Corwin's company Redstar, after which Natalie asks: "You ready to whip them into shape or what, Alex?" (00:35:59). Then, Alex is seen dressed in a tight-fit black leather skirt, a jacket, and high heels, and Dylan and Natalie are seen dressed as men in suits. Together, they walk through an office inside the Redstar headquarters, which, apart from one female secretary, consists entirely of men. They all seem mesmerized by the presence of Alex and, therefore, immediately follow her as she exits the office and enters an auditorium. In here, she dominantly, but at the same time flirtatiously, pep-talks the male workers into giving her ideas to increase the company's efficiency. Excitedly, they all follow her outside the auditorium and away from the area so Natalie and Dylan can access the Vault, which contains the satellite network technology.

What happens in this scene is a display of one of Rikke Schubart's five female action film stereotypes: the "dominatrix". As Schubart argues in her analysis of these stereotypes, the dominatrix is "the woman punishing the masochist and fulfilling his perverse pleasures. She is not really cruel, since she serves her victim" (30). Hence, she can temporarily oppress males, but does, at the same time, provide them with a pleasurable service. At the same time, Alex performs as a teacher; another stereotypically fetishized persona. By combining such two personas in one, Alex exerts an extreme sense of sexual power, enough to steal and control the attention of an entire section of a company. Here, the men suffer the same fate as the previously mentioned male characters: being reduced to characters who are so sex fixated that they fail to do their job. The attention on Alex's sexual energy is further underlined with a close-up of her tightly-clad bottom as she walks through the office, together with the sound of twisting leather. This specific part is seen in a still below:



Screenshot 5: *Charlie's Angels* (00:36:15)

For a moment, the attention of all the male workers is focused on Alex, and likewise, the attention of the spectators of the film is focused on her bottom, which thereby freezes the

development of the plot. Therefore, Mulvey would here argue that Alex is temporarily reduced to an erotic spectacle, which appeals to the fetishistic scopophilia of film's male spectators.

The dominatrix and teacher stereotypes are both figures of authority who are to be respected. True to the dominatrix persona, Alex first induces fear and pain with the use of a whip-like stick, which she slaps against Dylan a couple of times as well as against a table to shock and induce fear in the men. Then, she offers a form of pleasure when she physically caresses one male worker's cheek as well as compliments the skills and knowledge of the male workers to make them feel important and noticed. As with the dominatrix stereotype, Alex induces fear in the men but ensures they are aware that they are the important ones. Next, she once again underlines her own authority as she aggressively snaps her whip/stick in half with her knee. This specific moment can be regarded as a form of symbolic castration, and as a way of telling the male workers that they better perform and bring her the information she is asking for or else they will be castrated. Finally, she changes into an almost innocent and cutesy type of persona as she tilts her head, grabs a lock of her hair, and asks: "[...] can anyone show me?" (00:38:04). Here, she gives the illusion that she has fallen back into a more passive role, which thereby emphasizes that the male workers are the ones with all the power in the form of knowledge.

In this scene, there are levels of exhibitionism, fetishization, sexualization, and objectification; all things which, to Mulvey, are negative for females in action films as they reduce them to spectacles available for men to derive pleasure from via their gaze. The fact that Charlie requests for her to resemble a dominatrix to manipulate a large group of men can, in gender-binary terms, be thought of as oppressive. However, she is fully aware of the sexualization happening; she is the one in control of the sexualization and objectification as she

actively allows the males to gaze upon her body. Thus, a form of sexual empowerment happens at the same time as the fetishization, and she is therefore not oppressed or exploited. This notion is what makes this scene interesting to analyze through the theory of Hills.

As mentioned, this scene is comparable to the other dress-up scenes, as Alex is arguably the one who manipulates and exploits the male workers. Her costume is nothing but a masquerade purposely used as a tool by her desiring body. The males may be gazing upon her fetishized body and thereby feeling pleasure. However, Alex does not feel exploited as her reassembled body allows her to be in full control of this situation and thereby also the looks of the unsuspecting male workers. Thus, even though Alex may be objectified and fetishized by the male characters and spectators of the film, this does not happen because of oppressive traditional standards that consider women objects for males to derive pleasure from. Instead, she actively allows it to happen, as she puts herself in control of the objectifying gaze, which means she has gained power over these male viewers.

Another part in which the Angels demonstrate their abilities to survive is the scenes where two assassins attempt to kill Natalie and Alex. Here, the scene alternates between two different situations. Natalie is at a dance club with Pete, and Alex is alone at Jason's trailer. When Natalie goes to the restroom, a man shows up with a nunchaku with which he intends to strangle her. Natalie fights him, wins, and manages to gather important information from him as well. Meanwhile, a car with armed men parks next to Jason's trailer and proceeds shoot at it while Alex is inside. She manages to climb up top inside the trailer, thereby dodging every bullet. Like with the scene where the Angels fight the Thin Man, Natalie and Alex here demonstrate superhuman levels of survivability. Climbing up top to dodge the bullets is a result of Alex's ability to solve problems quickly, but the fact that the armed guys did not shoot the

roof of the car at all seems unrealistic. In the scene where Dylan realizes that Knox is the bad guy, he attempts to shoot her, but she dodges the bullet as well and breaks through a window to fall down a great distance onto a steep hill. She does not seem to be visibly hurt at all and bears no cuts or physical marks except for her hair being messy. These unlikely instances of the Angels escaping death prove that they are, in fact, immortal. However, *Charlie's Angels* is a film of the action genre, which can hardly be considered a realistic genre. Therefore, at the same time, it makes sense that the Angels possess the ability to survive any situation, just like the traditional male hero does.

Moreover, the Angels are perfect in looks. If the scenes where they dress up as sexy personas or the close-ups of their bodies and faces did not underline their physical perfection already, the fact that they are never visibly hurt and never bleed after a fight certainly does. While the Angels have arguably liberated themselves from the limitations of an oppressive gender binary, a lot of focus is put on their ability to remain beautiful, even when physically hurt. In several of the scenes where they fight their enemies, they pause several times to pose with certain stances, as seen in the example below:



Screenshot 6: *Charlie's Angels* (00:24:22)

This gives the spectators of the film the idea that women who fight need to look perfect and admirable to do so. As Mulvey might argue, the fighting Angels are then partially presented as spectacles, where the focus of the spectators will lie as much on their beauty, attractiveness, and stunning poses as on their fighting skills. Though, as mentioned, the unrealism of the action genre allows the Angels to be immortal. Immortality is a trait traditionally assigned to most male action heroes, as the plot depends on their extreme survivability. Then, the fact that the Angels possess it too may merely be a conscious choice to emphasize their status as modern action heroines. As Brown argues, some modern action heroines express their heroism in a more fluid way as they have abandoned gender absolutism (36).

The last part of the film may be one of the most crucial ones to analyze due to a variety of important points. As the Angels enter the location of the lighthouse by boat, they split up to each focus on their own task. Natalie frees Bosley after fighting Vivian, Alex attempts to hack a satellite but is interrupted by the Thin Man, and Dylan infiltrates the lighthouse and gets captured by Knox, after which she fights off a group of men. After this, the girls fight the Thin Man and Vivian together and win, but Knox then ascends in a helicopter and sends a missile to blow up the lighthouse. The Angels escape and are picked up in a car driven by Bosley. Then, the Angels manage to enter Knox's helicopter, where Dylan fights Knox while Natalie pulls the control circuit cord, and Alex reprograms the missile. Knox releases the missile, the Angels jump off, and the missile hits and blows up Knox in his helicopter. The Angels look for Charlie, who is not home after all, and in the final scene of the film, they relax on the beach together with Bosley while they talk to Charlie through a speaker.

As mentioned, the perfection and beauty of the Angels are often highlighted throughout the film. If not done via sexy costumes, camera angles, close-up, and lighting, it is done by

leaving the Angels looking visibly unharmed after finishing dangerous and seemingly painful tasks. However, the Angels do undergo a form of transformation in this part of the film. As they enter the beach below the lighthouse, they start removing their tight-fit diving suits, revealing their cleavages and naked, wet backs. The scene is even played in slow-motion, which extends the duration during which the audience gets to gaze upon their naked bodies. Emphasis is especially put on Natalie's body, as she walks all the way up to the camera, but the camera keeps its focus on her chest, as seen below:



Screenshot 7: *Charlie's Angels* (01:06:50)

Here, the emphasis is once more put on their beauty and sexuality, seemingly important traits of the Angels. However, this scene in which they undress their bodies to imply that they are about to change their attire is entirely unnecessary to the narrative and can, therefore, be regarded as a satellite. The scene is a total of 30 seconds long, which makes it a slow-motion scene of an unusually significant length. Perhaps, a scene in which they gather and prepare the clothes they are about to change into might have sufficed. Again, this suggests Mulvey's notion about females as spectacles. She argues that a spectacle "tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (19). Here, the scene

is, as mentioned, played in slow-motion, resulting in the momentarily eroticized Angels freezing the flow of action. After this, they have successfully changed into a more serious form of clothing.

Despite some of the clothing being slightly revealing as well, especially Natalie's, this can be regarded as the Angels finally transforming from their flirtatiously innocent personas to their new, strong, and fearless fighting personas. Here, the spectators are shown that there is more to these girls than attractiveness as they get ready for the final, all-or-nothing part of their mission.

Another important point in this part to take notice of is the Angels' abilities to once again fight and survive. As with the other fighting scenes, the Angels utilize martial arts fighting techniques and barely any weapons at all. Even when their opponents wield weapons, the Angels take them out with ease. Dylan fights a group of men with her hands tied behind her back, which seems just as unrealistic as dodging bullets or surviving explosions. There are several moments, not just in this part but in the entire film where the Angels are close to dying, but somehow always manage to survive, which once again underlines their status as modern action heroines.

Yet, survivability is not the only form of power that the Angels demonstrate in this final part. As with many other scenes of the film, advanced utility usage skills and high levels of intelligence are put on display here, especially by Alex. She uses a bow to climb a wall, hacks a satellite signal, uses a chain to fight the Thin Man, and reprograms a missile. The Angels use these advanced skills to dominate and successfully overpower the bad guys. As Hills would argue, the Angels once again demonstrate their ability to reassemble their desiring bodies to overpower or defeat obstacles. Additionally, they once more prove that they can do this in other ways than masquerading as sexualized and fetishized personas.

A last but equally important point to bring forth is the way Dylan seems to seek revenge from Knox after the Angels figure out that he is the real enemy. While Dylan still believes he is a good guy, they have sex. Knox has put himself in the victim position, and as a result, Dylan and the other Angels pity him. He then uses this position to get into bed with her as she feels attracted to him and his seemingly genuine intentions. As his true and manipulative self is revealed to Dylan, the tables have turned as she is now the one who has been exploited. Here, the Angels' overall task changes from trying to help Knox to seeking to defeat him. However, for Dylan in particular, her personal task becomes to destroy Knox because he has exploited her sexually. Thus, she enters one of Schubart's action female stereotypes; the "rape-avenger". As Schubart argues, "the rape-avenger is characterized by three elements: As the victim of rape she is the victim of a certain *kind of masculinity*. As an avenger of rape she acts out a certain *kind of male fantasy*. And as a female avenger of *male violence* she has feminist potentials" (34). According to this notion, Dylan is a victim of masculinity, as Knox manipulated her and sexually exploited her. Therefore, the restoration of a power-balance becomes her goal. Such interpretation of this instance might seem to empower for Dylan, and give her feminist potential, as Schubart points out. Furthermore, Dylan here becomes the "in-between" that Schubart also speaks of (8). As Dylan gains revenge from the exploitation she has suffered, she enters the roles of both victim and hero.

Sub-conclusion

To summarize the findings in each analysis of the selected scenes above, it is safe to say that certain tendencies exist throughout *Charlie's Angels*. First and foremost, the three Angels are represented in a certain way with the use of camera positioning, lighting, as well as with their

physical styling and behavior. From the beginning, the emphasis is placed on their undeniable beauty as they swing their hair in slow-motion and reveal their perfect smiles and flawless skin. They are stylishly dressed in colorful, usually tight-fit, and sometimes revealing clothing that was highly modern at the time of the film's release. In addition to this, the camera sometimes focuses on the Angels' bottoms, cleavages or backs, even when they as characters do not intend to display sexual behavior. However, because their skin is exposed and because the camera is purposely focusing on it, the characters of the Angels gain a sexual trait to the spectators of the film. When analyzing this tendency through the lens of Mulvey's theory, this transforms the Angels into erotic spectacles available for the male spectators or sexualize. Furthermore, it removes some of the emphasis put on their fighting skills, as the need for these three girls to always look beautiful appears equally important. As mentioned, they never bleed, show signs of physical damage, or have their clothes torn during even the most violent, not to mention explosive fights of the film. They may be aggressive and immortal, but they never fail to look unrealistically perfect. This point further underlines their status as spectacles as it gives spectators the idea that women are supposed to look flawless and sexy all the time, even when working as violent private investigators.

Besides the emphasis put on the Angels' beauty, the emphasis is put on their sexuality as well. With the use of costumes representing stereotypically fetishized personas, the film invites not only the male characters in the film but also the male spectators of the film, to gaze upon the Angels' bodies and feel pleasure that way. Again, the Angels successfully perform as erotic spectacles, which makes the gazing men feel powerful. As Mulvey argues, in psychoanalytic terms, this momentarily places the Angels in a passive and powerless position and the men in an

active and powerful position. They are exhibitionists who express a need to be looked at by men who control an objectifying gaze.

The Angels are employed by and work for a man named Charlie, who controls which tasks they are given, where they go, and whom they talk to when they are on a mission. According to Schubart, this grants the Angels the status as the daughters and Charlie the status as their father figure. He “made” them, and he controls them. The daughter stereotype holds a resemblance to some of Schubart’s other stereotypes because her purpose is given to her by a man somehow. Schubart argues that the action film genre is a male genre due to how it exists by men and for men (15). She mentions that “most of the acts female heroes perform are about proving they are as good as men, better than men, or have had enough of men. [...] The female hero is a generic anomaly, and the narrative takes a lot of trouble to explain *why* she is in a man’s world, *what* she is doing there, and carefully *exports* her out of the plot” (29). This notion is applicable to *Charlie’s Angels* as their purposes as action heroines have been given to them by a man, or more specifically, their father.

When Dylan enters the stereotype role as the “rape-avenger”, her purpose changes into a more personal one. However, the giver of this purpose remains unchanged as Knox is a man as well. As a result of this, the Angels’ level of independence as action heroines becomes questionable. This possibility of their independence being an illusion is stressed further as the Angels seem eager to evolve their love lives and the general attention given to them by men, even when they are working. Natalie desires to be surrounded by men as she dances, the girls all spend valuable time while working to help Natalie gain Pete’s attention, and Dylan is so focused on the attention from Knox that she does not realize he is evil. Thus, they respond to the men’s

desire to possess women, which, as Mulvey would argue, makes them passive objects who exist for men.

While there is a lot to be said about *Charlie's Angels* when it is analyzed through the framework of Laura Mulvey's theory, there is, evidently, equally as much to be said when utilizing the theory of Elizabeth Hills. In the scenes where the Angels masquerade in fetishized costumes, it can be argued that empowerment, not exploitation, is what happens here. The majority of the male characters in the film are reduced to sex fixated men, and this gives the Angels power as they are able to manipulate them easily. Hills would argue that these costumes are parts that the Angels attach to assemble new bodies. They set a goal and desire to reach it, and by exploiting the sexualities of the men, they win. The misogynistic and binary notion that women are passive and meant for male sexual enjoyment can even be regarded as a tool that the Angels use to their advantage. They are aware of how some men may gaze upon women and objectify them as erotic spectacles, and they are aware of how erotic spectacles are able to freeze time and distract due to this. Hence, they purposely fetishize themselves, and thereby empower themselves, to temporarily disable these men so they can get what they want.

The Angels reassemble their bodies with the use of technology and martial arts as well. Hills argues that this does not erase their status as women, but rather enforces their existence in the action film genre: "[...] if action heroines become empowered and even violent through their use of technology, this is not to say that they are somehow no longer 'really' women, but that they are intelligent and necessarily aggressive females in the context of their role as the central figures of action genre films" (46). With this argument, Hills moves away from the binary and limiting idea which states that when women act a certain way, they are either feminine or masculine. Now, the Angels can be regarded as women who act a certain way because it is

simply necessary to their purpose as action heroines, and this is neither because they wish to be more masculine nor because they need to be masculine to fulfill their purpose.

An interesting part of *Charlie's Angels* to point out is the character, Bosley. While it can be argued that he is an extension of Charlie as their father figure, he is ultimately their sidekick, who is much less capable than them. In fact, the Angels often have to teach Bosley how to do things, and they are often the ones helping and informing him. While the Angels may have been given their purpose by a man, they act as the givers of Bosley's purpose on several occasions. The film then shows spectators that women can teach men as well, which thus undermines the argument that they are passive as they work for a man. Furthermore, Yvonne Tasker argues that in action films of the 70s, the female sidekick functioned as "a point of differentiation, emphasizing the masculine identity of the male hero" (27). Here, a switch in roles has occurred, as the comical failings of Bosley as a sidekick can be regarded as a point of differentiation that emphasizes the important capabilities of the Angels as action heroines.

Worth mentioning as a final point in this analysis is the film's form and its possible effect on its spectators. As mentioned, the film has an almost overly saturated feel to it, both in terms of lighting and colors. This may be to put the focus on the Angels' beauty and perfection. However, it does give the film a less dark and serious tone and makes it more uplifting for spectators to watch. The selection of music is diverse but seems more pop-focused than any other genre. The music is generally upbeat and energetic with several songs from popular artists at the time, such as Destiny's Child, The Prodigy, and Sir Mix A Lot. This mainstream collection of artists would perhaps be recognizable to most spectators of the film at the time of its release, which only adds to its 'fun' feel. Additionally, the Angels always wear stylish clothes, even when they fight.

All these factors of the films' form give off the idea that it is perhaps meant to be about "girl power". In the scene where the Angels steal food from a fast food place in a stolen car, the song "Independent Women Part I" by Destiny's Child plays, which underlines the idea that the film is meant to empower female spectators. The narrative of the film adds to this theory as well, as it is about three women who fight men, and Dylan's mission to gain revenge on Knox further emphasizes this. The way the Angels act proves that they are strong, powerful and capable characters who are free from oppressive and binary gender roles, and yet, they are sexualized and fetishized for the desiring gaze of the spectators throughout the film, sometimes even in satellite scenes which are unnecessary to the main narrative. Their fighting skills and tech-savviness at times fall flat since they are performed in such exaggerated and unrealistic manners. Furthermore, they are supposed to appear as serious professionally trained private investigators, but their main method is to masquerade as almost comical versions of male sexual fantasies. Though, the film is as much a comedy as it is an action film, which may justify these unrealistic elements. Additionally, the fact that it mocks men's sexual desire just as much as it exploits women's means it is difficult to determine whether it is exclusively meant for male spectators to derive sexual pleasure from or for female spectators to feel empowered from.

***Wanted* (2008)**

Introduction

The film *Wanted* is directed by Timur Bekmambetov and was released in 2008. It takes place in Chicago, Illinois, where the protagonist, Wesley, is introduced as an anxiety-ridden 25-year-old who works a dead-end desk job. He hates his life as he gets harassed by his boss, gets cheated on by his girlfriend, Cathy, with his coworker and best friend, Barry, and because he has no savings

and no future. One night as he is out to get groceries, he is approached by a woman named Fox. She reveals that Wesley is the son of one of the greatest assassins to ever live, who was killed the day before. Fox then saves Wesley from being shot by his father's alleged killer, Cross, and they eventually escape. Wesley wakes up the next morning and feels confident due to his newfound identity and a large amount of money now present in his bank account. He tells off his boss at work and hits Barry in his face with a keyboard. He then leaves the building and finds Fox outside, who then drives him to a repurposed cotton mill. There, he is introduced to the "Fraternity"; a society of highly skilled assassins who are instructed to kill evil people via a secret code. The Fraternity's leader, Sloan, reveals that like the other assassins of the Fraternity, Wesley has a natural-born talent for performing certain skills, such as handling guns, with great accuracy. Fox becomes Wesley's mentor and introduces him to Earl, who teaches him how to use weapons, the "Repairman", who teaches him hand-to-hand combat, and the "Butcher", who trains him in knife-fighting. Additionally, and as part of his training, he studies Cross and all his assassinations.

Finally, Wesley masters how to shoot and curve a bullet, which concludes his training. He then finishes a selection of assassination jobs together with Fox. One night, after they pick up a gun at Wesley's apartment, Wesley notices Cross, who is hiding. He chases after him, gets shot by him, and attempts to shoot him back but ends up killing his friend and fellow Fraternity member, the "Exterminator", instead. Back at the Fraternity building, Wesley notices that Cross shot him with a traceable bullet. He traces the bullet back to the place where the Fraternity was born. This is where Wesley and Fox meet Cross once again, as it seems he follows Wesley everywhere he goes. They all end up on a moving train where a fight between Wesley and Cross ensues. The train derails off a tall bridge between two mountainsides, and Wesley almost falls

off but is caught by Cross at the last second. Wesley shoots Cross, the wagon they are in falls off the bridge and gets lodged further down between the mountainsides. To Wesley's surprise, Cross reveals that he is his father. Fox confirms and admits that Cross came up as an assassination target, and they trained Wesley because he was the only person Cross would not kill. Then, she reveals that Wesley's name came up as well, but before she gets to shoot him, Wesley shoots the glass below, so he falls out of the wagon and into the water below.

Next, Wesley wakes up in his father's apartment, which is located right across from Wesley's. It turns out that from here, his father has watched Wesley grow up in secrecy. Wesley then discovers a room that contains wristwatch-bombs and weaponry, after which he plans how to destroy the Fraternity. With a garbage truck, Wesley breaks into the Fraternity building and releases several hundred rats with wristwatch-bombs strapped around them. They all explode simultaneously, and Wesley proceeds to enter and kills several people inside. He ends up in a room where he faces Sloan, Fox, Earl, and other assassins. Fox shoots and kills everyone in the room, including herself, except Wesley and Sloan, who escapes. The film ends after Wesley finally shoots and kills Sloan from afar, as he manages to trick him at his workplace with a decoy of himself.

The film *Wanted* stays true to the action film genre; the protagonist is given a quest where he must train to kill a bad guy to restore justice. The camera-movements during multiple of the more intense scenes are fast, and the film cuts between shots quickly and frequently. The music is mostly of the rock-genre and is often upbeat to fit with the fast-paced nature of the film. Despite this, the film differs from a more traditional action film form in some ways. The character Fox is at times presented to the viewers as an erotic spectacle; however, throughout the film, she proves that she is more than just this. She mentors Wesley as he trains to become an

assassin, and ultimately gets to decide when he is ready. Therefore, she can be regarded as the one who grants him his status as an action hero. She is not merely a side-kick; in fact, she is as important to the narrative as Wesley himself. Without her, he would have never been able to become an assassin in the first place.

In addition to this, Wesley never manages to form a romantic relationship with her, even though he seems to want to. Whenever she is presented as an erotic spectacle, she intentionally presents herself this way to further her own agenda in some way. This is exactly what makes *Wanted* an interesting film to analyze through both the theory of Laura Mulvey and Elizabeth Hills. Fox is objectified and eroticized for the characters within the film as well as the spectators of the film, and yet, she herself is fully aware of this as she actively uses this to manipulate and control others, such as Wesley.

Scene Analyses

The first scene in which Fox is present is the scene that takes place at a grocery store. She shows up as Wesley is about to pay, and informs him that his father, one of the greatest assassins to ever live, was killed the day before. Wesley's father's supposed killer, Cross, then shows up and attempts to shoot Wesley, but Fox protects him. A shootout between Cross and Fox occurs, and Wesley manages to escape. Cross gets into a truck to chase Wesley, and Fox picks up Wesley in her car. As they are both being chased, Fox hangs out the front window of her car while steering it with her legs to be able to shoot at Cross at the same time. She is unsuccessful and is forced to stop as they are almost hit by a bus. Cross then shoots two bullets and curves them around the bus, so they puncture two tires on Fox's car. Then, Fox turns and flips her car over a group of

policemen to land on the side of another bus, which she uses to speed off and ultimately escape the policemen. The policemen search the truck which Cross was in, but he is gone as well.

During Wesley's first meeting with Fox, she is established as a tough, violent and capable character. She is, in fact, the exact opposite of Wesley's character at this point in the film, and she manages to demonstrate this to the fullest. However, in the initial close-up shot of her, she appears calm and collected. Her eyes are focused on Wesley as she attempts to retain eye-contact with him while they converse. She is beautiful; her eyes are accentuated with dark eye-makeup, her hair is tied up, and she wears a traditionally feminine white dress. Apart from the eye make-up, this is an atypical physical appearance for her when compared to her appearance during the rest of the film. Perhaps, it is a costume and meant to make her look more normal and feminine to not stand out. Either way, as the focus is first placed on her beauty and femininity, she is initially established as an attractive character. Thus, in Mulveyan terms, this speaks to the male spectators of the film. Wesley is, at this point, established as no more than an anxious regular-Joe protagonist. However, male viewers may already start to identify with him here, and especially as this beautiful, mysterious, and possibly possessable woman shows up and presents him with an intriguing quest.

As the scene progresses, Fox shatters this initial presentation of her as a calm and collected woman. She grabs and overpowers Wesley to forcefully move him around, which proves her physical strength. She utilizes a gun together with a camera, which allows her to view down an aisle without having to peek with her own head, which proves that she is skilled in both weaponry and technology. On the topic of castration anxiety and how a female character may induce it as male spectators gaze upon them because of the female character's lack of a penis, Mulvey argues that this fear can be completely disavowed with the substitution of a "fetish

object” (21), such as a gun. Thus, in psychoanalytic terms, Fox here acts figuratively masculine to make up for her lack as a female, so she can ultimately match Cross, another male, as she fights him at the store.

However, besides her use of guns, she demonstrates physical strength and quick thinking and decision-making, which are, according to psychoanalysis, considered active, male traits. Hence, with her behavior, she contradicts the psychoanalytic notion that only men can be active and that women are, therefore, passive. As Hills would argue, she even escapes this restricting gender binary when she uses her “Body without Organs” (44) as a machine to connect with the gun and piece of camera technology. She reassembles herself to transform from a calm persona and into a violent and dangerously capable character. She even uses this transformation to protect Wesley, who is not able to act at all in this situation, which thereby emphasizes her power and dominance as a character.

The level of her capability as a character only increases as she manages to steer a car with her feet while the rest of her body reaches through the broken windshield and lies on top of the hood of her car so she can shoot a shotgun. Hence, she transforms her body once more to use the car as another tool to fulfill her current task. Another important part of this car chase to take note of is when Wesley, who is situated in the front passenger seat, briefly looks between Fox’s legs as she steers the car. This moment is seen in the still below:



Screenshot 8: *Wanted* (00:18:26)

As he apologizes, it is implied that he perhaps sees something he was not supposed to see, which turns his gaze into a sexual one. This part brings the psychoanalysis to mind and the notion that children in the pre-Oedipal phase find pleasure in looking at the genitalia, which is how their voyeuristic desires are later formed (Jackson, Hoggs 2). Thereby, in psychoanalytic terms, Fox gains an erotic trait in Wesley's mind as he lays eyes on her forbidden parts. Additionally, she becomes a sexualized object to the spectators of the film as well as they identify with Wesley and perhaps imagine seeing what he sees. Thus, she alternates between a beautiful and sexual persona and an intimidating and violent persona, which may confuse but intrigue Wesley, and perhaps male spectators as well.

Another scene that sheds light on Fox's character and her role in the film is the one at the shooting range located in a slaughterhouse. Here, she introduces Wesley to Earl, the Fraternity's professional gunman. Fox requests for Wesley to shoot and curve a bullet to hit a target placed far behind the hanging carcass of a pig. Sloan shows up and demonstrates the technique with ease. Fox then brings Wesley outside and forces him to jump onto a moving train with her. They approach a tunnel, and Fox leans back onto the train to not get injured as the train moves through

the tunnel, while Wesley panics and attempts to run away to avoid the tunnel but eventually gets hit, which renders him unconscious.

In these scenes, Fox enters the role of Wesley's mentor. In the scene where Wesley meets Fox, she asserted her power and strength. In this scene, she asserts her authoritative status as a respected and admirable assassin as well. Apart from demonstrating her skills and knowledge in battle, she possesses the ability to teach and mentor other people in them as well. From here on, she watches Wesley, often from the sideline, as he trains to become an assassin. As she demonstrates how to lean onto the train to not hit the tunnel wall, Hills' theory comes to mind once more. She connects her body as a machine to that of the train to morph into one. She works together with the train to reassemble and empower herself, unlike Wesley, who works against the train and is therefore unsuccessful.

In the scene before these two, Fox watches Wesley get injured by the Butcher as she calmly eats her burger. Wesley seems to look back at her multiple times, which indicates that Fox's often-present gaze matters to him. Perhaps, he wishes to impress her and prove he is not, in fact, weak and incapable. Perhaps, he also thinks that if a woman can be as strong, capable, and dangerous as Fox is, then he can, too, and therefore turns his training into a sort of competition. Thus, Fox is not only Wesley's mentor; she is a reminder to him that he has a goal to reach. Not only shall he become a greater assassin than Fox, but he shall also impress her because she is beautiful and attractive. Compared to Wesley's unfaithful and belittling girlfriend, Fox is someone Wesley sees as beautiful and respectable, which grants him additional motivation to impress her. Perhaps, it motivates him to eventually possess her as his new girlfriend as well, which may speak to the male spectators of the film as they identify with him, as Mulvey would argue.

Furthermore, Fox is the controller of an active gaze, which at the same time controls Wesley. She prompts him to act and improve, and ultimately, as long as she looks at him, he stays motivated and continues to learn. This goes against Mulvey's notion about men being the active bearers of a controlling gaze. Here, Fox is the one who turns Wesley into an object with her gaze as she analyzes and asserts his progress. The difference between Freud's notion about scopophilia and Fox's mentoring gaze is that Fox is not sexually interested in Wesley. However, even though she does not derive scopophilic pleasure from her gaze, she still adopts these, according to Mulvey, active traits, which makes her anything but a passive bystander. Later, Sloan even says to Wesley: "You're ready when Fox says you're ready" (00:43:47). This emphasizes her importance to the narrative as well. Without her, Wesley would not be able to finish his training as an assassin. Once again, Mulvey's theory about women's insignificance to the progression of a narrative is contradicted as well, as Fox holds a crucial part in the narrative of *Wanted*.

Apart from Fox appearing as a silent, mysterious, highly skilled, and fearless assassin, her character has, as mentioned, an unconventionally beautiful and erotic side to her as well. This is revealed in the scene where Wesley takes a bath and speaks to the Exterminator. The Exterminator shows Wesley how a rat can be used as an explosive device and sends off a rat with a bomb attached to it, which explodes in the distance shortly after. Wesley attempts to have the Exterminator agree that the training methods of the Fraternity are bullshit, but the Exterminator seems focused on something else. Wesley turns his head, and in the distance, Fox steps out of a different bath. Her body is first seen completely naked, as shown in the still below:



Screenshot 9: *Wanted* (00:45:08)

She then slowly wraps a towel around her to cover her naked bottom as the camera reveals her wet, tattooed back in a close-up, and then requests for Wesley to meet with the Repairman.

Here, Mulvey would have sufficient reason to argue that Fox's character appears as an erotic spectacle to the male viewers of the film. Mulvey argues that an erotic spectacle "tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (19). This is exactly what happens in this scene as, for a moment, Fox leaves Wesley, the Exterminator, and perhaps male viewers of the film, speechless as they gaze upon her naked body. This suggests Mulvey's notion about women's inherently passive exhibitionist needs as well. Fox has proven herself as an active character. However, she exerts the need to be objectified and pleasurably gazed upon as well. Additionally, this part of the scene is a satellite and could have been left out without the main narrative of the film being altered. Fox could have asked Wesley to meet with the repairman at a time where she was not naked. Thus, this suggests that her status as an erotic spectacle in this scene was an intentional choice by the film-makers of *Wanted*.

On the contrary, perhaps, Fox purposely reveals her naked body to Wesley as another reminder of his goal. It appears he has lost part of his motivation as he struggles to succeed during his training. Fox may have noticed this, and she may have also noticed how her presence seems to motivate him. She may even be aware of his admiration and infatuation with her and uses this to remind him of his desire to impress her and perhaps even possess her. Here, Hills would argue that she uses her sexuality as a tool to further her own goal: to ensure that Wesley succeeds as an assassin. Thus, while she may momentarily appear as an erotic spectacle, she simultaneously empowers herself as she uses her naked body to manipulate and ultimately motivate Wesley, who is an object to her as well.

In the scene where Wesley shows up to meet with the Repairman, Fox beats up Wesley. She headbutts him and claims he is wasting her time and asks him why he is there. She swings her fist at him and then punches him in his back several times. He becomes aggravated and attempts to hit her back. She beats him up further with brass knuckles while she repeats the same question a few times. Wesley falls to the ground and admits he is there because he does not know who he is. She ceases the violence, smiles, and stands up.

Fox has already, at this point, been established as a dangerously violent character, however, only with the use of guns and only towards enemies. This is the first time Fox is violent against an ally, which indicates that she does not wish to kill or permanently hurt Wesley, but rather does it to prove a point. As she was present during Wesley's negative rant to the Exterminator during the bath scene, she must have overheard what he said. Consequently, she realizes the need to reignite his initial motivation. As mentioned, she initially does this with the use of her sexuality. However, in this scene, she uses her violence as well. Additionally, for the first time, she uses her hand to fight, and not a gun. Thus, she uses violence as another addition

to her machinery. As Hills argues, women in action films can empower themselves with violence, but “this is not to say that they are somehow no longer ‘really’ women, but that they are intelligent and necessarily aggressive females in the context of their role as the central figures of action genre films” (46). Fox sees the need to use this violence to overpower and humble Wesley and his rebellious behavior. However, she does not do it to prove that she is more masculine than him. Rather, she simply acknowledges it as a necessary step towards her goal.

The relationship between Wesley and Fox develops throughout the film. This is especially seen in the second scene with Wesley and Fox on a moving train followed by the scene in which Wesley succeeds at curving his bullet to hit the target behind the pig carcass. In the first scene, Wesley and Fox stand on top of the moving train once again as they are about to race each other to see who can reach a target further down on the train first. They look at each other and then run towards the tunnel opening. Fox leans back like she did the first time, and Wesley jumps up onto the road above and avoids several cars to then jump back down onto the train again, right in front of Fox. He laughs and starts to run, but Fox makes him trip and fall. They both crawl towards the target and eventually reach it at the same time as they laugh together. In the following scene, Wesley is in the slaughterhouse once again. He attempts to shoot and curve his bullet to hit the distanced target but, once again, the bullet hits the pig carcass. Fox then walks over to the carcass and stands in front of it to face Wesley. He takes a minute to gain the courage and proceeds to successfully curve the bullet to hit the target. Sloan welcomes him to the Fraternity, as this means his training is complete.

In these scenes, Fox and Wesley’s relationship develops as she softens up to him and as he begins to feel a form of affection for her, which reaches beyond admiration and respect. Wesley finally masters the ability to run down the train and avoid the tunnel opening. He even

outperforms Fox as he jumps up above the tunnel and dodges several moving cars to then jump back down. She seems impressed but eager to win their race. As they both reach the target at the same time, they laugh, which indicates that she is enjoying this training session and that she has started to feel more open towards him. Wesley has felt a variety of emotions towards Fox at this point; admiration, attraction, fear, and respect. Now, he feels affection towards her, too, as he both sexualizes her and respects her. Imaginably, this is the reason why he is finally able to curve his bullet when Fox stands in front of the target. At this point, Wesley sees Fox not only as his mentor and source of knowledge and learning but as his possession as well, as Mulvey might argue.

When first introduced to his natural-born special ability, Wesley was only able to perform with a gun aimed at his head as this sent him into an anxious but mentally elevated state. Similarly, with Fox placed in front of the target, Wesley feels the same anxiety as he does not wish to lose her. The male spectators may, at this point, according to Mulvey, acknowledge Wesley as an ego-ideal (17) due to his newfound capabilities and success, and will thereby also identify with his affection for Fox and likewise his fear of losing her. Thus, in Mulveyan terms, she is here reduced to a passive object with exhibitionist tendencies as she falls victim to Wesley's gaze. However, in contrast, Hills would once again argue that Fox utilizes Wesley's affection towards her to manipulate him. She uses her desiring body to connect with him, which, unbeknownst to him, prompts him to act a certain way. Hence, she ultimately exploits his emotions, as well as his gaze, to be able to control him.

After Wesley fails to assassinate his first target, he speaks to Fox about his uncertainty and guilt as she sits next to him while he takes a bath. She tells Wesley a story about an evil assassin who was sent to kill a man of importance while he made the man's daughter watch. The

evil assassin would then brand his initials onto the daughter to make her remember the instance. This was not supposed to have happened but did because one of the Fraternity's assassins failed to kill the evil assassin a week prior to this. She mentions that the Fraternity believes that when an assassin kills one evil person, a thousand other innocent ones may have been saved. As Fox gets up and walks away, Wesley notices a scar on the side of her neck and thereby realizes that she is the daughter from her story.

Once again, the relationship between Wesley and Fox develops as Fox reveals a softer and more vulnerable side of herself for the first time. Her mysteriousness disappears as Wesley realizes that she was traumatized as a child and that she became an assassin to eliminate evil people like her father's killer. Suddenly, he sympathizes with her, and thereby the Fraternity as well. The clothes she wears in this scene are different from the androgynous, black leather attire she typically wears as well. Here, she wears a white knit wrap-dress and black pants, which is a softer and more traditionally feminine look. During the scene, the light from several lit candles creates a warmer, low-light environment than what is usually seen throughout the film.

Contrary to Fox's usually tough, cold, and dominating persona, Wesley now sees her soft-hearted and feminine side, and he perhaps pities her due to her past. Thus, while there is a shift in Wesley's perception of Fox, there is a shift in their power relations as well. Wesley realizes he must man up and do as the Fraternity codes tell him to, otherwise, he might be the reason that innocent little girls, such as Fox, become the victims of cruel people. In Mulveyan terms, the fact that Fox's character is here turned into a traditionally feminine and vulnerable victim forces her into a passive position, like a damsel in distress. While she was, in a sense, saved by the Fraternity, Wesley feels the need to save her as well and avenge the wrongdoings of people like her father's killer. Consequently, and while still viewing this scene through the lens

of Mulvey's theory, Wesley is here turned into an active hero as his purpose as an assassin is awoken by his pity for Fox.

In contrast, Fox may be revealing her past to Wesley to emotionally manipulate him into performing his task, much like in the scene where she stands in front of the target to force him to succeed. She uses her past as a communicative and emotional tool to change how Wesley feels about the Fraternity and their assassinations. Thus, she reassembles herself into a softer, more open persona to eventually ensure that Wesley's training does not end here. Even when Fox is here analyzed through the lens of Mulvey, she could be regarded as a contradiction to Mulvey's main points, as her past once again emphasizes her importance in the narrative. As she reveals her past to Wesley, she actively grants him motivation and a purpose. Had she not, Wesley may have never completed his first real assassination at all. Whenever Wesley doubts himself, she is the one who gives him a reason to continue, and not only because of her attractiveness.

An important scene to analyze is the one in which Wesley and Fox share a kiss. Here, they show up to Wesley's apartment, where his friend Barry answers the door. Wesley slams the door open, which hits Barry's face and knocks him onto the floor. Wesley's girlfriend, Cathy, starts to berate Wesley as he makes his way to the bathroom to grab a hidden gun. Fox listens in on Cathy's berating and then decides to enter the apartment too. Wesley comes out from the bathroom and sees Fox walking towards him, and then she suddenly kisses him. They pause for a second, smile at each other, and kiss again. Cathy finally shuts up, and Fox then grabs Wesley to leave.

This scene underlines Wesley's success as a male hero in an action film narrative. At this point, he has overcome his anxieties, joined a secret society of assassins, mastered an ability possessed only by few, and thereby proven his importance in this world, and now, finally, he gets

the girl too. In slow-motion, the camera alternates between close-up shots of Wesley and Fox's faces as they kiss, which emphasizes the intimacy of this moment. This moment is seen in the still below:



Screenshot 10: *Wanted* (01:03:24)

At first, Wesley seems surprised, but then he smiles as he has perhaps hoped for this moment to eventually happen. In Mulveyan terms, the male spectators of the film may simultaneously, as they identify with Wesley, feel as if they now finally possess Fox as well. She enters a passive position as she gives in to Wesley's now strong and heroic persona. The formerly passive Wesley, who got humiliated and disrespected by his girlfriend and boss, has changed into an active and highly capable person who is able to possess a, at first, seemingly unattainable female. As Barry proclaims from the floor of the apartment when Wesley takes his leave: "He's the man!" (01:03:58). Wesley has finished his training and won the true prize: Fox.

Alternatively, this scene can be regarded as another instance in which Fox emotionally manipulates Wesley to give him confidence. Ultimately, Fox's goal is to ensure that Wesley kills Cross. To do this, he must remain confident in himself and his own existence and abilities as an assassin. As she kisses Wesley, she gives him sexual confidence as well, and perhaps, this is just

another step on her own journey as a “desiring-machine” (Hills 44). It could even be argued that since Fox sees Wesley as an object, which she is able to change into something better, he is thereby another tool or machine, that she connects with to reach her goal as an action persona. As Hills argues by the inspiration of Deleuze, bodies can be analyzed as machines without regarding the organs they hold (44). Thus, Fox is able to view Wesley as another tool that she can tamper and connect with.

Even in Mulveyan terms, this would put Wesley in a passive position as he is, in a way, emotionally and physically manipulated and exploited by Fox. Fox, then, becomes the active character who grants Wesley his new identity. However, at the same time, the kiss does seem unnecessary. Surely, it makes Wesley feel more confident, but it is unimaginable that it turns him into a more skilled assassin than he already was before this scene. Therefore, it is more likely that Fox kisses him because she feels some affection towards him. Although, perhaps, she only does it because she pities him and wants to remove that last bit of insecurity and oppressiveness from his life. Hence, she is in Mulveyan terms still active, as she once again actively grants Wesley something: a liberation from his old life.

Sub-conclusion

To summarize the findings in each of the above scene-specific analyses, Fox’s character can be viewed as a, at times, passive character whose importance in the narrative of *Wanted* is partially due to her status as a sexual object. Mulvey speaks of the mirror stage, in which children misrecognize their reflected self as a more complete version of themselves: “the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject which, re-introjected as an

ego-ideal, prepares the way for identification with others in the future” (17). As such, an ego-ideal is created, and according to Mulvey, this is what happens when a male spectator of a film acknowledges the male hero on the screen as more perfect than himself and thereby identifies with him. When male spectators identify with Wesley, they likewise identify with his gaze as he looks between Fox’s legs and later sees her naked. Especially during the bath scene, they may regard her as an erotic spectacle. They may also identify with his ability to “win” Fox as they finally and passionately share an intimate kiss. Thus, in Mulveyan terms, Fox’s character is reduced to a passive and possessable character. She may be strong, skilled, and violent, but at the same time, she holds a soft and more traditionally feminine side as well. This is especially highlighted in the scene where she reveals her past trauma. She is a victim as well, who needs to be saved or avenged by Wesley.

Furthermore, important to point out is the fact that Fox is a part of the Fraternity and works under Sloan. Her identity as a fearless and highly skilled assassin has been granted to her by Sloan and the Fraternity, and her tasks are given to her by a secret code. Thus, while she may mostly be regarded as active in psychoanalytic terms, she is, in a sense, oppressed since she is forced to kill because the code tells her to. Even when she is instructed to kill Wesley, whom she may potentially feel affectionate towards, she does not hesitate to complete her task. She does not question the ethics of the Fraternity, or Sloan for that matter, and blindly does as she is told, which trivializes her status as an independent character.

There is, in contrast, at least as much to be said about Fox's status as an empowered character, though. When Mulvey argues that weapons are “fetish objects” (21) and a way for female characters to make up for their phallic lack, Fox defeats this notion when she uses her fists to fight and overpower as well. Instead, and as Hills would argue, her use of guns and

physical violence is a method to reassemble her body as a machine. Similarly, she reassembles herself when she emotionally manipulates Wesley with her erotic, feminine, soft, and vulnerable personas. Thus, she uses these traits, which are traditionally regarded as feminine, to give Wesley the impression that she is more attainable and possessable. Since she is the one in control of Wesley's infatuation with her, she can empower herself via it.

Although Fox is sexualized in a couple of scenes and does appear as an erotic spectacle in one of these, she can generally be regarded as an active and important character in Mulveyan terms. She fights, she develops the narrative, and apart from those two specific instances, she is generally portrayed in a sexual manner by the camera. In fact, the idea that she is the prize to be won by Wesley falls flat when she eventually dies. Furthermore, she is arguably not romantically or sexually interested in Wesley at all and only sees him as a useful object in fulfilling her own task. Therefore, Wesley never actually gets to possess her and form a relationship with her, which proves that her attainability is merely an illusion, or a tool, created by herself. Any time Fox's character is coded with traditionally feminine traits, she is the one who temporarily adopts them as they are meant to be assemblages. This is not to claim that Fox is instead a masculine character. She is a woman, but the way she looks and the way she acts is not coded as either masculine or feminine looks and actions. As Hills argues, a female character can still be a woman even though she utilizes guns and technology.

Additionally, Hills states that "we can claim that these female characters are masculine or 'figuratively male', but from my perspective it is much more productive to conceptualize them as transformative, transgressive and alternative *women*" (49). Therefore, when regarded through the lens of Hills' theory, Fox's character transgresses hierarchical and binary limitations when she reassembles her Body without Organs to fulfill her task. To further emphasize this notion; Fox's

character is never presented as “one of the boys” even though she is a member of a seemingly exclusively male society of assassins. However, she is never hyper-feminized either. She wears both androgynous and traditionally feminine clothes, she is a victim and a survivor, and she is momentarily an erotic spectacle but does not exist to be possessed by the male hero or the male spectators of the film. Therefore, her character is alternative, fluid, and unique. She may be oppressed by the Fraternity and the secret code; however, as she shoots herself in the end, she finally takes control and frees herself from it. She could have chosen to survive and help Wesley, but since she perhaps wishes to finally be independent and be forgiven for her wrongdoings as an assassin, she performs her last action of empowerment by liberating herself from the Fraternity.

Mad Max: Fury Road (2015)

Introduction

Mad Max: Fury Road is a post-apocalyptic action film from 2015 that acts as a revisit to the original *Mad Max* series. Tom Hardy is introduced as Max Rockatansky just as he is captured by the villain Immortan Joe and his War Boys, who intend to use him as a blood bag. This post-apocalyptic world is a relentless one that is set in the middle of a wasteland where there are no signs of proper civilization. While the original series is centered around the character Max Rockatansky, this story belongs to Imperator Furiosa, played by Charlize Theron, who is the driving force of the plot. She is one of Immortan Joe’s trusted lieutenants who is assigned the task of driving a giant truck named “The War Rig” so she can collect gasoline and ammunition. Her intention soon becomes clear as she drives off-road, clearly dismissing the task she got. The audience soon learns that she is escaping the Citadel with the wives - a group of five women who were all carefully selected for breeding by Immortan Joe.

Shortly after Furiosa decides to drive off-road, Immortan Joe realizes what she is doing, and discovers that she has most likely escaped with his five wives. He quickly gathers his entire army so he can chase her down and bring back his wives. This is also when Max and Furiosa are introduced to each other. Max is strapped to one of the War Boys' cars as they chase after Furiosa. She successfully escapes for the time being as she drives into a sandstorm, where she is only followed by a War Boy named Nux, who has Max strapped to his car. Max manages to escape his restraints just as Nux is about to sacrifice himself in an attempt to bring down the War Rig that Furiosa is driving. Moments before Nux's car is destroyed, Max lunges himself at Nux. In the next scene, Max has survived the crash and restrained Nux.

As Max walks through the desert, he comes across the War Rig being repaired by Furiosa, while the wives are huddled together. During this scene, conflicts quickly arise as Max and Furiosa battle each other. Max manages to steal the War Rig and get rid of Nux but does not get far since it is programmed with a kill switch that can only be activated by Furiosa. Reluctantly, he agrees to let Furiosa and the wives on board. For the remainder of the film, it is a battle between Immortan Joe and his War Boys versus Furiosa and Max. The latter finds some common ground as they start to help each other instead of fighting each other. Nux, the War Boy that tried to attack them on multiple accounts, reconciles with them and joins them in their fight.

We learn that Furiosa is looking for the Green Place, a place she remembers from her childhood before she was stolen and brought to the Citadel. Throughout their journey, they are confronted with the realization that the Green Place does not exist anymore, as they come upon an all women's gang, the "Vuvalini": a gang that has been significantly reduced. The Vuvalini joins them in their journey, and together they fight against Immortan Joe and his men. They plan to keep driving until they find a safe place, but Max convinces them to go take the Citadel back,

as it is their only shot at a proper life. In the end, Immortan Joe is defeated and killed by Furiosa, but she is greatly injured at this point and is losing a lot of blood. Max transfuses some of his blood into her and ultimately helps keep her alive. They victoriously return back to the Citadel, and Furiosa is praised and cheered by the people. Just as Furiosa and Max share a brief glance, he disappears into the crowd.

The women of *Mad Max* greatly surpass the gendered binaries of active versus passive, where women, especially in action cinema, are typically coded as passive or framed as sexualized objects. This, of course, does not apply to all films in action cinema, but there has been a consensus about the fact that women are coded into a specific frame, which does not allow them the agency they deserve. *Mad Max: Fury Road* has been praised as a feminist masterpiece as it has a woman in the lead, alongside Tom Hardy's Max. While Charlize Theron and Tom Hardy are the protagonists of the story, the supporting characters mainly consist of women. There are the five wives: The Splendid Angharad, Toast the Knowing, Capable, The Dag, and Cheedo the Fragile. They are all portrayed as conventionally beautiful women, dressed in white rags, with Splendid Angharad, who displays a heavily pregnant stomach as she carries the child of Immortan Joe. Conventionally beautiful women are not the only women in *Mad Max*. There is also the biker gang, Vuvalini, represented by seven women who all quickly join Furiosa on her journey as they battle their way through the desert. Except for the actress Megan Gale, the rest of the all-woman gang is portrayed by elderly women.

There is no denying the fact that the primary cast is made up of women. Emperor Furiosa is undeniably one of the strongest female characters in the film. She defies the male gaze repeatedly as she neither allows it to penetrate the screen nor does she invite it in from her fellow male characters. She is a physically strong woman who avoids being perceived as a spectacle

both through the way she dresses but also through her actions. She is a one-armed woman with a buzz cut, with half of her face smeared in black grease. Furiosa is a leather-clad, gun-wielding woman who stands in stark contrast to other action heroines from the last couple of decades. Visually, she is comparable to Ripley from *Alien*, as they both wear clothes that do not emphasize their womanly forms. While she is coded with traditionally masculine traits, she also displays significantly more feminine traits as she shows vulnerability through the way she reacts upon meeting the Vuvalinis and discovers that the Green Place does not exist anymore. She is an action character who is allowed a display of emotions as this does not render her weak.

The five wives, on the other hand, stand in stark contrast to Furiosa. While there is no emphasis on Furiosa's female form, the same cannot be said for the five wives. This group of women are all portrayed as beautiful, vulnerable, and fierce at the same time. They do not obtain the function of being irrelevant female characters since they all undergo character development. For instance, the character Cheedo is hesitant and frightened but ends up partaking in the action as she uses her innocent demeanor to help Furiosa during the final car chase. All five women are actively fighting the patriarchy, and more importantly, they are all allowed to have agency as female characters as they all actively partake in the plot. An interesting aspect to them is that they are not there to contribute to the male narrative, and more importantly, they all defy the role of victims. The five wives show that they are more than victims of Immortan Joe's regime and oppression. The line "We are not things" (00:14:20) is perhaps what best defines the film's attempt to frame these women as more than spectacles, and it is arguably hard to read them as passive.

The last group of women in *Mad Max* is the Vuvalini, also referred to as "The Many Mothers". This group consists of seven women who appear significantly older than Furiosa and

the five wives. Opposed to the five wives, these women are natural fighters and willingly join Furiosa in her car chasing journey back to the Citadel. This group of women are not afraid to fight for what they believe in. Symbolically they represent a matriarchy that stands in stark contrast to Immortan Joe's patriarchy. These women are the carriers of life in the way that they carry seeds to plant in barren places. While this aspect may function as imagery on a woman's reproductive system, the film never reduces this group of women to passive symbols. Their ragged clothes and dirty faces show that these women are not afraid to get dirty, nor do they shy away from a fight.

Scene Analyses

The first scene where Furiosa is introduced is a close-up shot of her as the camera is focused on the back of her neck, where Immortan Joe's mark is branded into her. Shortly after, the camera shifts into a medium shot and reveals that she is walking towards the War Rig and a group of War Boys, who are waiting for her cue to take off. The medium shot reveals that she has a mechanical arm that is kept in place by a shoulder-pad attached to her. The camera tilts upwards to reveal another group of War Boys readying themselves to attach a tanker to the War Rig so Furiosa can go to Gas Town, and it is not yet revealed that she is going to go off-road.

The following scene is a close-up shot of her hands, attaching the steering wheel inside the War Rig. This first introduction to Furiosa is particularly interesting since there is no emphasis on her gender. She remains almost androgynous as the camera has neither shown her face nor revealed her identity yet, as illustrated in the still below:



Screenshot 11: *Mad Max: Fury Road* (00:06:11)

Already from the beginning, there is nothing to suggest that this is a character who is positioned in front of the male gaze. The camera remains respectful to her womanly form and does nothing to objectify her. More importantly, this stems from the way the camera conceals her gender identity in the first couple of shots. She is not introduced to the audience as a woman until she sits inside the War Rig. Interestingly, the first couple of shots focus on her hands' movement and not on her body. It signifies the importance of her as the driver of the War Rig, as opposed to the fact that she is a woman since the camera has not yet revealed this.

As Immortan Joe bellows, "I salute my Imperator Furiosa" (00:08:10), the camera finally zooms in on her inside the War Rig, where her identity is finally revealed. This medium shot shows her from the side and is only focused on her body from the waist up. She sits inside the War Rig and gazes out the front with half of her face covered in black grease, her hands positioned on the steering wheel. The spectators are now fully introduced to the character and her relation to Immortan Joe as this establishes their connection. This relationship, as well as Joe's obvious trust in her, is important, considering how the post-apocalyptic world in *Mad Max* has turned women into nothing more than breeders. Imperator Furiosa is a woman in a man's world,

and a woman who is trusted by the leader, so for her to break out of the imprisonment that is assigned to women merely because of their gender, is interesting. Perhaps her privilege is what ultimately creates her desire to help the wives escape the Citadel.

Laura Mulvey argues that in mainstream Hollywood cinema, women hold no importance to the narrative, as they are coded into passive characters that only hold importance as a spectacle, or as a narrative element to further the man's development and explain his motives. According to Yvonne Tasker, the modern action heroine transcends this coding, as her image does not fit the stereotypical image of a passive woman. *Furiosa* remains a good example of this, especially as an action heroine of the 21st century. She, by far, transcends both a passive and sexual coding and is positioned into a role of importance already from the beginning of the film. As stated in the theory section, Elizabeth Hills reasons that an active female character automatically cancels the psychoanalytic binaries. To renegotiate how the female subject is seen, she suggests an approach that takes a point of departure in Deleuze's concepts of "desiring machines" and "assemblages".

The audience is introduced to *Furiosa*'s first and most important assemblage: the assemblage between her and the War Rig. It is perhaps the most important assemblage that she demonstrates throughout the film. This assemblage happens symbolically when she slots the removable steering wheel into place so she can control the War Rig as it essentially becomes a part of her and the way she expresses herself. She is a skilled driver who can easily maneuver a large vehicle through the desert while being chased by Immortan Joe's army. The assemblage between her and the War Rig is something that is shown consistently throughout the film, to demonstrate her ability to drive and control large vehicles, which would have traditionally been read as a masculine action. Already from the beginning, it is established that she is the one who

is completely in control of the vehicle as it is an important part of her identity and assemblage. It situates her into a role of importance as she uses this assemblage to fulfill her ultimate goal: save Immortan Joe's wives. The assemblage between Furiosa and the War Rig is important because it also offers her independence and almost functions as a shield which empowers her as it protects her from the male gaze.

The first introductory sequence of shots that have Furiosa at the center are primarily close-up shots of her. The attention is centered on her face, and the emotions illustrated on it remain an important part of these shots. The scene alternates between close-up shots to point-of-view shots, and then to a full shot as she steers the War Rig off the path. The close-up shots provide Furiosa with the ability to connect with the audience, as they remove some of the distance between her and the spectators. The continuous close-up shots of her face reveal the myriad of emotions she goes through, which softens the hard edges of her persona as an action heroine and makes her more relatable. Furiosa is in control of this scene, both with her gaze, but also through the way she steers the vehicle. The point-of-view shot not only signals that she is in control of the action, but also that she is at the center of the narrative. The different camera angles and movements never frame Furiosa as a sexual object. Instead, they establish her as a transgressive character who is a woman.

The next scene right after Furiosa steers the War Rig off the path, stands in juxtaposition to what has been witnessed on screen. The audience has been introduced to a strong female character who surpasses traditional and stereotypical conventions, but the next shot is a close-up shot of big-breasted, obese women, who are all attached to milking machines. The Citadel and Immortan Joe sees these women as nothing but a commodity and a tool to collect what is referred to as "mother's milk". Immortan Joe has confined women into two roles: milk machines

and breeders. The latter is something that only seems to apply to those women who are conventionally attractive.

Another scene of importance unfolds as Furiosa drives off-path, clearly ignoring Immortan Joe's orders to go to Gas Town, while her group of War Boys follows her without questioning her authority or their new quest. They are chased by enemies, and soon enough, Furiosa orders the War Boys to help her fight them off. The camera shifts through a variety of different angles to establish the scene and to emphasize Furiosa's importance. She drives a monstrous War Rig, one of the biggest war machines that the Citadel has, and she does it seamlessly. She is in full control as she has made the war War Rig part of her assemblage. As Hills argues, albeit in relation to Ripley from *Alien*, the pairing between Ripley and various machines, such as weapons, the Alien's body, and different suits, "provides the means of creating a new body which transgresses the hierarchical divisions and limitations posed by the gender system" (45). The same notion of empowerment can be applied to Furiosa and her machinic connection with the War Rig. Her Body without Organs allows her to step outside oppressive codes of masculinity and femininity, and furthermore, it enables her to reassemble her body into a powerful tool that can empower her during her journey.

The assemblage between Furiosa and the War Rig is most likely something she has been in possession of ever since Immortan Joe proclaimed her as The Citadel's Imperator and granted her control over the War Rig. Driving the large vehicle seems to be an unachievable dream, and yet, Furiosa, at some point in time, became its designated driver, and a respected one at that. As the story in *Mad Max* unfolds, it becomes clear how Furiosa uses the War Rig as an assemblage in order to create a context that will eventually allow her to reach her goal: to save the five wives from Immortan Joe's post-apocalyptic patriarchy. As mentioned, this assemblage is something

that allows her to transgress oppressive limitations as an action heroine. While Mulvey might argue that the image of Furiosa driving the War Rig could be read in terms of phallic symbolism as a way to counter the supposed castration anxiety in the male spectator, it is important to denounce a reading where the action heroine is confined to a rigid gender system. A reading like that links Furiosa to an image where she is perceived as someone who is figuratively male, simply because the practice of driving a monstrous vehicle is seen as a traditionally masculine practice. While the War Rig could certainly be seen as a phallic symbol with the way it is orchestrated, it is also a tool of liberation for Furiosa, as well as the five wives.

In his book *Dangerous Curves, Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, Jeffrey A. Brown writes about how modern action heroines are often paired with motorcycles as their main vehicle. “Symbolically the image of the action heroines on motorcycles can be interpreted as carefully orchestrated sign of liberation and empowerment. After all, the motorcycle has long represented freedom, mobility, and the open road in American culture” (11-12). While Furiosa is not paired with a motorcycle as her main means of transportation, she is still paired with a vehicle that produces an image of both liberation and empowerment as it gives her the ability to empower herself and use it to help the five wives. Furthermore, in regard to motorcycles, Brown also writes that “it is also an obvious phallic symbol, suggesting that whoever has mastered the machine, male or female, has also mastered power, privilege, and individuality” (12). While it can be discussed whether the War Rig is a phallic symbol, Furiosa appears to have attained a significant privilege when she became the War Rig’s designated driver. In the *Mad Max* universe, she has mastered a kind of power that no other woman in the Citadel has, and with that comes the privilege. As an action heroine, she uses this privilege to selflessly help the War Lord’s wives escape.

The action-filled sequence in which Furiosa and her men are chased by enemies from the desert, shows just how capable she is, both as a driver of a large vehicle, but also with guns. The spectators get a full-frontal view of the War Rig maneuvering its way through the desert, where its sheer massiveness becomes visible. As soon as the enemies approach, Furiosa puts the War Rig into auto-drive and slings her body out the vehicle. Her mechanical arm keeps her attached to the War Rig as she shoots and kills the enemies. The next shot is yet another close-up shot, which focuses on her facial expressions. Here, it becomes clear that this chase affects her emotionally, although the reason behind this remains unknown. Her glazed eyes indicate that for a second, she feels defeated, and yet, she continues on as she glances at the side-mirror.

The camera zooms out and moves to an extreme wide shot, which exposes the full breadth of the action happening in the middle of the desert. The audience now knows that the exposed emotions on Furiosa's face are due to the fact that Immortan Joe has caught on to her, as he chases her with an entire army. This adds to the hopelessness of her current situation, but she pushes through and remains determined to escape. Shortly after this, the audience is introduced to Furiosa's true intention as one of the five wives, the heavily pregnant Angharad, crawls from the attached tank to the War Rig. The camera proceeds to show the ongoing action, wherein Furiosa now remains relatively passive as she is focused on controlling and driving the War Rig and prepares herself for the ultimate escape. The camera angle changes again, to show that Immortan Joe's army is now free to chase Furiosa after having killed the enemies that she stumbled upon in the desert. It becomes obvious how dire and nearly impossible the escape appears to be, especially when the camera goes back into an extreme wide-shot, which reveals that they are headed towards a dust storm.

The next scene unfolds inside the dust storm, where Furiosa's capabilities truly peak as she single-handedly fights off the group who followed her into the dust storm, thereby revealing that she is able to battle her way through obstacles on her own. The camera briefly zooms in on Furiosa she shifts gears and speeds up just before she hits the dust storm, where a full-frontal shot shows her wearing a black mask that covers her mouth and nose, while goggles protect her eyes. In that brief shot, her speed as an action heroine is portrayed through her control of the War Rig, which symbolically functions as an extension of her by being a part of her assemblage, as Hills might argue. In contrast to Furiosa during this scene, Max goes through a physical fight as he uses his own body and strength to untie himself from the front of Nux's vehicle. His physical strength as an action hero is on full display, whereas Furiosa's strength and power are illustrated through the War Rig so far. This, of course, changes later in the film, as she eventually illustrates her physical power as well.

As they drive through the sandstorm, the mood turns chaotic through the visual effects. The conditions are harsh, but the chase is far from over. While Furiosa steers the War Rig through the sandstorm, Max is the one who continues to fight until he can reach Nux inside his car, just before the car can collide with the War Rig and create an explosion. In this scene, Max becomes the unlikely savior as Furiosa manages to escape with the five wives hidden in the tank. This sequence of scenes introduces the audience to Furiosa and her purpose in the film while connecting her story to Max, as he unintentionally saves her from a disaster.

Here, a sequence of scenes demonstrates one important thing to the audience. Furiosa's introduction is one that entirely avoids the passive and sexual objectification that Mulvey talks about. First and foremost, the camera treats Furiosa respectfully up until this point when it comes to sexual objectification. Although it should be important to note that there are important points

about her physical appearance in relation to fetishistic scopophilia that will be discussed later in this analysis. From the pivotal scene in which she is introduced to the audience for the first time, it is evident that her gender is purposefully concealed in order to introduce her outside the scope of a sexualized action heroine. Her role of importance is introduced through her title as the well respected Imperator and driver of the War Rig, and not through her role as a woman. Mulvey argues that “ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference”, which signifies that a woman only achieves meaning through the fact that she is not a man. As explained in the theoretical section, according to Mulvey, women in film are always framed as spectacles or as figuratively male, which means that their sexual difference always remains emphasized. This, however, does not apply to Furiosa’s character as demonstrated in the first part of the film.

The fact that her gender identity remains hidden for the first couple of minutes means that she is not introduced in relation to her sexual difference in a highly patriarchal society, which is ruled by men, and in which women are either used as commodities or breeders. Furiosa is the bearer of meaning and not the bearer of look. She does not connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey 19), but instead, her role at the beginning of the plot is veiled by mystery, and for a split second, the audience believes that she is one of Immortan Joe’s men. It is not until she creates her first assemblage between her and the War Rig that she is introduced as a woman. Another interesting aspect of this introduction to Furiosa is the fact that the audience does not get a full-body shot of her from the front until later. In the beginning, the full-body shot only shows her from behind, and when her gender is revealed, she sits inside the vehicle as nothing below the waist is revealed. This, of course, takes away the focus from her female forms and instead focuses on her driving skills.

There are also brief sequences of shots, in which Furiosa uses a gun skillfully as she takes down the enemies chasing her through the desert. While early feminist critics would pinpoint the use of guns as a signifier for the male phallus, it is important to note that there is nothing fetishized about the image of Furiosa handling a gun. The camera does not linger on the way she holds or uses the gun, which therefore denies a fetishized coding of the act. In accordance with the action genre, the image of her holding the gun should be viewed in light of the *mise-en-scène*'s iconography. The use of weapons is something that belongs to every action hero(ine), and by reducing Furiosa's use of a gun to that of a symbolically phallic image, her character is then framed as figuratively male, which in turn erases her identity as a woman.

This is where Hills offers a different take on how to read the image of an empowered woman handling a gun. Just like the War Rig and Furiosa can be seen as an assemblage, so can the connection between her and the gun. Her body is a desiring machine that can create assemblages by connecting with different parts, such as the War Rig or a gun. Thus, she produces a new body that is an "assemblage of diverse elements and forces" (Hills 44). Arguably, the assemblage between Furiosa and the War Rig is one that holds the most importance, considering that she has to drive through a desert to get Immortan Joe's five wives to safety, as she searches for the Green Place. Another significant aspect of the War Rig is that it functions as a figurative shield against the male gaze if it were to be present. Letting Furiosa sit inside the War Rig for the better part of the film, takes away from the distraction that her body may induce. Of course, that is not to say that having full-frontal shots of her does not necessarily establish a scopophilic invitation. There are several times throughout the film, where it can be argued that

Furiosa falls victim to fetishistic scopophilia, but this should be viewed in light of the context in its entirety, as will be discussed later on.

Another notable scene to analyze is the first time Max sees Immortan Joe's five wives together with Furiosa out in the desert. This scene is particularly interesting because of the way the first couple of shots are established. The audience gets a point-of-view shot as Max gazes towards the wives, and while he does so, the camera is out of focus for a couple of seconds before it slowly stabilizes and reveals the wives washing themselves off in the desert, while they also attempt to cut off their chastity belts with a bolt. This moment is seen in the still below:



Screenshot 12: *Mad Max: Fury Road* (00:33:06)

The blurry effect of the shot when Max gazes towards them makes the beginning of the scene appear almost dream-like as if he questions whether he is dreaming or not. For a split second, one could easily make the assumption that Max is enthralled by the sight of the wives. After all, they are all scantily clad in white garments draped around their bodies to produce a piece of clothing, which does not leave much to the imagination. This first visual introduction to the wives could be seen as having sexual undertones in the way that the camera establishes their image, but from Max's point of view, he is more interested in the prospect of water than the

prospect of stumbling into a group of nearly naked women in the middle of the desert. When viewed through the lens of Mulvey's theoretical framework, the wives can be regarded as a group of spectacles fully on display for the male gaze, but not necessarily Max's gaze.

Laura Mulvey writes, "[...] cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire" (25). This means that everything within a *mise-en-scène* tries to generate a certain image. The scene with the five wives washing themselves off in the middle of the desert could certainly allude to sexual undertones, as the camera does nothing to position them as anything but spectacles when Max gazes towards them. An interesting point to note, though, is that it is the camera that creates the image of spectacles and not Max himself. As mentioned, he appears to be more interested in the prospect of water than in the women themselves.

This is also exemplified continuously throughout the film as Max's interaction with the women is never sexual in nature. As the film progresses, it is obvious that he has nothing but respect for all of the women. The fact that Max never interacts sexually with any of the women also denies the male spectator the ability to experience pleasure from imagining himself in the male protagonist's position. Laura Mulvey's notion of the ego-ideal is when the male spectator is able to mirror himself in the male film star and thus experience pleasure through him as he imagines himself in his place (17). *Mad Max: Fury Road* consistently denies the ego-ideal to be established within the film's universe through Max. While the male spectator can easily create his own imaginary existence through Max, it is never with the purpose of objectifying the women in the film, since the film denies such attempts.

The next shot focuses on Furiosa, who stands on the side and repairs the War Rig. The medium shot reveals that she is holding a sharp-ended screwdriver just as her head turns to the

direction of where Max is standing. The shot of Furiosa holding a sharp screwdriver could certainly be read in phallic terms, but knowing the War Rig is part of her assemblage, one must acknowledge the fact that such assemblage includes various elements, such as knowing how to repair the vehicle. Once Max spots Furiosa, he immediately points a gun at her, and the camera moves yet again as it shifts into a close-up shot of one of the wives getting her chastity belt cut off. The camera lingers on this image for some time before tilting down just as the chastity belt drops heavily to the ground. This image of the chastity belt on the ground symbolizes the five wives' own fight against Immortan Joe's patriarchy, with help from Furiosa. The removal of their chastity belts is the first step towards freedom. The fact that Furiosa is not the one to cut the chastity belts off is also quite significant, as it points towards their capabilities of handling things on their own to an extent. As can be seen throughout the film, they, of course, need Furiosa's help, but they are also remarkable at teamwork and helping each other. Despite the brief shot that alludes to their sexuality and thereby arguably exploits them, they continuously prove that they are no damsels in distress. In many ways, as will be touched upon throughout this analysis, they use their femininity and looks to their own advantage.

After the removal of their chastity belts, the camera alternates between focusing on the wives, Furiosa, and then Max. Shortly after this, Max states his intention, and this quickly confirms that he himself did not partake in the scopophilic aspect of the male gaze, as he was indeed more interested in water. Angharad is given the task to provide Max with water as Furiosa briefly confirms the request. In the first couple of shots, the camera tracks Angharad's movements as she walks towards Max, and it focuses on her determined face rather than her body. As she gets closer, the camera zooms in on her pregnant stomach, where it lingers for several moments. The only part of the draped clothing that is wet is the one that covers her

stomach, which is an interesting visual decision. Once she delivers the hose to Max, the camera shows her in a medium-shot from behind, before it tracks back to her face, which reveals that she looks nervous now that she is in front of Max. Shortly after, he waves the gun at her and orders her to go back.

As mentioned, the emphasis on Angharad's pregnant stomach is interesting. The fact that the camera lingers on it for several seconds indicates the importance of focusing on it. Without understanding her role in its entirety in that specific moment, this image could fail to deliver its possible message about the empowered and self-sacrificing mother to be. The shot is heavily focused on her body and could be seen in the light of being subjected to the male gaze, through the fact that the camera tracks her as it would a spectacle, and her body is on full display. The detail with the wet fabric covering her stomach also insinuates that this is a deliberate decision. "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed [...]" (Mulvey 19). Angharad does indeed seem to be styled accordingly to the image that she is supposed to project at that moment, and yet, a large part of her is defying the male gaze by breaking the stereotypical role of the passive woman throughout the film, regardless of her momentarily being perceived as a spectacle. Through the lens of Mulvey, the prolonged lingering on her stomach could be seen in terms of fetishistic scopophilia as some male spectators might interpret Angharad's pregnant stomach as something erotic. It also places emphasis on Mulvey's claim that "ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference" (21). The prospect of motherhood is at the center of attention during this sequence of shots, but with that in mind, it is also important, as mentioned, to view Angharad's role in its entire context. Later in the film, she commits the ultimate sacrifice as she shields Furiosa with her body.

Symbolically, this can also be seen as Angharad reclaiming the rights to her own body, and thus to that of the child.

Another interesting moment during this scene is when Max then grunts and thereby signals that he wants someone to cut the chain that keeps him connected with the War Boy Nux. The Dag is just about to hand Furiosa the bolt, as Max cuts in and signals for her to be the one to bring him the bolt and destroy the chain. The camera moves to a full-frontal shot as The Dag makes her way towards Max, while he holds Angharad at gunpoint. In the blurry background, Immortan Joe's army slowly approaches. As The Dag attempts to cut off the chain, Furiosa uses her body's strength to effectively lunge herself at Max and topple him to the ground. Next, a fight ensues between them. Capable and Angharad quickly run to grab the chain so they can pull Max off of Furiosa, and during this moment, they dispel the image of the passive woman. In unison, the five wives start doing what they can to help Furiosa. Ultimately, Max overpowers her as he slams her onto her stomach and pins her down, aiming a gun at her head.

The fight between Max and Furiosa is especially interesting as it establishes them both as capable fighters, which is important for Furiosa's image as an action heroine. She repeatedly gives as good as she gets, with help from the wives. Even more notable is the fact that she is fighting without her mechanical arm, thus not only framing her as an active, strong and fierce woman, but one who is disabled as well, but no less capable of defending herself. Even without the aid from the mechanical arm, she swiftly manages to defend herself. The fight between them is chaotic and filled with suspension as the wives repeatedly interfere in the battle in surprising ways, which consistently dispels the image they may have been given when the audience is first introduced to them. This is also the first time the audience sees Furiosa in bodily action. At one point, while she fights against Max, four of the wives hold Nux down, while Dag rushes to

Furiosa's side as she grabs the chain that is attached to the metal cage locked around Max's face. She then attempts to pull him off and thereby actively partakes in aiding Furiosa. The wives' sexualized looks are enough to briefly dismiss them as passive participants, but at the same time, they successfully manage to position themselves inside the narrative with their own stories, purposes, and roles.

The mirage-like moment when Max comes across Furiosa and the wives could serve as a momentary distraction that stops the flow of the narrative, as Mulvey might argue. However, as mentioned, the scene itself carries a lot of symbolism that makes it hard to reduce the scene to a meaningless moment that portrays the five wives as objectified spectacles. Their visual presence does not work against the storyline and the action that happens on screen. All five women are active parts of the narrative, and they all drive the plot forward with their importance and their actions. They are not spectacles who momentarily freezes the plot in order to offer a distraction. The five wives all move the plot forward and do not freeze the flow of action. Despite the scopophilic aspect of the scene, the real meaning lies in their symbolic representation. This scene that contains a momentary objectification of the women cannot be reduced to a satellite, as it still carries a lot of importance. Thus it should be viewed as a kernel, as the meeting between Max and the women is a pivotal point in the narrative.

A good example of how the wives are fearless on their own is when Angharad tries to walk away from the group and towards the War Rig, and then announces: "We are going to the Green Place" (00:38:27). She has just witnessed Max beat Furiosa to the ground, and there is an entire army approaching, but she remains determined in her decision. The camera faces her back as Max shoots at her, but she fearlessly keeps walking towards the vehicle, despite being wounded. The camera zooms in on her face before it scales out to reveal the rest of the wives

huddled together in the background. After Max attempts to drive away with the War Rig, there is a brief conversation between Angharad and Furiosa. Angharad proclaims that it hurts, but Furiosa cuts in and says, “Out here, everything hurts”. She then continues, “You wanna get through this? Do as I say” (00:38:51-00:39:01).

Immortan Joe’s five wives are not bound by a symbolic order (Mulvey 15), where the male spectator gets to live out his fantasies through them. The audience gets to gaze upon beautiful women, but this group of women consistently fights off the male gaze. While Immortan Joe was able to live out his fantasies through them by using them as breeders, the film’s plot never reduces them to a signifier for the male other, meaning that their subject is not created through the fact that they are not male. The five wives are not framed as women who are ‘lacking’. They may have been positioned in front of a scopophilic gaze during the dream-like sequence of shots, but in the context of their roles in its entirety, they are more than just objects. They are indeed beautiful women, but they are women with personalities and stories.

As Furiosa attempts to persuade Max to let them all aboard the War Rig, he remains reluctant until she implies that she can help him remove the metal-cage that frames his head. As Furiosa crawls back into the War Rig together with the wives, Max holds them at gunpoint and thereby indicates that he still perceives them as threats. His clear sign of distrust shows that he understands that the wives are not spectacles and that Furiosa is not the only one who fights back. Max quickly starts to collect all the weapons he can find in order to reduce the danger towards himself. The fact that he does this further illustrates that he fully acknowledges all the women as capable fighters who will not hold back if the situation calls for it. This stands in stark contrast with the first time Max meets the wives, where he deems them innocent and incapable of doing any harm, which is why he only allows Angharad and the Dag to approach him.

Hills argues that it is dangerous to have preconceived knowledge of what female bodies are capable of doing, and even though she refers to the body of the action heroine, in particular, this statement can also apply to the wives. Upon Max's first meeting with the five wives, he mistakenly allows his preconceived knowledge to define the wives, and what he thinks they are capable of. While Max acknowledges Furiosa's strength from the beginning, it is during this scene that he now understands that the five wives possess their own kind of strength as well. He does not perceive them as passive bystanders simply because of their beauty.

At some point, Max points the gun at Toast, as he grunts and snaps his fingers at the wives to demand that they hand over the weapons in the back. An interesting conversation takes place during this moment as Angharad says, "You don't have to do is, just because he tells you". The camera is positioned in a close-up shot as it alternates between the wives and Max. The Dag responds, "What choice does she have?" after which Toast cuts in, "He's not gonna' hurt us. He needs us". Dag even insults Max and calls him a "crazy smeg who eats shlangar" (00:42:40-00:42:57). This interaction is interesting as it shows that the wives do not allow themselves to be frightened by Max. They sit in the back as they glare at him and do not shy away from talking back at him. Although Mulvey links femininity with passivity through her psychoanalytic approach, the five wives are important examples of how femininity does not equal passivity. Mulvey writes that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (19). This rigid binary frame would link the wives to a state of passivity simply due to their femininity, but it is important to view the feminine nature outside a gender binary that defines them in accordance to oppressive standards. Even if the wives do connote to-be-looked-at-ness, they remain active as female subjects.

As Furiosa is about to steer them towards the canyon, Max grunts and tries to steer them away. They warn him about the Gas Town boys and thereby emphasize that they need to take a different route. He yanks Toast forward, as she ironically says, “Don’t damage the goods” (00:43:26). This line illustrates a level of self-awareness that the wives possess, as they understand the objectification and oppression they have suffered under Immortan Joe’s regime, simply because of the fact that he sees them as commodities. They understand that their value is based on their beautiful appearance and their ability to give birth. There is also a certain empowerment in the sarcastic comment: if they remain aware of their objectification, they can also combat it. In the back, the close-up shots reveal the two of the wives grab binoculars so they can keep an eye on the approaching army for Furiosa. Capable answers with, “Big rigs. Polecats. Flamers” (00:43:40) This illustrates that both Capable and Angharad understand war language. They are able to effectively report back to Furiosa on what they see. While Hills notion about desiring-machines and assemblages is reserved for the action heroine, it can also be linked to the female side-characters in the action genre. Just as Furiosa picks up signs, for example, the War Rig, to reassemble herself into a capable action heroine, the five wives do something similar. They appear to have learned how to pick up important signs relating to war language in order to create a useful assemblage that can aid them if the need arises.

Another notable moment during this scene is when Nux lounges himself at Furiosa and tries to strangle her with a metal chain. The wives immediately react as they attempt to bite and pull him back. Furiosa grabs the hidden knife concealed as a gearbox and holds it against Nux’s throat as Angharad yells, “No unnecessary killing. We agreed. [...] he’s just a kid, at the end of his half-life.” The camera then turns to Angharad and reveals that she is staring angrily at Furiosa (00:45:53). The remaining wives in the back try to hold Nux down as Angharad orders

them to tie him up as well. The five wives' ferocity truly becomes pronounced as Nux praises Immortan Joe and his regime. The camera shows a close-up image of their angry faces as all five women hold him down. The dialogue is an important aspect of this sequence as well. Capable holds Nux down as she says, "He's a lying old man!", after which Splendid angrily cuts in, "That's why we have his logo seared on our backs. Breeding stock! Battle fodder!" (00:46:25). She yells as she slams Nux hard enough to push the door open and thereby lets half of his body hang out from the War Rig. The camera shifts into a low-angle shot, which focuses on Capable and Angharad who both look furious, while Nux denies the truth behind their words. Just before she pushes him out, she yells, "then who killed the world?" (00:46:33). Angharad's dialogue further emphasizes the fact that the women are aware of their own oppression and the role they place in Immortan Joe's patriarchy. The term 'breeding stock' implies the commodification of the wives' bodies as they are used to produce male heirs.

Another important element to note during this sequence of shots is Max's facial expression during Angharad's wrath. He is taken aback by the sheer ferocity in her outburst, but this also signals the moment where he starts to respect her as he realizes that she is a woman who is strong and has a purpose. Her self-awareness empowers her, and Max appears to acknowledge this. This is also an effective way to establish the women as empowered to the spectator.

The trust between Max and Furiosa slowly builds as they reach the place where she has a safe passage and a deal with a biker gang. She asks Max to stay close by in case he needs to drive the War Rig. The fact that she trusts him with the vehicle says a lot, especially as she has no choice but to trust him during this dire situation. As Furiosa tells the wives to get back in the hold of the War Rig and stay hidden, Max demands that Angharad stays, as he points one of the guns at her, while he points the other at Furiosa. He realizes that he, too, needs to stay hidden, so

he quickly gets down in the hold together with Angharad. A point of interest during this moment is that he never ogles Angharad's body, despite their close proximity, as he instead he keeps his gun pointed at her.

As Mulvey writes, "Camera technology (as exemplified by deep focus in particular) and camera movements (determined by the action of the protagonist), combined with invisible editing (demanded by realism), all tend to blur the limits of screen space. The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action" (20). With Max being the male protagonist in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, he should certainly be capable of commanding the stage, and the gaze, but in this instance, the camera never allows him to articulate the look of Angharad being closely pressed against him, as they hide in the hold. There is not a single shot wherein he looks at her in a sexualized manner. When his gaze moves, it moves straight to her face and not her body. Angharad is neither exploited by the camera nor by Max.

As Furiosa enters the place controlled by the biker gang, her deal with them quickly dissolves as they notice Immortan Joe's approaching army. Having given Max a cue to start driving as the plan fails, the camera zooms in on her face before she yells, "Run!" (00:51:07). She rolls away like a true action hero and swiftly avoids bullets, as Max gets the War Rig started so they can get out. All the wives have gathered to help pull Furiosa back up. So far, all five wives have not shied away from immediately jumping into action at every chance they get. They consistently prove that their parts in the plot are not based on being spectacles.

Displays of Furiosa's different assemblages evolve as the narrative unfolds. As they attempt to escape from the biker gang, she brings out a long-gun, with which she efficiently displays her skills with larger weapons, as almost every bullet hits its target. As Furiosa gets

back into the War Rig with help from the wives, she crawls back to the front and lets Max drive the vehicle. The trust between them seems to build at this moment as they share a look of acknowledgment, and he hands her one of the guns he initially collected for his own safety. Furiosa grabs the gun and stands up through the moon roof before she takes her aim. They collaboratively work together to shoot down the approaching enemies. As Furiosa runs out of bullets, the camera moves to a close-up shot of Max who wordlessly loads the gun and then holds it up so Furiosa can grab it. This marks the beginning of the trust between them, and it further emphasizes that, at least for the time being, Max has decided to fight with them.

Furiosa's body is, as Hills would argue, a constant site of experimentation and creation of new contexts. The fact that Max now drives the War Rig offers Furiosa the ability to properly display her capabilities as a strong action heroine who knows how to do more than drive the War Rig. As her desiring body connects with a long-gun to create a necessary assemblage for their escape, she shows her transformative nature. Although Mulvey's theoretical framework would argue that Furiosa's assemblage with a gun could be a way to phallicize her character in order to lessen the possible castration anxiety of the film's male spectators, it is also important to remember that the action heroine is not imitating men, nor does she become a man. Her speed and strength surpass the essentialist concept of woman. As mentioned, parts of Furiosa could be read as phallic, especially as she carries a lot of symbolism that refers to it, such as the codpiece hanging between her legs with Immortan Joe's skull on it. This could figuratively be read as phallic, especially as she is the only woman who wears that item in particular. As Brown argues, guns should be seen in the light of empowerment, and not as something that renders the action heroine as being figuratively male (31). Additionally, through the lens of Hills' theoretical framework, all these aspects are simply part of Furiosa's arsenal of different assemblages.

The powerful scene with Angharad's wrath over Nux has provided a powerful image of what this group of women stands for, and what they absolutely defy down to their core: the objectification of their bodies. One of the most powerful scenes where the women reclaim their own agency is as Angharad uses her own body as a shield to protect Furiosa with, as illustrated in the still below.



Screenshot 13: *Mad Max: Fury Road* (00:46:25)

Just as Immortan Joe is about to aim at Furiosa, Angharad flings herself out of the door and lets her own body act as a shield, while Toast and Capable hold her in place, so she does not fall off. This act of both defiance and bravery is important for various reasons. In the context of the situation, this act is symbolic as Angharad uses her own body in accordance with her own wish so she can reclaim her own agency. It is a body that has been abused and claimed by Immortan Joe, but through this act, she reclaims it. It is her own decision to use her body as a shield, and not one that has been made out of fear or force. Angharad uses her own objectified and victimized body as a shield and as a weapon as well, against Immortan Joe and his patriarchy. She understands that her reproductive body is a powerful tool against the patriarchal regime,

especially because the patriarchy relies on these women's reproductive abilities for its continuation.

Angharad's act of bravery does not end here. As Immortan Joe's army gets more persistent, the danger heightens as his son fires off a spear that locks the War Rig's steering wheel into place, which makes the monstrous vehicle impossible to control. Without thinking twice, Angharad jumps into action once again as she crawls out of the War Rig and holds onto the doo. Together with Capable, she cuts off the chain that was attached to the spear and thereby frees Max's hand. This momentary loss of control over the vehicle almost makes him drive into a cliff as Angharad still hangs from the side of the War Rig. Immortan Joe cries out a warning, and she swiftly manages to avoid getting hit. Her wispy, white dress billows in the air as she tries to make her way back inside. The camera positions into a close-up shot as it switches between Max and Angharad just as he gives her a thumbs up, and they share a smile. Tragically, she eventually loses footing and falls off the War Rig before she is run over by Immortan Joe's cars as he fails to steer away from her. Even during this precarious situation, Angharad does not hesitate to jump into action. This moment is fundamental as it dispels the link between passivity and femininity. Symbolically, Angharad dies as a free woman who has reclaimed the right to her body.

As mentioned earlier, the five wives seem to understand their ability to be read as spectacles, and they use this knowledge to their advantage. After having journeyed through the desert for a long time, they begin to approach what appears to be a naked, crying woman on top of a wooden tower. She is crying for help, and as Furiosa witnesses this, hope lights up in her eyes. The showcase of the naked woman crying for help is seen through a full-shot, and not once does the camera zoom in on her naked form or linger unnecessarily on her body. This can be interpreted as a way to let her stay in control of her own body and agency, instead of scrutinizing

her body through the lens of scopophilia. It is soon revealed that this woman is part of the Vuvalini gang and that Furiosa has finally found the Mothers of Many. The Vuvalini deliver sad news, and Furiosa's search for the Green Place is shattered as she learns that it has been destroyed, and with it, a lot of women, too. What had once been a large, powerful female gang, has now been significantly reduced. The threat of their complete destruction does not make this gang of women shy away from joining Furiosa in her fight.

Throughout the film, the audience has seen fractions of Furiosa's emotional vulnerability, but as she learns about the Green Place's destruction, the audience gets access to a raw moment as she slowly walks away from the group. She detaches her mechanical arm as she walks, and as she drops to her knees, she releases a bone-shattering cry. Hills emphasizes how the transgressive action heroine has access to an emotional range that exceeds the traditional binaries that dictate what is considered to be feminine and masculine. During this moment, Furiosa's range of emotions frames her as a dimensional character that is not only coded through stereotypical masculine traits. Action heroines are typically formed on the basis of stereotypes and established images that codes the action heroine into specific categories (Tasker 15). Furiosa resembles a bit of a tomboy, so it is easy to classify her into a stereotypical category of masculinity, but the added layer of raw and authentic emotions emphasizes her softer side. This softer side is traditionally coded as feminine, but it is important to view Furiosa in the light of a transformative action heroine who transgresses binaristic logic. Her softness is a part of being a multifaceted action heroine.

The final car chase scene in *Mad Max: Fury Road* is perhaps the scene in which Furiosa truly gets to demonstrate her capabilities and strength as an action heroine alongside other empowered women. This fast-paced, action-filled scene puts almost every woman on display as

strong and empowered. The Vuvalini has joined Furiosa in her fight, and after Max convinces Furiosa to go back and reclaim the Citadel, they all venture back to dangerous territory while Immortan Joe gets more relentless as he realizes that they are making their way back. In this scene, the women from the Vuvalini gang truly step into character as their ferocity is put on display. None of them show any hesitation towards sacrificing themselves as they fight for what they believe in. Despite varying in age range, all women are transgressive and strong. Their assemblages consist of weapons and motorcycles as they do their best to protect Furiosa and keep enemies away from the War Rig.

In relation to Ripley and her ability to transform herself into the context of her role, Hills writes, “This new sensitivity to her environment bears directly on what Ripley’s body can do, on its passions, speeds, and movement. In Deleuzian terms, it bears on her capacity to affect and be affected: ‘to destroy [another] body or be destroyed by it’” (49). This idea can also be applied to the Vuvalini women. While it only remains implied, these women have been through a lot since the Green Place was destroyed. They have all learned to adapt to new and much harsher environments, and through this, their passion, speed, and movement have evolved. When viewed through the concept of desiring-machines, these women’s bodies have picked up signs that have enabled them to reassemble themselves into heroic female characters whose bodies are capable of enduring harsher conditions out in the desert.

In the final car chase scene, these women are actively helping both Max and Furiosa. One of the younger women shows a remarkable ability to balance on top of a motorcycle, while she takes down the enemies around them. As stated earlier, Brown writes how the image of the action heroines on motorcycles can be interpreted as signs of empowerment. Seeing the woman

stand on top of a motorcycle while she skillfully uses a gun frames her as both empowered and liberated.

As mentioned, during this scene, Furiosa truly gets to demonstrate her transgressive nature as an action heroine. She is once again in control of the War Rig, as Max offers his aid outside the War Rig, while he fights his way through enemies together with the Vuvalini. Furiosa has reassembled her body with the War Rig and uses it to fight. Max once again uses his body to physically fight, while Furiosa uses the monstrous vehicle to push the enemies off the road. It is important to note that later, she will enter a physical fight mode that will truly show that she is almost equal to Max in many ways when it comes to the way she uses her body. Max, as the action hero protagonist, has primarily used the strength of his body to fight, while Furiosa has mainly wielded her power through her assemblage with the War Rig. This contrast could imply that physically, Max is stronger than Furiosa, which is also illustrated during the scene in which they fight, and he eventually overpowers her. Despite her status as the action heroine, she is, during this fight, momentarily degraded to someone of lesser strength and perhaps framed as someone who is weaker than her male counterpart. With this in mind, it is also important to remember that outside the physical comparison between Furiosa and Max, she can still be seen as both transgressive and strong, as she is the one who ultimately defeats the bad guy. Her moment of glory is not stolen or taken by Max.

A look of anger crosses Furiosa's face as Immortan Joe manages to capture Toast. This fuels her determination and anger, which she uses symbolically to render her assemblage of various elements even stronger. After Toast is captured, Furiosa's anger becomes part of her assemblage as she uses it to empower herself in order to save the remaining four wives. A low-angle shot frames Furiosa's face just as she grabs Max before he can get pushed off the War Rig.

Her mechanical arm is locked tightly around his leg, and she appears to be shocked and distraught. Capable and Dag rush to Furiosa's aid as they do their best to offer their strength in order to keep Max from falling.

Furiosa gets severely injured during this scene, as a War Boy manages to stab her. Despite being wounded, Furiosa continues to fight. As the true embodiment of an action hero, she is not easily defeated, and her fight is not over yet. Furiosa's physical courage knows no boundaries, and while she is severely injured, she still manages to hold on to Max until Nux helps her push Max towards another vehicle, so he does not fall to the ground. During this sequence of shots, the camera continuously moves to close-ups of Furiosa's face to show her struggle as she fights through her own pain. During this moment, Furiosa's body exceeds the preconceived knowledge about what a female body is capable of, as Hills would argue. Her body challenges the notion that only male action hero's bodies can withstand and endure a large amount of physical injury. As Schubart argues, action heroines can do everything that only men were previously able to do (11).

Just as Furiosa looks back at Toast, who sits in Immortan Joe's car, the camera turns into a full-shot as Furiosa crashes the War Rig into the War Lord's vehicle. A vehicle versus vehicle fight ensues between her and Immortan Joe until she hands over control to Nux and allows him to control the War Rig, so she can climb her way out and join Max. While a couple of scenes contained moments where Furiosa fought with a gun or her body, the War Rig has been her primary assemblage. She wheezes as she attempts to jump from the War Rig to other vehicles that can get her closer to Immortan Joe's car. A point of interest during this scene is the fact that Max continues to carefully watch Furiosa and aid her from afar, however, he can. His concern

for her does not grow out of love but out of respect. He wishes to help her because he wants her to succeed.

As Furiosa continues to fight and struggle to make her way to Immortan Joe, Cheedo the Fragile decides to step into character. Out of the five wives, Cheedo is the one who has been the most cautious. Contrary to what her name implies, this young woman proves that she is anything but fragile as she uses her own innocence to trick Rictus, Immortan Joe's son. As she gets to the front of the War Rig, she yells out his name, reaches out with her arms, and thereby signals for him to pick her up, as illustrated in the still below:



Screenshot 14. *Mad Max: Fury Road* (01:41:51)

Rictus does not hesitate to pull her over, as he does not question her intention, as he has most likely deemed her too innocent and fragile to fool him. At this moment, Cheedo uses her looks to her own advantage, as she understands that the man in front of her will see her as passive. Cheedo plays into her own objectification because Rictus is a man who will first and foremost see her as an object, rather than as a capable woman, due to his father's oppression of women.

With help from Cheedo, Furiosa finally manages to reach Immortan Joe. She is instantly attacked by the man who is with him. She head-butts the man and swiftly manages to overpower

him and throw him off the car. Despite the fact that she is in a state of injury, Furiosa demonstrates an ability to use her body. When she is not put up against Max, she exerts physical prowess that renders her capable of overthrowing men and fight them with ease. The grandness of Furiosa's bodily strength and violence has not been properly put on display until this moment, aside from the scene in which she fights Max. Her aggression has mainly been exerted through her assemblage with the War Rig, although this time, her desiring machine (body), connects with the determination burning inside of her, as she fights her way towards Immortan Joe. Her ultimate purpose at this moment is to defeat the War Lord.

As Furiosa finally gets to his side of the car, she forces Immortan Joe to look at her as she roughly utters, "Remember me?" (01:44:28), before she yanks his oxygen mask off with her mechanical arm, which ultimately kills him. There appears to be implicit meaning laced into the words she utters, which perhaps points to the fact that at some point in time, Furiosa was just as oppressed by the War Lord as the other women. Despite her use of the War Rig as her primary assemblage to achieve empowerment and strength, it is Furiosa's body that ultimately helps her defeat Immortan Joe. More importantly, she does it with a tool: the mechanical arm, which has most likely been produced by Immortan Joe's men.

The last scene in *Mad Max* carries a lot of significance, too. The remaining Vuvalini women, Max, the remaining four wives, and a wounded Furiosa, all return back to the Citadel victorious, as they are greeted by a cheering crowd of people. The camera positions into a full-shot as Max stands on top of the vehicle, which they returned in, to reveal Immortan Joe's dead body. The moment he does, the crowd cheers loudly. Moments after, Max helps Furiosa out and helps her stand up. The camera remains in a full-shot as the Vuvalini and the remaining four wives stand behind Furiosa and Max, as seen in the image below:



Screenshot 15: *Mad Max: Fury Road* ((01:51:01))

Furiosa is covered in blood and grime and is visibly injured. Although she has been aided by Max and is now without her mechanical arm, Furiosa portrays a strong image of a fierce woman who indeed has an action hero's immortality. As she stands there, people chant her name. This is a significant moment, as the film establishes the fact that Furiosa is the one who brought them to victory, with the help of the group of people behind her.

Later, as Max retreats back into the crowd, he shares a meaningful glance with Furiosa. He acknowledges that this is her moment and her story. She is the one who deserves the cheer, as she is the one who was perhaps the most capable force in their group. The glance between Furiosa and Max is not a romantic one. Instead, it signifies the respect that these two characters have for each other. In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Furiosa is “in full command of the narrative – carrying the action in ways normally reserved for male protagonists” (Brown 25). While Max is the male protagonist in the story, she is the true action heroine who possesses a body and a brain that illustrate her competency as an action heroine. She has expressed an ability to be one of the “necessarily aggressive females in the context of their role as the central figures of action genre films” (Hills 46). As the camera positions into a low-angle shot during the last couple of seconds of the film, Furiosa stares down at the people/audience, as shown in a still below:



Screenshot 16: *Mad Max: Fury Road* (01:51:59)

This camera angle puts Furiosa in a position of power, which thus leaves a final impression of her as a transgressive and victorious action heroine, and thereby illustrates that she is the true hero of this film.

Sub-conclusion

Throughout the analysis, multiple things have come to light. When it comes to the representation of women in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, there are several important points to note. On the aspect of the male gaze, the use of different camera techniques, as well as the way that the women are framed, effectively counteract an invitation for the male gaze. The first introduction to the wives is through a mirage-like sequence, where Max stumbles into them out in the desert. This is the only point in the film where objectification is established through an unnecessary way, and yet, even as they are forced to partake in the roles of spectacles, there are several important symbolic aspects of the scene, and thus it does not function as a moment where the display of five,

beautiful women momentarily stops the narrative. The meeting between Max and the women is important to the way that their relationship with each other evolves for the remainder of the film.

The display of the five wives scantily dressed in white robes that barely cover their bodies, as they cut off their chastity belts, is also a representation of them liberating themselves from Immortan Joe's patriarchy. The way that these characters have been dressed also mirrors the way that Immortan Joe's patriarchy objectifies beautiful women. Another important thing to note is the casting of these characters. They are all played by young, beautiful models, so in many ways, it also mirrors and correlates with reality where beautiful women are objectified in media because sex sells. If anything, the wives could be said to be under a covert male gaze, simply because of the fact that they still partake in visual stimuli just from merely being attractive to look at.

In many instances, the five wives use the male gaze to empower themselves, especially when they face Immortan Joe and his War Boys. They remain aware of their own position as objects, and they take advantage of that knowledge as they reassemble it into a force that can empower them. For instance, during the last car chase, Cheedo truly steps into character. She has been the most fragile one out of the five women, hence the name 'Cheedo the fragile', but she truly shows strength and courage as she takes advantage of her own innocent looks when she gets out of the War Rig to trick Immortan Joe's son. Rictus believes that Cheedo willingly hands herself back to them, but in reality, this action is only part of her plan to help Furiosa.

When it comes to Furiosa, she is the true hero of this story, even though Max is the protagonist in the film. Furiosa is the one who leads the narrative, and her actions are, for the most part, what drives the plot forward. The way she reassembles her desiring machine (body) is an impressive sight in the film. It is also important to remember that Furiosa is someone who is

disabled, but this aspect of her character neither hinders her in any way nor is it emphasized at any point in time. The audience only knows that she is disabled, but they do not know why.

Furiosa's disability is not something that renders her weak. With the help from her mechanical arm, she can easily drive the War Rig and fight, but at the same time, she shows multiple times that she does not need the mechanical arm to provide her with the necessary strength and abilities to be a fighter.

Furiosa fights Max without her mechanical arm, and yet she successfully manages to land multiple hard hits as she fights him. The fact that he eventually outmaneuvers her is not due to her disability, but simply because the film portrays him as physically stronger. As an action heroine, she is strong and fierce. Furiosa's greatest and most important assemblage is the one between her and the War Rig. For the better part of the film, this is the one she connects to the most, apart from the multiple guns she uses. More importantly, she is a transgressive action heroine who has access to an emotional range that exceeds the traditional binaries that dictate what is considered to be feminine and masculine. Mulvey would argue that Furiosa's physical attire stems from a need to disavow a possible case of castration anxiety in the male spectator. Through this lens, Furiosa is then considered to be dressed in traditionally masculine clothing. The codpiece that hangs between her legs with Immortan Joe's logo on it then becomes a fetish object that can be read as phallic, and as a way to phallicize her in order to explain her empowerment and the way she actively controls the narrative. When viewed through a Mulveyan lens, this then renders her figuratively male. This binary reading is perhaps far-fetched as Furiosa's role as an action heroine is taken into consideration. Her clothing is perhaps not masculinized as it is simply a part of her war gear.

Furiosa was the Emperor in the Citadel, while she worked under Immortan Joe.

This offers meaning to her attire as she is then seen wearing pieces that signal her previous belonging to the War Lord's army. The codpiece is not just a phallic-looking object as it is a product of her place in the hierarchy as the Emperor. All the War Boys, and Immortan Joe himself, wears the same kind of codpiece. In many ways, this could also be seen as Furiosa challenging the phallic power. She is a highly intelligent woman who has climbed her way through an oppressive hierarchy as the presumably first woman to do so. In this regard, Furiosa has reclaimed her own agency and achieved a privilege that has not been granted to any other woman. She then uses this privilege to help five oppressed women escape from a horrible life as breeders.

Another worthy thing to consider is the fact that while Furiosa does use her so-called privilege, she does it with a purpose in mind. As Max and Furiosa's respect towards each other grows, he asks her what she is looking for, to which she replies, "redemption" (01:16:19). As Schubart writes, "[...] the narrative takes a lot of trouble to explain why she is in a man's world, what she is doing there [...]" (29). In this regard, the film does not explicitly state why Furiosa is in a man's world, but it does offer some context for her desire to save the five wives. Her need for redemption can then be considered as a way to explain her role as the action heroine in the plot.

Furthermore, Furiosa could also be seen to fall into Schubart's rape-avenger stereotype. While the film does not reveal her backstory, it does reveal that she was once stolen from the Green Place and taken by Immortan Joe. Knowing that she has been raised in the Citadel, a society that classifies women in accordance to what they can offer due to their biological sex, one could perhaps then assume that Furiosa has been through a similar fate as the five wives,

which explains her desperate need to get them away from the Citadel and save them. “This is the woman who kills the man, or men, who raped her. She can even [...] kill men who haven’t touched her yet, merely because they belong to the “predatory” sex” (Schubart 33). Therefore, even though it is never clarified whether she herself has been raped by Immortan Joe, the fact that the five wives have is enough to motivate Furiosa to gain revenge.

Lastly, the contrast between Furiosa and Max is also an interesting one. The film allows Furiosa to keep her independence and does not link her to a man romantically. The respect between the two protagonists is not one that is built on romantic love. They are both two troubled souls who manage to find some common ground as they work together to take down Immortan Joe’s army. While they are both highly capable and skilled, Max is still established as the superior one when it comes to physical abilities as he overpowers her during their fight. Later, the film contrasts this again, during a scene in which Max attempts to aim for an approaching enemy in the dark, but fails. With only one bullet left, Furiosa quickly takes over and demonstrates a flawless ability to hit her target.

While Max demonstrates brute force, Furiosa demonstrates a high efficiency with weaponry and talent with maneuvering the War Rig through dangerous territory. Despite the fact that she is physically overpowered by Max, the success behind their victory is largely due to Furiosa. Max is the one who suggests that they return to the Citadel in order to reclaim it, but it is Furiosa who ultimately defeats the enemy and is praised as a hero. It is her quick-thinking and abilities as an empowered and transgressive action heroine that help them all succeed. As Hills would argue, she successfully reassembles herself into a strong and intelligent action heroine, as she moves through her environment in order to reach her goal and ultimately achieve a well-deserved victory.

***Atomic Blonde* (2017)**

Introduction

Atomic Blonde was released in 2017 and is directed by David Leitch. The film takes place in 1989 just before the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Charlize Theron's character, Lorraine Broughton, is an MI6 (Secret Intelligence Service) spy who is also allegedly a double agent for the KGB (Russian Committee for State Security), although it is later discovered that she has been working for the CIA all along. The film alternates between flashbacks to Lorraine's time in Berlin, and to the debriefing room where she is interviewed by agents respectively from both MI6 and CIA. James Gascoigne, an MI6 agent, is killed by the KGB agent Yuri Bakhtin, who steals The List, which is a document that has every agent's name written on it. After Gascoigne's death, Lorraine is sent off to Berlin so she can recover The List before it gets into the wrong hands, as everyone tries to uncover the double agent Satchel's true identity. Once she arrives, she is instantly ambushed by two men from the KGB who is there to send her a message from their boss, Aleksander Bremovych. Before she can get in harm's way, Lorraine manages to escape the scene and meets up with her contact, another MI6 agent, David Percival. Upon their initial meeting, Lorraine suspects Percival's double-sided nature as she discovers suspicious items in his apartment. She learns that he is connected to the MI6 agent that was killed.

Later, Lorraine ventures to a restaurant that was mentioned by the KGB men who attempted to ambush her upon her arrival in Berlin. During this visit, she encounters the KGB boss Bremovych. As he attempts to flirt with her, Lorraine is saved by the French agent, Delphine Lasalle. Shortly after this, Delphine and Lorraine enter a romantic relationship. The film reveals that Percival secretly follows her as she visits a watchmaker to uncover more

information about The List. Moments after, another KGB agent, Bakhtin, enters the shop, where he reveals that he is willing to sell the watch with The List to the highest bidder. Percival manages to lure Bakhtin to an empty alley where he kills him and steals The List, only to discover Satchel's real identity. After this, Lorraine discovers that the Stasi officer, Spyglass, has memorized the entire list and therefore knows all the names on it. Together with Percival, Lorraine attempts to escort Spyglass to West Berlin so they can get him to safety. Before this, Percival meets up with Bremovych to tip him about the mission to get Spyglass to West Berlin, and he reveals Satchel's true identity. At this point in the film, the audience now understands that Percival is one of the bad guys.

As Lorraine attempts to help Spyglass escape, Percival covertly shoots him. Lorraine has to battle a large group of KGB men while she attempts to rescue the wounded Stasi officer. The mission does not end well as their car gets knocked into a river where Spyglass drowns. As Lorraine escapes back to West Berlin, she realizes that Percival has planted a tracking device inside her coat. She reveals this information to Laselle, who immediately calls Percival and threatens him since she has the knowledge that he met up with the KGB boss. After this, Percival goes to the French spy's apartment and kills her before she can deliver information to Lorraine. Moments later, Lorraine arrives only to find Laselle's dead body, and all the evidence The French spy has on Percival. Just before Percival manages to flee Berlin, Lorraine tracks him down and kills him.

In one of the last scenes, it is revealed that three days have passed, and Lorraine has traveled to Paris to meet up with the KGB boss, Bremovych. As she enters his suite, she speaks Russian. As Bremovych greets her, he addresses her as "Comrade Satchel". It is now revealed that Lorraine is the secret double agent. Bremovych orders his men to kill her, but Lorraine

shows her strong capabilities as an action heroine as she takes down every single man. Just before she kills Bremovych, her British accent is now replaced with an American accent as she reveals her true allegiance. The last scene shows Lorraine returning to the United States together with the CIA agent.

Lorraine is a fierce and intelligent spy who is able to take down men who are twice her size. As she goes on her missions as a spy, she is quick to utilize the environment around her, in order to empower herself. Despite this, she is also someone who is beautiful, and at times, placed in front of the camera as a spectacle. She is someone who is perhaps both objectified and transgressive, as the film spends a lot of time focusing on her visual image while she fights, or simply just interacts with the other characters in the film. Thus, Lorraine is an interesting character to analyze through both Laura Mulvey and Elizabeth Hills' theories.

Scene Analyses

The first time the audience is introduced to Lorraine Broughton is through a high angle shot just as her face emerges from ice-filled water. The camera slowly pans out as she pulls herself up and reveals the battered and bruised state of her body. As the camera momentarily focuses on Lorraine flexing her shoulder blades, it moves back to the front to show her bruised face. This moment is illustrated in the stills below:



Screenshot 17: *Atomic Blonde* (00:03:24)



Screenshot 18: *Atomic Blonde* (00:03:33)

She crouches forward, and in the next couple of shots, she places a couple of ice cubes into a glass filled with vodka. The camera then changes into a full-shot as Lorraine sits on the edge of the bathtub in the dark, while she drinks a glass of vodka with a shaky hand, as the grandness of London is seen through the large window she sits in front.

Next, the camera zooms in on her bloodied fingers as she attempts to cover some of the cuts with a band-aid before she rummages through a drawer and pulls out a photograph of herself

and a man next to her. As she faces the camera, the light from the mirror turns on and illuminates her bruised and bloodied face, before it shows her from behind again and thereby displays her entire naked form. This is the audience's first glimpse of the ass-kicking Cold War spy, Lorraine Broughton. This scene is an interesting introduction to her character, as it positions her into a rather vulnerable state already from the beginning of the film. There is no denying that the camera frames her as a spectacle to be gazed upon. Her naked body is at the center of the shot, which may invite a male gaze to objectify her, as the camera is heavily focused on her bruised body.

Lorraine Broughton appears to be subjected to the notion of scopophilia when the scene's setting is taken into consideration. The audience has been invited inside the dark bathroom, where Lorraine is attempting to soothe the bruises and cuts on her body in a tub filled with ice. Even in the dark, her body remains the focal point of the camera. The audience cannot do anything else but gaze at her wounded body. Momentarily, this scene freezes the flow of the narrative, as nothing of importance is introduced, aside from the fact that she is a woman who has been put through a violent event. Mulvey writes how during scopophilia, the spectator is "in direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed for his enjoyment (connoting male fantasy)" (21). Lorraine's female form is undeniably put on display for some kind of enjoyment, as this scene in itself serves no real purpose for her character, aside from the fact that she is, as Yvonne Tasker argues, in possession of an action hero's immortality: her body can handle a lot. Her durability is what makes her equal to an action hero, but the camera's framing of her body is what momentarily renders her a spectacle in the context of the scene. This scene functions more like a satellite in the narrative rather than a kernel. With this in mind, the display of Lorraine's

naked and bruised body places her outside a context of importance. In this scene, she is more of a spectacle than an empowered woman, as the camera traces her body.

An additional point to bring forth in relation to Mulvey's theory is the aspect of voyeurism and sadism. As mentioned, Mulvey compares the voyeuristic mode of looking with sadism and argues that "pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness" (22). Although the audience has not seen the instance in which Lorraine was hurt/punished, they are able to gaze at her bruised and injured body in the aftermath of it. Thus, as Mulvey might argue, the erotic nature of this scene may induce a castration fear in the male spectators. However, the fact that she has been physically punished prevents this as her wounded body invites a sadistic and pleasurable gaze.

In the next scene, Lorraine's character is all dressed up. The camera zooms in on her as she lights a cigarette before it slowly zooms out and reveals that she has now covered the bruises on her face, as she must hide the nature of her job as a spy. She quickly places a gun inside her shoulder bag before she pulls on a white leather coat and walks out the door as she puts on sunglasses. As she walks down the street, the camera positions into a close-up shot as it follows the movement of her black, chain-clad leather boots clacking against the pavement. On the surface, Lorraine is beautiful, sexy, and stylish, while all the layers cover what is underneath them: a bruised and battered body.

In contrast to the prior scene, this scene is focused on her looks as well. The camera continues to zoom in on the details of her clothing, consistently revealing leather-clad pieces, as illustrated in the stills below:



Screenshot 19: *Atomic Blonde* (00:05:25)



Screenshot 20: *Atomic Blonde* (00:05:39)

Leather is commonly associated with fetishes, and it is hard to distract from that knowledge as the camera continues to emphasize those aspects of her clothing. This visual decision could link Lorraine to Schubart's dominatrix stereotype. "The dominatrix is an erotic act rather than a person, and her actions are services rather than punishments. She is not perceived as a "person", but as a male fantasy" (Schubart 32). Through this frame, the violence that Lorraine inflicts on her male opponents might then be regarded as pleasurable services by some male spectators.

Thereby, although her dominatrix status may place her in a powerful position, she can still be regarded as a sexual object which exists for men to receive pleasure from.

Lorraine is easy to spot among the crowd, as her attire makes her significantly noticeable. This is reminiscent of how Mulvey argues that the female form is presented in such a way that it is dressed for the male gaze. “The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (19). One thing that is remarkably clear throughout this film is the attention to detail when it comes to Lorraine Broughton’s clothing. She consistently wears beautiful attires that capture her beauty as a woman. This, of course, does not mean that she cannot be empowered while she is dressed to kill, but it certainly cannot be comfortable to fight in high heels and long coats. The fact that Lorraine is dressed to perhaps appeal to a stereotypical male fantasy with her blonde hair, leather boots and a short skirt that reveals a garter belt, may distract from what she does as an action heroine, as it instead focuses on what she wears through the distinct attention to detail that the camera focuses on.

Later, Lorraine arrives in Berlin as she is on a mission to recover The List. The moment she arrives, she is greeted by two men who claim to have been sent by MI6 station head, David Percival. Lorraine is, of course, a smart woman and quickly notices that something is wrong as she gets into a car with them, and spots that the man who sits on the backseat with her is hiding a gun inside his suit. During this car scene, the camera zooms in on Lorraine as she pulls off her red stiletto shoe before she slams its heel against the man’s throat. He pulls out a gun and tries to hit her, but she efficiently gets her grip around it. Eventually, she manages to push the man out of the car before she turns to the driver and smashes his gun out of his hand before she elbows his face repeatedly. In an attempt to end the fight, she grabs the steering wheel and lets the car drive straight into a rampage before it rolls around. Naturally, she survives this crash because she

has an action hero's durability. Percival arrives at the scene as he has managed to track the car that Lorraine got into. He brings Lorraine the red stiletto shoe she used as a weapon as he greets her, as it had fallen out of the car during the crash.

The red stiletto is a symbolic and significant element of the different assemblages Lorraine Broughton's machinic body creates throughout the film. While her various outfits are all a part of her visual aesthetic, she also demonstrates an ability to use whatever elements she can to reassemble her body. Despite the initial objectification of Lorraine, she is still a strong and empowered woman, who also demonstrates the kind of creative thinking that Hills talks about. As an action heroine, her body is a "site of experimentation and transformation" (Hills 45). While the camera has depicted her as a momentary spectacle during the bathroom scene, Lorraine is also an empowered woman whose body carries various forms of significance, which are not all tied to objectification. Elements from the assemblages that she creates are already part of what she wears, and if she is seen through the light of a desiring machine, she recreates the image of herself as a spectacle into an image of a fierce and strong woman.

Another notable scene from the film is the scene in which Percival lets himself into Lorraine's hotel room in Berlin to deliver some information. This scene begins with a close-up shot that lingers on the lower part of her legs, as she drops a piece of clothing. The neon lights which illuminate the shot arguably make the image eroticized, as illustrated in the still below:



Screenshot 21: *Atomic Blonde* (00:24:16)

As Mulvey argues, “[...] conventional close-ups of legs [...] or a face [...] integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative; it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon, rather than verisimilitude, to the screen” (20). The close-up shot momentarily freezes the narrative as it perhaps establishes an erotic moment in which the male spectator’s gaze is allowed to linger.

The camera then tracks the movement of her body, while it focuses on the middle part as she yet again sits down and submerges herself into an ice-filled bathtub. Just before she lowers herself into the water, her breasts become visible. These bathroom scenes are all established through low-key lighting, which establishes a more intimate scene while it offers a mysterious aspect to Lorraine’s character as the audience must wonder why she constantly submerges herself in ice-cold water. As pointed out earlier, this scene offers no development to the narrative, and yet again, it merely serves as what Mulvey would call a case of working against the development of the story, “to freeze the flow of action in moment of erotic contemplation”

(19). This scene does appear to call for a moment of erotic contemplation, especially as the next shot is that of her bed in a room also illuminated by neon lighting.

As Lorraine makes her way out from the bathroom, she instantly notices that something is off, as her spy and ass-kicking abilities jump into action. She grabs a bottle of vodka as a weapon and slowly makes her way across the room to find the intruder. As mentioned earlier, Lorraine's quick thinking enables her to create assemblages through various objects that she finds around her. Just as she slams the bottle against the intruder's head and begins to aim for his side with a fist, she grabs his wrists and throws him onto the bed, after which she straddles him. In a close-up shot, the camera reveals that it is Percival. Lorraine's fingers are wrapped around his throat as he gazes up at her with a cigarette between his lips. Whenever the camera focuses on Percival, it is through a high-angle shot, and as it moves to Lorraine during this moment, it is through a low-angle shot. Of course, this establishes the current dominance between them, as Lorraine is the one who is in control of the situation and the one who appears with the most strength. This moment is illustrated in the stills below:



Screenshot 22: *Atomic Blonde* (00:25:11)



Screenshot 23: *Atomic Blonde* (00:25:16)

As Lorraine utters, “I’m impressed. You’ve got some balls breaking in here” (00:25:11), Percival responds with, “You should see my balls, then you’d be really impressed” (00:25:16). The sexual innuendo is part of what establishes this scene as another case of scopophilia, and the way that the camera moves, blurs the lines between the spectator and the characters, as it invites them into the scene through the camera techniques. “A woman performs within the narrative; the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude” (Mulvey 19). Thus, the male character enables the male spectator to gaze upon the woman through him. It adds to the authenticity of the scene and allows the presumed male spectator to identify themselves with Percival as he lies beneath Lorraine while he gazes up at her. The camera movement places the male spectator figuratively beneath her as well, as they get to gaze up at her through Percival.

In this scene, the male gaze can be said to be two-fold: the gaze of the spectator, and the gaze of the character. As with the bathroom scene, the audience is placed in a dark room together with Lorraine, and get to experience the intimate moment that is created through the camera. It allows the spectator to identify himself with Percival, while it positions Lorraine into a role of

objectification, especially considering how Percival attempts to sexually interact with her through his comments. The fact that he verbally acknowledges his attraction to her laces this scene with possible sexual tension, and thus the scene is about more than just Lorraine's ability to physically overpower a man. While it displays her quick thinking and capabilities as a spy, her interaction with Percival yet again distracts from it.

Later, as Lorraine makes her way to Gascoine's apartment, the camera slowly moves before it stabilizes as Lorraine walks into the shot. She is dressed in a white coat, leather gloves, a high neck sweater, and knee-high boots. She commands the image as she is beautifully dressed and looks as if she has some serious business to do. She searches Gascoine's apartment, as she presumably searches for information that will help her find The List. During this search, Lorraine discovers that someone must have tipped off the police as she runs out to a staircase and sees two police cars outside. Lorraine then runs out to a balcony and grabs a bundle of rope before she runs back into the apartment, where she turns on some loud music so she can distract the intruders. She is shown to be effective and clever, and as demonstrated multiple times throughout the film, she is quick to use the items around her, or on her, as weapons and possible tools to help herself in whichever way she needs to.

Her various assemblages are interesting and show that she is capable of constantly transforming her desiring machine to achieve whichever end-goal she searches for. Hills' example with Ripley from *Alien* as a transgressive character who adapts to her surroundings can be applied to Lorraine Broughton as well, as she illustrates "[...] the importance of creative thinking in response to the new signs which occur in her environment, a willingness to experiment with new modes of being and the ability to transform herself in the process" (40). In this scene, as she transforms herself in the process, she connects with various elements to

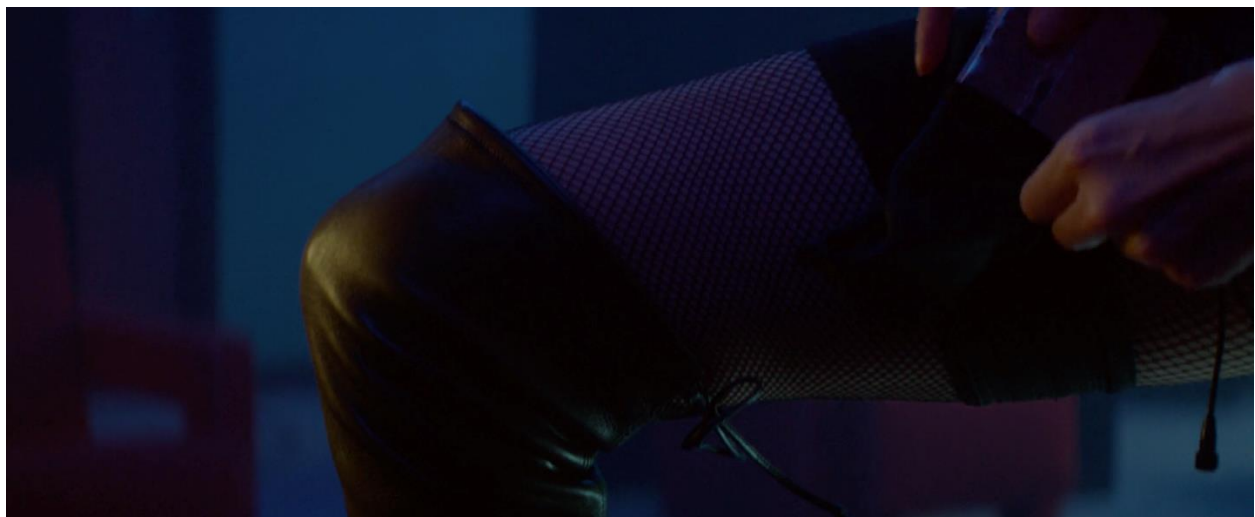
establish a continuous flow of assemblages. Lorraine uses a bundle of ropes as a weapon as she slams it against a police officer's face before she uses it as a lasso to knock their guns out of their hands. Lorraine throws punches, and she uses her high-knee boots to kick the men squarely in the face. She wraps the wires around their throats and rolls them around on the floor.

In one particular shot during this scene, the center of attention remains on the fallen man, and on Lorraine's long, lean, boot-clad legs in the background, where her garter belt becomes visible. This moment may distract the spectator from the narrative and action. She flawlessly rolls around on the floor and kicks ass left and right while showing that her clothes do not hinder her in action. She uses pans to fight, and she uses the door from the refrigerator as she slams it against one of the men's faces. Lorraine shows that she is highly versatile in the way that she fights. Just before her grand escape during this scene, she ties the rope around one of the men's throats before she runs towards the balcony and jumps out. Just before she manages to escape entirely, she is yet again approached by two police officers outside. The camera moves into a full-shot where she is in the center of it as she is flanked by the two men. She rolls the collar of her high-neck shirt over her mouth and nose before she swiftly and efficiently lands a couple of hard blows left and right. Lorraine's use of various objects/signs, which she finds in her environment, is what Hills would then argue demonstrate her creative thinking and ability to continuously reassemble herself as an action heroine.

As Lorraine kicks ass in a mini-skirt and a visible garter belt, it is hard to deny the spectacle aspect of the image. That is not to say that the way she is visually portrayed renders her passive or weak, but while she actively fights as an action heroine, parts of her are also in the center of the shot as a spectacle. As Mulvey would argue, the male spectators may be stimulated through their gaze as they have continuous access to the image of her lean legs dressed in high-

knee boots while her thighs are framed by a garter belt. This scene does not necessarily defy the scopophilic aspect of the male gaze, but it also does not weaken her actions. Although in this instance, the mise-en-scène has been carefully planned out to accommodate the wish for “pleasurable looking” (17). The spectator gets to watch a sexily dressed Lorraine fight her way through a hoard of men. While she is empowered, she remains objectified through the visual apparatus of the film.

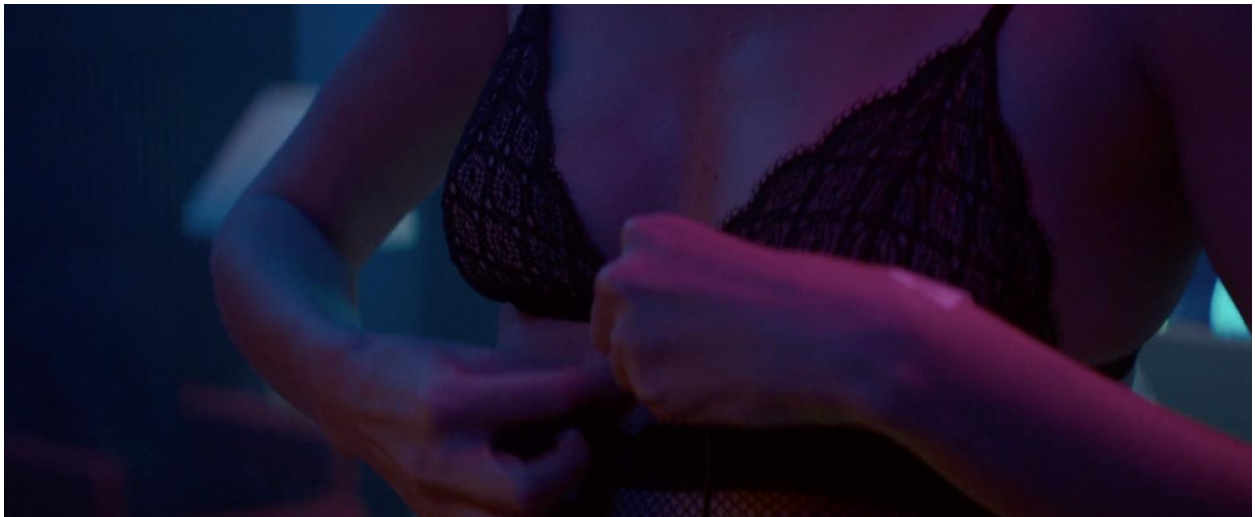
The following scene takes the audience back to Lorraine’s neon-lit hotel room. The scene begins with a close-up shot of her hands as she places a device inside a pouch attached to her thigh. Her leg is once again shown in knee-high leather boots, but this time she wears fishnet stockings. The camera slowly follows the contours of her thighs before it unveils her stomach and a set of black lace panties. It then continues to slowly move along her body and thereby reveals more of her stomach as she attaches wires to it with tape. The camera then moves upwards, where it lingers on her lace bra before it eventually settles on her face. This moment is shown in the stills below:



Screenshot 24: *Atomic Blonde* (00:33:00)



Screenshot 25: *Atomic Blonde* (00:33:04)



Screenshot 26: *Atomic Blonde* (00:33:10)

Half of her body is illuminated by a neon-pink light, which softens her image, while it perhaps simultaneously eroticizes it again. The unnecessary camera-tracking alongside her body emphasizes her sexuality and is thereby yet again a direct invitation to fetishistic scopophilia. As with the bathroom scenes, this scene offers no context to the narrative, aside from the fact that she uses tracking devices because she is a spy. In this scene, she is a spectacle once again. This scene is, therefore, a satellite, which serves no narrative purpose as it instead focuses on her sexuality and how she is presented through a variety of close-ups to perhaps cater to the male

spectator. The fact that she is dressed in fishnet stockings and knee-high leather boots is part of her erotic coding.

By applying Mulvey's notion of woman as spectacle, Lorraine's appearance yet again momentarily stops the narrative flow. Throughout the film, the aspect of fetishistic scopophilia is rarely avoided during scenes in which Lorraine is alone in her hotel room. "[...] fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself" (Mulvey 21). The film has arguably, on multiple accounts, built up the physical beauty of Lorraine through her visual coding. The problem with these in-between scenes is that they reduce Lorraine's character to a bearer of the look, instead of meaning. It allows the male spectator to investigate her character in an objectified manner as there is no meaningful action in the scene, apart from the fact that her body is at the center of attention. The camera instructs the audience's gaze to linger on her body as it tracks it for several seconds. She is dressed for the gaze and not for the action or flow of the narrative. This is yet another pause that brings the audience back to a momentary break where they get to partake in voyeurism.

In another scene, Lorraine Broughton wears a deeply low-cut, dark, glittery, cobber dress. Her blonde hair is wavy, and her eye make-up is dark and smokey. Every aspect and element of this outfit and look adds to her sexual appeal. If her purpose is to attract attention, she does it well. Soon enough, she attracts the attention of Bremovych, and as she is about to light a cigarette, the close-up shot shows a hand that moves into the frame and does it for her. As Bremovych attempts to speak German to her, she is dismissive, "I am not speaking German tonight" (00:37:27). Her personality briefly shines through as she remains cocky towards the man. This scene, in particular, is illuminated by soft, neon red lighting. The accompanying neon lighting, which is seen in several scenes, appears to be placed in conjunction with Lorraine and

the way that the film attempts to frame her appearance in an eroticized manner. The film's effect with the lighting highlights Lorraine's sensuality and sexual appeal, as illustrated in the still below:



Screenshot 27: *Atomic Blonde* (00:37:21)

In this scene, the audience is also introduced to her love interest, the French spy, Lasalle. She is an equally beautiful woman who saves Lorraine from Bremovych's unwanted attention, which is an interesting take on the interaction between them, as it is usually a male character who saves a woman from another man's unwanted attention. There are sexual undertones to the interaction between Lasalle and Lorraine during this moment.

As Lorraine makes it to East Berlin, she enters a building nearby Checkpoint Charlie, where she is chased by some of the KGB's men. Another fight scene ensues, where she uses various objects around her to form different kinds of assemblages that allows her to strengthen her power. She grabs a ladder and slams it against a man before she pushes a shelf on top of him. She wears high-knee leather boots again as she fights her way through a group of men. As Lorraine stumbles across one of the men, she pulls out a pair of keys and positions them between her knuckles, letting her hand connect with another element to produce a new momentary

assemblage. She fights relentlessly on equal terms with the men. She punches and kicks, and more importantly, as the action heroine, she gets hurt, injured and bruised, and yet, she remains a beautiful visual image on the screen despite her bruises.

While Lorraine defies the binary limitations that the psychoanalytic field has established, her visual presence is arguably still coded as sexualized. Lorraine is consistently used as a catalyst to induce pleasurable looking. This is a fast-paced action film that relies on a lot of narrative information, such as the entire structure around who works with whom. However, the way that Lorraine is dressed and made to look appears to only function in a way that connotes to-be-looked-at-ness, as Mulvey calls it. While she is important to the film's narrative, she appears to be equally important to the visual apparatus of the film, as a beautiful and eroticized woman.

The in-between scenes where the audience is invited into Lorraine's bedroom continue to serve as momentary stillness that stalls the narrative. The spectator is yet again able to gaze at Lorraine as she is back in her bedroom, while she listens to all the conversations that she has recorded. This short scene begins with a full-shot where Lorraine is positioned in the middle of the shot as she sits side-ways. She wears an oversized white t-shirt and a pair of long, black, fishnet stockings. As with all the other similar scenes, this one is illuminated by soft neon lighting again. The choice to use neon colors throughout this film emphasizes the fact that it takes place in the 80s, but it is also important to bear in mind that these colors are usually present during the sequences of shots in which Lorraine's character could be said to be objectified. This visual decision is hardly an unconscious choice and is arguably present to produce a specific impact when it comes to the way that Lorraine is sexualized.

In the next scene, Lorraine has taken Laselle up on her offer to visit a club that her friend owns. She is once again beautifully dressed, this time in a skin-tight black dress that emphasizes

her body. As she enters the club, she immediately spots Laselle and joins her at the bar. The French woman is obviously ogling Lorraine, and the atmosphere between them is flirtatious. Laselle pushes a glass of whiskey towards Lorraine, who is surprised by the fact that Laselle appears to know which drink she enjoys. Lorraine utters this out loud, and Laselle replies with, “I look for pleasure in the details” (00:50:16). Just as Lorraine’s gaze shifts to the woman’s lips, they share a kiss. Laselle then suggests that they go somewhere quiet. Neon hues once again frame the scene, as the two women share a heated moment.

As Laselle drags Lorraine to a more private spot, the camera faces her in a close-up shot. During this moment, Lorraine gazes straight into the camera with a smoldering look, as neon red lighting illuminates her face. Just as they reach a more remote place, Lorraine pushes Laselle against the wall and kisses her passionately. The camera tracks the movement of her hand as it skirts down Laselle’s back, where it briefly grazes her bottom before it snatches a gun out of her skirt. During this scene, Laselle admits that she works for the French Intelligence and is a spy as well, but opposite Lorraine, she does not seem to enjoy her job as she realizes the dangers that come with it. After the brief conversation between them, Lorraine turns Laselle around and crowds her against the wall with her own body.

The next sequences of shots take place back in Lorraine’s hotel room. In a close-up shot, Lorraine’s hand grips Laselle’s chin. Both women’s faces are blissed out as they partake in a passionate moment. The two women grind against one another while upbeat 80s music plays in the background, and soft neon hues fill the frame. The camera slowly zooms out just enough to reveal the moment Lorraine’s hand makes its way down between Laselle’s legs. The camera lingers on these close-up shots to reveal the movement of their hands as they pleasure each other, and then it shifts to their face as they share a passionate, albeit erotic kiss. The last couple of

seconds during this scene show a full-shot of the now naked women on the bed as they have sex. Interestingly, in this shot, in particular, the camera lingers for several long moments.

Due to the nature of the two scenes in which Lorraine meet each other and have sex, it is hard to argue against the obvious establishment of the male gaze. Both scenes code the women as spectacles. They're both beautiful and dressed accordingly, in sexy clothing. Both scenes cater to the male gaze through camera angles, color palettes, and the women's visual presence. Through the way the camera tracks their every move, it simultaneously controls the audience's gaze and directs their attention to specific details and movements. At the beginning of the sex scene, both women are highly eroticized through their clothes. The close-up image of Lorraine's hand between Laselle's legs shows that Laselle wears a mini-skirt and a garter belt, while Lorraine wears fishnet stockings again, which allow her panties underneath to be visible. Just before the sex scene ends, both women are fully on display as all of their clothes has been removed. A moment from this scene is illustrated in the still below:



Screenshot 28: *Atomic Blonde* (00:52:52)

Additionally, the camera angles and the color palette also establish the eroticism in these scenes with the vibrant red and purple neon hues, which can be said to accentuate sensuality and

passion. Lastly, the women's clothing is all part of the visual stimuli that caters to the male gaze. As Laura Mulvey writes, "Woman displayed as sexual objects are the leitmotif of erotic spectacle [...] she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire" (19). In this case, both women hold an eroticized look that caters to what, by some males, might be considered a sexual fantasy as the two women partake in girl-on-girl action.

While this scene could be seen as a tender moment between two people, the way that the scene is established fetishizes two women having sex with each other, and thus the scene itself serves no real function to the narrative or Lorraine's character. This romance between the two women is fleeting as Laselle gets killed off quickly. Even a possible attempt to create representation for the lgbtq+ community quickly falls to the ground as this scene is not meant as an attempt for better representation. Instead, it is established as a fetishized sexual fantasy, rather than a tender and authentic moment, which may appeal to some male spectators. Lorraine's possible bisexuality is not allowed any real depth, and her romance with Laselle is yet another thing that halts the storyline, as it does nothing to create a more well-rounded character for Lorraine. Their romance is reduced to yet another trope, which does not offer any real narrative value.

Just before Lorraine meets up with Percival, there is a short scene wherein she attaches the recording device to her body once more. Lorraine, dressed in a black bra and high-waist stockings, stands in front of the mirror with a cigarette between her lips. The next shot takes the audience back to her bedroom just as she walks into the frame, and only her lower body is visible. She wears a black latex pencil skirt and high heels. As with the other earlier mentioned scenes, this one stops the narrative and thus turns into a satellite. There is nothing in this scene that serves any real narrative purpose. As with the other scenes, Lorraine's only purpose in this

scene is to perform as a spectacle, while the camera lets the audience be in scopophilic contact with her character. It lets the spectator be in possession of her visually through her image. The problem with these in-between scenes is that Lorraine is isolated only to be put on display and become sexualized.

Lorraine and Percival create a plan to escort a Stasi officer, Spyglass, to West Berlin. As the Germans march outside and protests against the Berlin wall, Lorraine and Percival grab the opportunity to mingle in with the crowd as they attempt to free Spyglass from East Berlin. As Percival covertly shoots Spyglass because no one from the KGB has managed yet, Lorraine now has to get him to safety and make sure he is not killed. They take shelter behind a car and Lorraine tears of the car mirror and then proceed to use it as a tool in order to spot who is behind the shooting, as she yet again proves her think creatively and produce assemblages as she moves through her environment. Next, she runs towards a building with Spyglass, but this building is quickly swarmed with men from the KGB who are all out to kill both her and Spyglass. Lorraine pulls out her gun and actively partakes in the fight, while she simultaneously attempts to protect Spyglass. She runs up and down the stairwell as she fights her way through a group of brutes who are all eager to kill her.

Lorraine lands blow after blow just as much as she takes hits after hits. She throws a man twice her size across her shoulder and pushes him down the stairs while she receives the same treatment. These men never stop just because she is a woman. They are all eager to land all the hits they can and throw her down as many stairs as possible. In this regard, the film allows her the same kind of treatment that a male action hero may get, as it lets the male characters exert violence on her. Simultaneously, the film demonstrates that as an action heroine, she is capable of overthrowing a man twice her size. Lorraine's face becomes increasingly bruised and

bloodied, but she continues the fight. As one of the men pulls out a small knife, she does not attempt to take it from him. Instead, she uses her physical strength to grab control of the man's hand as she directs it towards him and causes him to stab himself. She eventually manages to get rid of the men for now and searches a bag that they brought with them for guns. Instead, all she finds is unloaded guns. Lorraine demonstrates creative thinking again as she grabs one of the heaviest guns and decides to use it as a tool to land harder blows and thereby makes it part of her assemblage. This is something she does throughout the entire scene, as she continues to connect objects around her with her desiring machine, so she can continuously create useful assemblages that will empower her.

Lorraine eventually gets ahold of a gun and uses it to take down the men around her. This scene is also the only fight scene in *Atomic Blonde*, where she is dressed in more practical clothes that do not frame her as a spectacle in the same way that she has been framed in other scenes. Throughout this scene, she also demonstrates her creativity when it comes to her assemblages, although this is a common denominator for all of her fight scenes. She creatively reassembles her body with whatever she can get ahold of around her, be it a bottle opener, an electric burner, or simply just her own body. She illustrates Deleuze's notion of 'becoming' as she participates in a steady flow of constant change as she fights. She changes her fighting technique based on what is available to her. Thus she illustrates both her intelligence and her creativity. "When a body disconnects from its habituated modes of acting and thinking in favor of multiple and changing processes of experimentation" (Hills 45). With this in mind, Lorraine illustrates these multiple and changing processes of experimentation more than once throughout this film. Even when she is not able to use a gun, she grabs whatever she can to reassemble her body.

Lorraine's assemblages consist of various elements and signs that she has picked up on. There is the assemblage between woman + guns, and then woman + action, and lastly woman + various objects. All these different assemblages serve a purpose, which is that of empowerment. Lorraine's different assemblages have meaning, and they are all elements that she actively uses. To illustrate a point that has been mentioned throughout this analysis, her sexualization never becomes a part of her empowered assemblage, as it serves no real purpose when it comes to her skills as a spy. Thus, her sexualized persona serves no real purpose, other than being there purely for the male gaze.

Sub-conclusion

To summarize the findings in *Atomic Blonde*, there are several interesting aspects to point out, both in relation to Laura Mulvey's theory, but also Elizabeth Hills' theoretical framework. When it comes to the male gaze, it is hard to argue against its presence throughout the film. Several scenes freeze the flow of the film and add no real value to Lorraine's character or the plot, for example, the scenes that put Lorraine on display as a spectacle. According to Mulvey, "the meaning of woman is sexual difference [...]" (21), and thus, Lorraine can be said to fall under this trope. The interesting aspect is that she does not fall under it because she is passive, but instead, she falls under the trope through her visual aesthetic. The camera constantly reaffirms her status as a woman, which is not a bad thing in itself, but it simultaneously codes her as an erotic spectacle due to the nature of some of the more intimate scenes which take place in Lorraine's bedroom.

Even as Lorraine leaves the hotel to go on a mission, the camera almost always initially tracks the movements of her high heels as she makes her way outside. The camera angles

constantly reaffirm that she is a beautiful woman who is pleasant to gaze at. The focus does not seem to be on her as a dynamic and multi-faceted character, instead, it focuses on her status as a beautiful woman who knows how to fight, and even looks pretty with a bruised and bloodied face. Lorraine is intelligent but her character lacks depth, and thus, instead of gaining an empowered image, she is instead arguably reduced to a spectacle more often than not.

Elizabeth Hills could offer a different take on Lorraine's character, where the focus is on her transgressiveness and the fact that she surpasses traditional binaries. However, Lorraine's desiring body never utilizes her eroticism as an assemblage to empower herself with. These eroticized scenes of her do not empower her more than they place her in scopophilic contact with the audience. Just as she almost exceeds the essentialist framework, she is brought right back into it as her sexualized persona is confirmed almost after every scene of importance in the film.

While Lorraine could be said to be transformative in some ways, especially through the way she creatively uses objects as weapons to reassemble herself on the go, she is also constantly bearer of the look and less of a meaning. In many instances, it can be argued that Lorraine's character is heavily used to signify male desire instead of female empowerment. *Atomic Blonde* only has two female characters, and thus, it fails to promote female empowerment and to position women in roles of meaning. While her body carries various forms of significance, through the way she performs as an action heroine, the continuous objectification of Lorraine's character seems highly unnecessary in the light of her role as a strong and intelligent spy. These momentary shots and sequences of scenes neither add to the overall narrative of her story, nor do they offer her any form of depth as a character. During these sequences, she is arguably coded erotically and positioned in front of a male gaze on multiple accounts.

With this being said, Charlize Theron's character, Lorraine, does transgress the hierarchical division between 'active male/passive female' as she displays brutality and violence in the same manner that male characters do. Thus, she demonstrates Deleuze's notion of 'Body without Organs'. Arguably, many scenes can be interpreted as highly sexualized, but it does not counter the fact that Lorraine is someone who actively fights against the binaries, and she by far exceeds Mulvey's claim that femininity equals passivity. She gives as good as she gets, and thus, as a woman, she stands in the same hierarchical position as the men around her. The way that Lorraine constructs her female subject should perhaps not be coded into negative terms, merely because she expresses traits that can be seen as traditionally male. It is important to surpass such binary and to instead view Lorraine's character in the light of an 'action heroine' who does not appropriate masculine behavior. The problem with *Atomic Blonde* is that her transgressive nature may become trivialized due to her erotic coding throughout the film, as it serves no real narrative purpose and thereby carries more importance to the visual apparatus than to the film's plot.

Discussion

Based on the findings in the four analyses above, a discussion will be conducted in the following section. All four films present certain tendencies in relation to this thesis' problem statement when analyzed through the frameworks of both Laura Mulvey and Elizabeth Hills. To begin with the theory of Mulvey, it is safe to say that the majority of the female characters in these films are sexualized and fetishized to some extent. Especially Mulvey's notion that female characters appear as spectacles for male spectators' visual enjoyment can be applied to each of these films. She argues that "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be

said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (19). In *Charlie's Angels*, several specific scenes occur in which the camera treats the Angels as erotic spectacles, such as the slow-motion scene at the beach. In *Wanted*, Fox's character is given a sexual status from the moment Wesley accidentally gazes between her legs. Furthermore, her naked body is put on display in one scene as she slowly exits a bath. In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Immortan Joe's five wives are framed as spectacles in the scene where the audience is introduced to them. In *Atomic Blonde*, Lorraine is repeatedly displayed as a sexy, lingerie-clad spectacle during scenes that hold no importance to the plot. In fact, *Charlie's Angels*, *Wanted*, and *Atomic Blonde* all have satellites which exist solely to present the sexualized female characters for the visual pleasure of the male spectators. In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, however, the scene with the five wives is a kernel as the initial face-to-face meeting between them and Max is important to the development of the plot.

Mulvey also mentions the notion of fetishistic scopophilia, where she argues that castration anxiety in the male subject or spectators can be avoided by "turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous" (21). In *Charlie's Angels*, all three Angels are repeatedly coded for strong visual and erotic impact when they masquerade as stereotypically fetishized personas such as Asian masseuses, belly dancers, and teachers/dominatrixes. In *Atomic Blonde*, Lorraine's erotic and sensual nature is coded through the way she dresses. Part of her visual aesthetic can, therefore, be linked to that of a dominatrix.

As discussed in the analyses of *Charlie's Angels* and *Wanted*, certain aspects of these films bring Mulvey's theory about the ego-ideal to mind. Mulvey argues that through the male spectator's identification with the male subject on the screen, he acknowledges this subject as a more perfect and complete version of himself, also called an ego-ideal (17). When a female character on a screen shows interest in a male character, "[...] her eroticism is subjected to the

male star alone. By means of identification with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too” (21). The scenes of *Charlie's Angels*, which reveal the Angels' relationships with their boyfriends/male interests are, as mentioned, satellites that are irrelevant to the main plot. Perhaps, they are meant to offer male spectators the idea that these three attractive women are possessable and, in fact, dependant on relationships. In *Wanted*, Wesley never ends up in a romantic relationship with Fox, but the film strongly indicates the development of sexual tension between these two characters. Therefore, through their identification with Wesley and his desire to possess Fox, male spectators are able to imagine the possibility of themselves possessing her as well.

These findings clearly indicate that some of Mulvey's main points in her essay are applicable today. The analyses of the selected works for this thesis have highlighted several important aspects of Mulvey's theory when it comes to the way that women are still portrayed in 21st century action films. All four films have female leads, but despite this, they all fall victim to the male gaze due to the way the camera presents them via certain techniques or the way they are visually styled. Through her inspiration from psychoanalysis, Mulvey argues that “in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, [...] she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire.” (19) In the aforementioned satellites with the Angels, Fox, and Lorraine, these female characters can then be regarded as momentarily passive. For some of them, it may be an active choice to willingly invite the male gaze upon themselves. However, the second they do, they enter a position where the male is in control of this gaze, which thereby removes their control.

While Laura Mulvey offers a way to examine the various ways that female characters are objectified, Elizabeth Hills proposes a theoretical framework that challenges the binary logic that

comes with preconceived notions of what female bodies are capable of doing. She argues that women in action films transgress binaristic logic as “[...] they access a range of emotions, skills, and abilities which have traditionally been defined as either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’”. As female characters who take up the central spaces in the traditionally ‘masculine’ genre of action cinema, they derive their power from their ability to think and live creatively, their physical courage and their strategic uses of technology” (39). By utilizing the works of Deleuze and his concepts of desiring-machines and assemblages, Hills then sees females in action films as transformative.

Mulvey argues that the use of weapons makes a female figuratively male, or that the weapon becomes a fetish object to distract the male viewers from castration anxiety. In contrast, Hills argues that the use of weapons is a way for action females to reassemble their bodies. In *Wanted*, Fox frequently uses a gun and even mentors Wesley in his weapon-training. In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Furiosa skillfully utilizes a variety of guns as she takes down enemies, and in *Atomic Blonde*, Lorraine is involved in several fights where she gets creative with a gun, as she not only shoots with it but also uses it as a tool to land hard punches. Through the lens of Elizabeth Hills’ framework, these action heroines’ uses of guns should not be seen as them ascending from a position of lack, where their use of weapons renders them figuratively male. Instead, it is an appropriate form of behavior from their desiring-machines.

Besides the use of guns, the women of all four films reassemble their bodies with various other techniques. In *Charlie’s Angels*, the three protagonists display the ability to transform into dangerous personas with their use of martial arts. Furthermore, they skillfully connect their bodies with technological devices, such as intercoms and computers, as another form of reassemblage. In *Wanted*, Fox displays the ability to use fist-fighting as another assemblage in addition to her use of guns. In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Furiosa’s most significant way of

reassembling herself, is the way she connects her body with a monstrous vehicle, as she maneuvers it through dangerous territory. Furthermore, her body also possesses a strength that is important in the context of her role as an action heroine. Her physical strength is another way for her to create an assemblage that allows her to reach her goal. Lastly, in *Atomic Blonde*, Lorraine is in possession of a diverse range of assemblages. Her use of guns is not the only way she reassembles herself. Lorraine's character is creative in the way she momentarily connects with her environment to create assemblages on the go, as she uses nearby objects to connect with. These aforementioned female characters all derive their power from their ability to transform themselves in the context of their role as action heroines.

Mulvey argues that a female character's exhibitionist desire to be gazed upon puts her in a passive position where the male spectator is in control of the gaze. However, as argued in the analyses of *Charlie's Angels* and *Wanted*, this sexualization and fetishization can be used as a method of transformation when analyzed through the lens of Hills' theory. When Natalie, Dylan, and Alex masquerade as stereotypically fetishized personas, they reassemble their bodies to manipulate male characters. As they actively allow these male characters, as well as spectators, to gaze upon their bodies, they exploit their sexual desires. Thereby, they become the ones in control of the objectifying look as they, in a sense, objectify themselves through the eyes of the males. A similar situation occurs in *Wanted* when the naked Fox steps out of her bath. She invites Wesley to gaze upon her to inspire certain emotions and desires in him as a form of manipulation. Thus, in a similar fashion as the Angels, she creatively and willingly transforms herself into an erotic spectacle to ultimately control Wesley. In conclusion, Fox and the Angels transgress traditional binary codes as their sexualized personas are an illusion and not a fixed state of being.

The transformations and reassemblages of the female characters in all four films underline Hills' alternative way of reading women in action cinema outside traditional gender codes. Their uses of weapons and tools, fighting techniques, technology, and sexuality emphasize the notion that their bodies are sites of experimentation where they can think creatively and innovatively. As they connect with other machines and thereby constantly evolve themselves, they prove that the female body can exist outside traditional notions such as 'passive' and 'lack'.

As mentioned, *Charlie's Angels* and *Wanted* have scenes in which the female characters use their sexuality as assemblages. However, despite this, these two films, as well as *Atomic Blonde*, all have satellites in which the focus on their eroticized bodies holds no importance to the plot. The slow-motion scene at the beach in *Charlie's Angels* is a satellite which, as argued in the analysis of the film, could have been substituted with a scene that would have not framed them as erotic spectacles. In *Wanted*, it can be argued that Fox uses her naked body to emotionally manipulate Wesley in the bath scene. Yet, this scene is another satellite that could easily be removed from the film without altering the plot. In *Atomic Blonde*, there are several satellites that do not move the story forward or develop the plot. Instead, these scenes establish Lorraine as a spectacle, exclusively to the viewers. In the context of the film, the focus on her sexuality serves no other purpose than that of objectification. This is the one thing that these specific types of scenes all have in common; the eroticism is unnecessary and therefore, replaceable. Hence, it can be argued that the sole reason they have been added to the films is for male spectators to derive visual pleasure from. In relation to feminism, this notion becomes problematic as it reverts parts of otherwise empowering films back to traditional and oppressive standards, which developed during classical Hollywood cinema.

On the contrary, with her article, Hills seeks to move away from these traditional ways to read action heroines, and instead urges feminist theorists to utilize new theories: “[...] I would argue that it is a matter of political urgency that as feminist theorists we reconceptualize the way we think about images of active and aggressive woman” (49). As action heroines are continually read through a binary framework, they are then locked into a position of either/or where they are automatically labeled as either objectified, oppressed, and sexualized or figuratively male. The aforementioned unnecessary eroticized scenes can be read as reversionary. However, this would rob the female characters in question from their potential status as transgressive and alternative women in action films. Hills argues that the important part here “is the process of change and the desire for the dynamism of becoming rather than the repetition of simply being” (49). With this, she invites theorists to celebrate the fluidity of female action characters rather than to dismiss them over the narratively insignificant instances in which they appear as sexualized.

With the fact that all four films present transgressive female characters, the choices of the actresses who portray them become a countering point worthy of discussion. Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz, Lucy Liu, Angelina Jolie, and Charlize Theron all have one thing in common as Hollywood actresses: they are celebrated for their conventional beauty. They have all frequently appeared in various mainstream advertisements and on magazine covers, which underlines their desirability. As mentioned, Mulvey argues that castration anxiety can be avoided by “turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (overvaluation, the cult of the female star)” (21). With “the cult of the female star”, Mulvey refers to the way popular Hollywood actresses are overvalued and idealized due to their attractiveness. As a result of this, the characters they portray on film can then implicitly be

regarded as fetishized due to preconceived ideas that male spectators may already have about the actresses.

Hills does offer an interesting new way to analyze females in action films, which does not confine them to a gender binary where they are coded as either/or. Yet, a gender binary may be difficult to avoid in this context as advertisements, and other popular media still indicate the existence of it in various ways. As mentioned, the actresses of all four films have frequently appeared in fashion, make-up and fragrance advertisements and on magazine covers where the focus is put on their beauty and sexuality. Below are two examples:



1: Lucy Liu, Cameron Diaz, and Drew Barrymore for Maxim Magazine (2003)

2: Charlize Theron for Dior (2010)

This indicates that a certain beauty standard may still exist for women in the 21st century western society. In its response to such standard, the film industry then reinforces it as it favors actresses who correspond with certain physical criteria such as, for example, weight, height, hair, facial

structure, and even race. In her essay, Mulvey mentions that she wishes to highlight “the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (14). With this, she argues that the filmmakers back then made deliberate choices to transfer societal standards to the film industry. The parallels between the beauty ideals of the western fashion industry and the film industry of today indicate that such deliberate choices are perhaps still made. The gender binary then prevails as popular media continues to shape its portrayals of women from a predetermined beauty ideal, which is created by the patriarchy.

While Hills offers a tool to analyze women in action films outside of traditional gender codes, it ignores the external choices and influences which shape the world and characters within a film. Her theory functions as a lens through which female action characters can be regarded as transgressive. However, Hills may only be able to avoid the gender binary in her analysis of female action characters since her method of analysis disregards the socio-historical context of the films which portray them. Hills criticizes feminist film theorists for their use of psychoanalysis to conclude that female action characters are regressive rather than transgressive: “[...] the active heroine, no matter how courageous and desiring, is forced to perform the role of lack which is necessary within this phallogentric framework” (44). As Hills implies, when analyzed through a psychoanalytic framework, the female characters will always be regarded as lacking.

Hills wishes to move away from this notion in which women in action films are regarded as “lesser” than men. Yet, as argued earlier, patriarchal standards have and still do exist in modern western society. Mulvey mentions that “there is no way in which we can produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides, of which psychoanalysis is not the only but an important one” (15). Here, she

argues that psychoanalysis is a product of patriarchy and thereby a valid framework to analyze it through. Therefore, today, it may still exist as a valid method used to highlight the ways in which women in action films are sexualized and exploited since this happens due to the, still in some ways present, patriarchy.

When Hills argues against the use of psychoanalysis, she focuses mainly on women who are seen as ‘figuratively male’, such as Ripley from the *Alien* films. Thereby, she utilizes one important part of psychoanalysis, yet ignores another equally important one. “Whilst shots of Ripley in her bikini briefs certainly eroticize her image, her actions supply a strong counter-narrative” (43) Here, Hills mentions an eroticization of Ripley’s character, however, this is the only time she does. As Hills refers to this moment as an erotic one, she implies, and then proceeds to ignore, that Ripley may fall victim to a pleasurable male gaze. Like with the sexualization of the female characters in the chosen films for this thesis, this sexualization of Ripley may be unnecessary, yet it is a conscious decision that has been made during the production of the film. Like *Alien*, all of the four films chosen for this thesis are written and produced by men. Thus, these male writers and directors are the ones who made conscious decisions whenever the female characters were, for example, framed as erotic spectacles. Likewise, it was a conscious decision by these male filmmakers to cast conventionally attractive star actresses to portray these female characters.

As mentioned, Schubart argues that the action film genre is a “male film genre”, and that even action films with female protagonists can be categorized as such, since they are also “written by men, produced by men, directed by men, and intended for a male audience” (15). Although the fact that many, if not most, action films are made by men and for men does not conclude the existence of patriarchy, the fact that they continue to portray women according to

patriarchal standards might. Then, as Hills ignores the conscious choice by male filmmakers to eroticize Ripley, even if it is just in one scene, she thereby ignores the socio-historical context of the film, as the eroticization of Ripley may be a product of patriarchal standards and expectations. Therefore, Hills' theory can be utilized to prove the transgressiveness of the female characters within an action film narrative. However, to prove this, one would have to ignore external influences that shape the production of the film, such as, for example, who the director of the film is, the camera movements, and the physical styling of the female characters.

An analysis of the socio-historical context of an action film may be as important as the analysis of its female characters in order to conclude how they are represented. This is what Mulvey attempts to do with her theory, as she uses societal issues such as patriarchy in her analysis of the oppression of women on film. With the use of Hills' theory, the female characters in all four of the chosen films for this thesis can be regarded as liberated from traditional standards, ideals, and expectations. However, through the utilization of Mulvey's theory, and by taking the socio-historical context of the films into consideration, the findings may then be the opposite.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to examine how women are represented in the action film genre in the 21st century. More specifically, we examined whether they fall victim to an oppressive and objectifying male gaze, or if they manage to empower themselves through their actions. In order to do this, we approached the issue through two theoretical frameworks and the tools they provided us with, which could help shed light on this matter. Our analyses presented several tendencies when it comes to the objectification and sexualization of the female characters, and

secondly, they also present multiple tendencies when it comes to the different ways they empower themselves.

Throughout our analyses of the four films, we discovered that, depending on the film, they each have moments where some of the women fall victim to an objectifying male gaze. In *Charlie's Angels*, there are moments during specific scenes where the camera frames the Angels as erotic spectacles. In *Wanted*, Fox does not entirely manage to avoid the male gaze, despite her heroic actions as a woman in the action film genre. She falls victim to the male gaze through the character Wesley. *Mad Max: Fury Road* also contains a scene in particular, where Immortan Joe's five wives are displayed as spectacles. Lastly, in *Atomic Blonde*, Lorraine Broughton is unnecessarily eroticized on multiple accounts as she is dressed down to underwear, or revealing clothes. However, despite presenting moments where the female characters are sexualized and objectified, they are also empowered and transgressive as they display diverse forms of strength and intelligence.

By applying both the theoretical framework of Laura Mulvey and Elizabeth Hills, certain tendencies are revealed where the women are both empowered and/or sexualized, depending on the context and the way the camera establishes the scene. It all depends on which way one decides to approach the scene in particular. While Elizabeth Hills offers a highly relevant theoretical framework, it does not render Mulvey's framework inapplicable as it is hard to deny that most of the women in the four films undergo sexualized and/or objectified moments. Upon discussing the socio-historical context, an important aspect showed up that indicates a clear tendency, which is hard to ignore: all four films have conventionally beautiful women cast in their more significant roles. Despite being transgressive as female action characters, they can be regarded as implicitly fetishized due to their status as attractive Hollywood actresses.

By taking all these different aspects into consideration, it is hard to conclude on a singular way that women are represented in 21st century action cinema. While the majority of the women display multifaceted female action characters, the majority of them are simultaneously framed in particular ways that either sexualizes them or objectifies them. As we argue, it is important to not dismiss their transgressive status as women in action cinema, and as Hills would argue, it is important to focus on their actions as empowered women, rather than the beauty and sexuality they signify. As mentioned, the different analytical outcomes depend on which theoretical framework is applied in the analysis of specific moments in the different scenes. While the female action characters are indeed transgressive, they still fall victim to the male gaze depending on how the camera frames them, and what kind of meaning is linked to how they are portrayed. While they do empower themselves via their actions and behavior through the way they assemblage their bodies, they are all still portrayed by conventionally attractive Hollywood actresses who fit certain traditional beauty standards.

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Abstract

This thesis is an investigation into the action film genre in the 21st century and how women are portrayed herein. Furthermore, the aim is to examine whether these women fall victim to an objectifying and oppressive male gaze, or if they succeed in their representation as independent, transformative, and transgressive characters. Throughout time, women in the world of cinema have, to an extent, been presented as erotic spectacles, and this trend seems to continue in present-day cinema. Especially in the action genre, the female characters of significance are often stylized in a way that may invite an objectifying gaze. However, at the same time, they manage to prove a level of strength and capability comparable to that of the male hero archetype. Valid examples of such female action characters can be found in the films *Charlie's Angels* from 2000, *Wanted* from 2008, *Mad Max: Fury Road* from 2015, and *Atomic Blonde* from 2017.

In four separate analyses of these selected films, the theoretical frameworks of Laura Mulvey and Elizabeth Hills have been utilized. Through her use of psychoanalysis, Mulvey argues that women on film are presented as erotic spectacles available for male spectators to pleasurably gaze upon. With her binaristic approach, she wishes to highlight how such objectification is oppressive. Hills, on the other hand, argues that women in the action genre are to be regarded as transgressive and alternative. She defies binaristic thinking and argues that a woman's identity as an action heroine is not determined by the gender or organs of her body, but rather by her actions.

The findings of the four analyses indicate that some of the significant females in the four films mainly succeed as transgressive characters, while others mainly fall victim to sexualization and objectification. The Angels, Fox, and Lorraine perform as spectacles on multiple occasions, and yet, they do manage to assert dominance as well, especially over their male opponents.

Furiosa seems to almost entirely avoid an unnecessary display of her sexuality. However, the four films in their socio-historical context reveals that they may have all been adjusted to certain, still present, traditional beauty standards. This notion is emphasized by the fact that the significant female characters of all four films are portrayed by conventionally beautiful Hollywood star actresses. Therefore, while Hills theory allows for an empowering reading of females in action films, the external influences of the films suggest otherwise.