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FINE ART - PAINTING

"ACTION HEROINES - SPECTATOR IDENTIFICATION FETISHISM AND SYMBOLIC POWER IN BLUE STEEL AND ALIEN."

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INTRODUCTION

Guns and films have been twin obsessions of American culture in the Twentieth Century, and both have attained an almost mythic status. While glamour and excess are represented by films, the law and its democratic aspirations are represented by guns. As the Wild West proverb put it:- "God created men, but Samuel Colt made them equal". Since the 1990's, it can be said to have made action heroines equal too. Some feminist critics are unlikely to agree because, "Freud got in the way".

The image of the action heroine has changed dramatically over the last two decades. In the 1990's, she has thrown off her shackles as a male hero's side-kick, and become an autonomous protagonist. As Jean Luc Godard said:- "A film is a girl and a gun".

In Chapter One, we have Jamie Lee Curtis playing the role of Megan Turner in Blue Steel (Bigelow, 1990). This gun-toting girl protagonist in a uniform is observed by spectators (theorists and critics alike), and the nature of the action heroine is addressed with regard to the spectators' gaze and feminist criticism thereof.

The character of Megan Turner remains a concern in Chapter Two. Here, the focus is on feminist writer/spectators' use of selected psychoanalytic theories, applied in relation to women with guns and the attendant fantasies of power. It is a pity that feminist critics cannot enjoy a film for its own sake, but must trawl for every conceivable reference to women as "victims", "sex objects", "unequal partners", etc. They seem to have lost a sense of balance, (not to mention a sense of the ridiculous), in their pursuit of

Introduction cont'd.

political correctness. This does nothing for cinema, the average viewer, or, in a broader sense, their own agenda, as, at the end of the day, they just come across as extremists.

The final Chapter addresses Alien (Scott, 1979), a film that has had many interpretations foisted upon it. Barbara Creed's discourse concerning the "Archaic Mother" is primarily noted as an example of how feminist theorists and critics can be led astray, searching for illusive, feminist meaning within film. Thomas Byer's more convincing reading of Alien, is contrasted for its apparant rationale.

Not only are action heroines themselves attacked by feminists for "gender bending" and "erotisization", but also the female spectator who identifies with the heroine. It should be remembered that spectator identification is part of a pleasurable process: it is an instinctive reaction that enables fantasy to be brought one step nearer to reality. Extreme ideological ideas should not be foisted on female spectators of hardware heroines. No spectator, male or female, should be expected to carry the burden created by authors with extreme views.

Chapter 1

SPECTATORSHIP AND WOMEN WITHIN THE ACTION FILM GENRE. IDENTIFICATION OR SCOPOPHILIA?

The three main "looks" which have been theorised in relation to the screen-spectator relationship are:

1. The camera's "look" at the pro-filmic event.
2. The "look" of the characters at each other.
3. The "look" of the spectator at the events on screen.

Theoretically speaking, the latter two "looks" are most important when between a man and a woman. With the exception of male "buddy" action films such as Tango and Cash (Konchalovsky, 1989) and Lock Up (Flynn, 1989), in which the gazes and mise-en-scene points to homereroticism, to reassure the ticket buying public that the characters are heterosexual, female characters generally are love interests, unless they are catalysts within the narrative, viz.,the raped and murdered girlfriend, the wife and child blown up, the innocent woman shot - thus giving the action hero a significant reason to embark on a blood-spilling, body-counting rampage.

It is obvious that the women in such films are featured mainly as an exotic object for one of the characters or, for the male audience, or both. Understandably then, feminist critics have had adverse reactions to this genre. It is ironic, however, that the spate of Action Heroes came out during the late 1970's, and gained momentum into the 1980's, which Yvonne Tasker suggests was a backlash against the fierce feminism of the 1970's

(Tasker, 1993, p.1).

Although Action Films have generally been ill-received by 'serious' critics, the genre cannot and will not be dismissed. Often, the popular press' rhetoric centres around how such 'violent' films affect their audience adversely, as was the case in regard to Oliver Stone's Natural Born Killers (1994), and was perversely so in 1991 when Thelma and Louise (Scott) was released, and a range of critics suggested that women in the audience would translate their viewing pleasure directly into aggressive attitudes and behaviour towards men in their daily lives.

However, for feminists critics and theorists, what is more important than the potential pathologising of the audience, is the representation of women within the narrative, and indeed, the apparent lack of characters with which the female spectator can identify. In conventional, male protagonist, action films, the female has no equal female counterpart with whom to identify.

If the narrative holds a sub-plot, where there is a female character, her part is often so small, that she is not on screen long enough for the identification process to take place. If, however, she remains 'alive',(for there is a tendency toward the rather prompt demise of such female 'characters'),and on screen for a suitable length of time, wherein the female spectator does indeed identify with her, the female spectator is then consigned to a masochistic position due to the inevitable subordination, objectification or destruction of the on-screen woman. Or, she is forced into the role of a kind of transvestite, whereby she

identifies with the male hero in a similar manner to which the male spectator does. This theory is grounded in Freudian psychonalysis, whereby the male/masculine is posturing and standard, and there is no way to explain the female/feminine except through that masculine. Thus, there is "no way to explain the pleasure of the female spectator, without reference to a masculine norm" (Byars, in Pribram, 1988 p.111).

On a simplistic level, such a theory completely overlooks the possibility that the female spectator may enjoy watching the (sexually) 'objectified' male, particularly in the instance of the action genre, as mostly the protagonists are shirtless, their 'hard bodies' being of significent importance to these films, and it is precisely because of these 'hard bodies' that the characters in these films are the only people able to 'do the job', hunt down the 'bad guys' and, ultimately, become the heroes.

Laura Mulvey's theory that the male body cannot stand up to sexual objectification, that a man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like, (Mulvey, in Penley, p.63) could be a true statement for the heterosexual male, yet it negates the idea that a heterosexual female spectator, through female emotions could receive gratification from viewing an 'objectified' male body, without her gaze being subject to any masculine codes of looking. It is necessary to consider that any spectator shall either look as a scopophilic, gaining pleasure from objectifying another person, i.e. sexual stimulation through sight, or shall look with narcissism, thereby identifying with images or the characters seen. With heterosexual males the latter must be the case, but

with heterosexual females the former could be, and also the latter. It appears through my research that no feminist critics wish to consider the female spectator as a scopophiliac, whereas by the very nature of the cinematic experience, she is rendered a voyeur. Is it inconceivable then that she would take it one step further to become a scopophiliac? For, if she identifies with the female characters in conventional action films, she is putting herself in a masochistic position, and if she identifies with the male protagonists, she is denying her sexuality, "Torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity" (Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, inspired by Duel in the Sun, in Penley, p.70). It is, however, possible that a third element could come into play for the female viewer of a male oriented action film, where the female spectator imagines herself to be the sole interest of the male protagonist, that his actions are for and/or because of her. The said fairytales etc. generally have passive female characters waiting to be rescued by a strong, brave white knight. Obviously then, the characters within the narrative of the films viewed are seen as fantasy figures or heroes, which inherently they are, or contemporary Hollywood wishes them to be perceived as such.

However, the effect of putting the female spectator at the centre of the narrative's interest could be seen as also rendering her essentially passive and objectified. It could be seen as a skilled manipulation of visual pleasure, as Laura Mulvey describes it; the relayed gazes would still work actively. It would be difficult for the female viewer as outlined above to be anything other than passive. Her position as a member of the audience, viewing the excitement on-screen from a velvet chair, insists

upon her being passive. But, rather than denying her own sex by narcissistic identification with the hero, or putting herself in a masochistic position by identifying with the female victim, she is promoting the thought of her own importance by believing the hero is risking life and limb for her.

Over the last few years it appears that the true 'thoroughbred' action hero has become a dying breed. Inevitably, this is a consequence of newer thought structures in the 1990's. The 'New-man' syndrome, whether it is a reality or not, has affected the narrative content of films coming out of Hollywood. The action hero is now finding himself more bound to 'feminine' emotions, the hard-hitting violence is more and more counter-acted with comedy and female roles in such films have become larger.

If one considers the Stallone films of the 1980's, such as Rambo: First Blood Part II (Cosmatos, 1985) and contrasts them with the action films of the 1990's, for instance, True Lies (Cameron, 1994), one finds that the female characters are becoming more equal; that instead of being a mere catalyst, she has a footing more equal to that of the male protagonist. However, the idiom, 'some are more equal than others', would still apply, as the women are generally supporting and helping the male character, and it could be argued that the women are only getting more screen time, or 'scream time' as could be the case with Jamie Lee Curtis in True Lies. It must be said, however, that Curtis ends the film as Schwarzenegger's personal and professional equal. Yet some feminists have criticised Curtis's character because she is made to strip in front of her screen husband -

Schwarzenegger - which by any standards is feminist extremism. A similar furore ensued following the release of Blue Steel (Bigelow, 1990), Alien (Scott, 1979), Aliens (Cameron, 1986), Fatal Beauty (Holland, 1987), and others. Within the narratives of these films the protagonist is a woman in a man's world. She uses physical force and weaponry in the same manner that a male action hero does, but, because of her sex, she incurs the wrath of some feminist critics due to her use of guns and violence. The questions are posed:

> Is the action heroine a surrogate man?
>
> Does she pose a threat to the patriarchy?
>
> Does she question her 'right' to be in the job she is in? i.e. a male dominated arena.
>
> Does she remain autonomous until the credits roll?
>
> Does she use her feminity to advance her 'cause'? (Indeed does she have a 'cause' other than to do her job?)
>
> Is her access to power unrelated to sex or romance?
>
> Is she contributing to male fantasy via the eroticisation of hardware and violence?
>
> What is her relationship to traditionally male forms of power?
>
> Is she portrayed as sexually attractive or available?
>
> Ultimately, are these films feminist, post feminist, gender-bending or merely viscerally exciting in a traditional way?

From the above list, it would appear that feminist critics and theorists are unable to enjoy a film on cinematic merits alone.

The action heroine is often deemed to be a surrogate man because she wields "phallic" weaponry, or, if she deliberately acquires musculature for an action role, this too can be used to define her as masculine.

Generally, patriarchy is not threatened by the action heroine. It is more likely that she will eventually be accepted into it, viz. Turner in Blue Steel, which again is seen to be putting her into the mode of surrogate man. However, the action heroine very often lives on the outskirts of society, much like the traditional action hero. Despite the fact that she is sometimes part of a patriarchal set up, e.g. the police force in Blue Steel, it is not her agenda to counter the male supremacy, but merely to be part of it.

She does not question her right to be in the job she is in, but the characters surrounding her often do, i.e. Turner in Blue Steel is asked three times by three separate men why she wanted to become a cop.

The fact that the action heroine is generally the survivor of the violent confrontations throughout the film; that she independently destroys the bad guys/monsters, indicates that she remains autonomous when the credits roll, even if she was 'helped' along the way by other characters.

She does not use her femininity to advance her 'cause', and, therefore, her access to power is unrelated to sex and romance. She is self-determining.

Her alleged contribution to male fantasy via the eroticisation

or hardware and violence, is mainly a feature of feminist discourse. The woman-with-gun is an easy target.

Her relationship with traditional male forms of power is dubious. Depending on her character at the beginning of the film, she can be subordinate to traditional male power and eventually become part of it, e.g. Turner in Blue Steel. She can be empowered by it, or be a pawn in it. It must be realised, however, that generally her relationship is correlated with traditional male institutions, which are not only powered by men on the screen, but in reality. For spectator identification to take place, and for the heroine to have an "other" to battle against, these male forms of power are essential - consider the action hero who also battles against institutionalised/individual male power.

The portrayal of the action heroine as sexually available, is not necessarily that. For her to be in a position to 'go into battle' she cannot have her own family, as they may tie her down. The action hero/heroine is by nature independent; so again, it is feminists who see this as a portrayal of "availability", rather than independence. Her "availability", if it is that, could be construed as a facet to enable the male spectator to 'possess' her as her on-screen love interest would.

Sexual attractiveness surely comes with the female actor. For money to be made, 'big' names are needed, and it is a fact in Hollywood that the big name female actors are usually attractive, therefore negating the character's "portrayal" as attractive. (Does Sigorney Weaver's much talked about "sensible" knickers in Alien make her less attractive?).

Lastly, the question as to whether these films are feminist, post-feminist or gender-bending, should not be asked at all. Action Heroine films should be seen as popular/populist culture and not feminist band-wagons.

Action Heroine films coming out of Hollywood are not made as feminist docu-dramas and, therefore, should not be judged as such. Ultimately, they are a reaction to the excesses of the 1980's hard-fighting, tough heroic characters such as Dirty Harry (Clint Eastwood), Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) and John (Diehard) McClane (Bruce Willis).

All this is not to say that action heroines should not be criticised, but a fair judgement of these films with more references to their quality as pure kinetic cinema, rather than focusing on the 'gender-bending' issue, could prove to be more helpful. The feminist critique cannot be subjective in the realm of popular action cinema (with female protagonists) when its over-riding view is that the image of women-with-guns, renders the protagonists symbolically male, and far from empowering the female characters, it erotizes them. (Tasker, 1993 p.135)

The questions as to whether female heroines are undermined by the erotic potential of their hardware, or sexually subverted by an emphasis on violence, danger and excitement, are addressed in Blue Steel. Bigelow's loving close-ups of guns and attention to the detail of Megan Turner's (Curtis) police uniform in a totally upfront manner, fetishises guns and uniforms, and highlights their erotic potential. Curtis' androgynous facial features also serve the purpose of allowing the male spectator the opportunity of at once identifying with her when in uniform, and at the same time he is allowed to objectify her in an erotic way when he sees her

dressing for her graduation ceremony. Theoretically for the male viewer, these two opposing gazes should not go together; at least they should not sit easily with each other.

Bigelow overturns the conventional notions of sadistic male violence and helpless female passivity. In Blue Steel Turner refuses to be rendered passive, even after she has been raped by Eugene and hospitalised by the police, she "knocks out a male uniformed police-man, steals his clothes and goes after Eugene to finally dispatch him in a surreal shoot-out sequence" (Tasker, 1993 p.159).

Because Bigelow so openly asserts all of the elements by which an action film such as Blue Steel (with a violent heroine) could/would be judged by feminist theorists and critics, it would seem that she is not merely 'gender-bending', i.e., giving the tough, Clint Eastwoodian Cop Role to a woman, but she is creating a tense thriller, a crowd pleasing orgy of blood and destruction, a re-positioning of female subjectivity and desire, but also, a satirical send up of Freud's pyschonalytic theories regarding the phallus and castration anxiety.

Blue Steel "is a perverse and powerfully stylised exercise in visual excess" (Shavino, 1993 p.2). No doubt this is what Bigelow set out to achieve, and she has succeeded admirably.

The role of Flight Officer Ripley in Alien (Scott 1979) was originally written with a male action hero in mind. At some stage, it was decided to convert the role to that of female action heroine. It can be assumed from this that there was no gender-bending envisaged in

the first instance, unlike Blue Steel, which, when it was introduced to the press by Bigelow, she categorically stated that it was a "genre and gender-bending film". Despite this the feminist critics/theorists treated both films and heroines in exactly the same way, indicating their obsession with their own agenda, rather than the overall narratives of the films.

The depiction of Ripley and Turner wielding weapons, and the very fact that they should use them at all, seems to affront feminist aesthetics. If the feminist ideal is a film in which there is no machismo by either gender, and where "the critical point is that feminism is about dis-empowering men, not arming women" (Garland and Botcherby - "Hardware Heroines" 1991), then the feminist spectator would be compelled to disregard the entire action genre and more. If new roles for women were written to the feminist ideal, there would be no films with any elements of violence, dominance, hardware or sex, where women would play a large part or a leading role. The enjoyment of the mass viewing public would be greatly diminished, if only by the number of films produced.

For the feminist viewer, if a woman is placed at the centre of a "standard-issue" genre film, she is there only to twist the 'norm' - which indeed she does - and not for any good, solid, feminist reasoning, i.e. not 'fighting' for the feminist cause. There appears to be a wanton lack within the realm of critical feminism whereby there is no acknowledgement that not all women feel as strongly as they do.

The films that would be produced under politically correct feminist

ideals would appeal to a much smaller audience base and would belong, therefore, in a different sphere than mainstream Hollywood, whose business is in catering to the masses. One cannot forget that Hollywood is a business, whose profits are made at the box-office by attracting the largest audience possible.

Mary Ann Doane in her essay, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body", stated that the medium of film "is not accessible to the female spectator, who, in buying her ticket, must deny her sex. There are no images either for her or of her" (Doane, in Penley, 1988 p.216).

If, as Laura Mulvey suggests the (male) spectator identifies with the male protagonist, he is projecting his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist, as he controls events, coincides with the active power of the erotic look - both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence... subsequently, when the screen female falls for the male star, the spectator feels like he is possessing her also, by his identification with the male hero. (Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Penley, 1988, pp 63-4).

Could it not be the case then, that the female spectator will identify in the same manner with an action heroine? Mulvey, in her follow-up article, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', inspired by Duel in the Sun" (Penley 1988 pp. 69-79) draws no such conclusions. In fact the notion does not come into discussion within that article, which was written in response to criticisms that her initial article did not deal adequately with the idea of the female spectator. Perhaps this is because Mulvey is very much concerned

with Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory in both her essays, and Freud left little room for the theorist to consider how a female spectator could operate on any level that was not at once due to or because of the male/masculine. For Freud, a fetishist was assumed to be male, although in "An Outline of Psycho-analysis" he did allow that female fetish was a possibility:

> "This abnormality is, as is well known based on the patient (who is almost always male) not recognising the fact that females have no penis". (Kauffmann, 1974, p.21).

If film-makers (eg. Bigelow) purposely use the gun as fetish/erotic appeal to engage the male viewer, there is the distinct possibility that the female spectator may identify with the women-with-guns image too, perhaps more so in America where guns are an ever present everyday reality. Women are becoming more violent and autonomous in our society, and this is reflected in newspapers, magazines and on the screen.

Just as the narratives are a reflection of the more 'even' position of the sexes today, and although women in Hollywood are still disposable and exploited for their physical attributes, it is Hollywood's attempt to reflect what is happening in Western society that has brought about the changes in women's roles.

Consider Linda Hamilton, who, in The Terminator (Cameron 1984) played the terrified Valley-girl, and then, in 1991 with Terminator II - Judgement Day (Cameron 1991) was transformed into as muscular and mean a figure as any male action hero. With Thelma and Louise (Scott, 1991), the themes and form of the road movie and the buddy movie - two forms of cinema that

that are most familiar as a showcase for male friendship - were appropriated and redefined for female protagonists and a 1990's audience. Interestingly enough that film created a furore itself by the very nature of that simple shift in the sex of the protagonists. Suddenly male critics were screaming "Anti-male" when the words "Anti-female" never crossed their lips before, no matter what male protagonists did to a woman, within a similar type of film.

The discourses on the new women's roles that were coming out of Hollywood concluded, as I've indicated before, that these roles were not particularly momentous for feminism, that they merely reduced the percentage of speaking roles that were men's. In 1991, a Screen Actors' Guild survey revealed that men took 71% of all speaking parts in motion pictures (David Thomas - The Sunday Times 4/9/94).

In Blue Steel Turner is reinstated onto the police force because of her usefulness as a victim, and this effectively diminishes the power she had before she was suspended, and she becomes a detective cum decoy. Also, the fetishism surrounding woman and guns is drawn out, and we, the spectators, are invited to share in it. Even though Bigelow set out to explore the relationship between sexuality, gender and the imagery surrounding guns in Hollywood cinema, the film (and therefore the film-maker and general audience) took an obvious pleasure in the images it generated (Tasker, 1993, p.159). It is these elements that are so frustrating for the feminist critic. If such voyeuristic and fetishistic elements were to be addressed, the feminists would prefer the film-maker to at least portray them as unhealthy and unpleasant, and the female protagonist to be seen in a more

affirmative light regarding the feminist ideal.

If feminist stipulations were put into practice, it would merely be another form of the Hayes Ruling, whereby the 'bad guys' could not get away with the crime. Instead the "Feminist Ruling" would cancel out all roles for "Hardware Heroines" and thereby channel the female actor (and ultimately the spectator) into just as much of a rut as she has been in already, where women were casually, sexually objectified. This is the other side of the coin, and really neither side can truly justify vetoing what they may not like or agree with.

Curiously, the emotions and responses that the character of Turner generated within Blue Steel, surprise, admiration, shock, disgust, were paralleled in the critical reactions to the film itself and its subject matter. (Tasker, 1993 p.160)

The modern day action hero is a direct descendant of the good guy riding into town in the early cowboy movies and almost single-handedly managing to rid the town of all the bad guys. Today's action hero is a far cry from this simple "good guy". He evolved out of two world wars, fully equipped with the infinite variety of weaponry developed as a result of these conflicts, and the subsequent Cold War. The violence which exploded on the screen with this new action hero invited stern criticism, but was hugely successful with the cinema-going public who had never before experienced such stimulation of the senses in the cinema.

These films remained hugely successful up to the early 1990's

when a backlash against the ever increasing violence crept in. This backlash increased steadily, and box office receipts began to drop significantly. This prompted film-makers to re-think the codes and conventions of the genre, which in turn, gave rise to the strong action heroine. The strong action heroine was a novelty to begin with, but, ultimately, she fell into the same criticism as that levelled at the male action hero, but with the added over-reaction of women's groups who saw a gun-toting woman as a male fantasy, and the gun, an overt phallic symbol.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that all feminist critics/ theorists are extremists in the pursuit of political correctness, but making demands and defining limits in what is essentially a phantasmorgorical area seems self defeating. The entire genre cannot be changed or arrested to suit the demands of feminist critics and theorists.

The change of gender opens up avenues for serious action heroines, and encourages spectators to redirect their sub-conscious gaze away from the conventional 'looks', which can have interesting results in itself.

Chapter 2

BLUE STEEL: OBJECTIFICATION, IDENTIFICATION FETISHISM AND POWER

> "Bigelow (has a) way of undoing the security and possessiveness that have conventionally been associated with 'the male gaze'. She pushes fetishism and voyeuristic fascination to the point where they explode."
>
> (Shaviro, 1993, p.9)

This statement is particularly relevant when considering Bigelow's 1990 film Blue Steel, although it is carried through in her other films, such as Near Dark (1987) and Point Break (1991). As a film-maker, she likes to redefine and appropriate genres: cop thriller, horror and the buddy action film respectively.

Bigelow has often been accused of having leanings toward 'masculine'subject matter, because many of her protagonists have been sexually attractive young men, and her narrative concerns, (ultra) violence, sexual 'deviance' and fetishism. In Blue Steel the 'masculine subject matter' is the conventional cop-thriller and its associated violence. Because the protagonist is a woman, argument and discourse have arisen, that would not have come about if the protagonist had been male.

There is an idea within (feminist) film theory that films "speak, enact and even produce certain ideologies, which cannot always be read directly off films' surface contents..... or that film voices repressions in 'unconscious' textual processes which, like dreams, associations and bodily symptoms of psychoanalytic

patients, require interpretation in order to reveal the meanings hidden in them". (Kuhn, 1990, p.10).

Thus, psychoanalytic theories such as the importance of the phallus (or lack of it) and castration anxieties, are used by feminist theorists in discussion of any given film.

Bigelow's film Blue Steel has been subjected to the aforementioned theories. It seems ironic, however, that feminists should use the language of the arch-patriarch Freud, when they draw conclusions from, for example, the use of guns and uniforms, etc. in action heroine films. In so doing they are colluding with a man who, in his lecture on "Femininity", dismissed women by saying that they themselves were the problem", (Doane, in Mast et.al. 1992, p.758). (If Freud were alive to-day and listening to the extreme elements of the women's movement, it is doubtful if he would change his mind.) Conventionally, when feminists have applied his theories to the nature of the action heroine, they have been used to condemn her, which would be understandable if all action heroes were reproached, but, unfair, if only heroines - because she is a woman with a gun.

Bigelow purposely incorporates images subject to psychoanalytic theories in Blue Steel. By do doing, she addresses the issues rather than allow them to be applied later to her film. Unfortunately, this did not have any effect upon critics, who saw the protagonist as yet another gun-toting female.

Jamie Lee Curtis plays Megan Turner, a rookie cop, who is unjustly

suspended from duty for use of excessive force on her first day on the job. Ron Silver plays Eugene Hunt, the wealthy, obsessive psychopath, who is fascinated by Turner's 'phallic' power, i.e. her use of her weapon. Hunt watched as Turner pumped six bullets into a thug, holding up a supermarket, and subsequently, stole the robber's gun, carved Turner's name on bullets and proceeded to go on a murderous rampage, all the while 'romancing' Turner - the object of his fascination. Initially, she is oblivious to his murderous side. Eugene's psychotic nature is glimpsed when we see him in a Wall Street bathroom apparently feeling the power of the weapon he has stolen - the weapon, which, he claims, gives him "his radiance". Soon after, he shoots dead an innocent man, merely to see what it would feel like. This fuels his fantasies of omnipotence and a desire to kill, to satisfy his need for power. We witness his insanity again while he is working out in a gym; he is 'hearing voices', telling himself, he is God. He believes Turner is the only one who is capable of understanding him, and, "that they are two halves of one person, and that Turner would do what he does, i.e. kill, if she "knew herself better".

Turner is 'tough', potentially as cold-blooded as Dirty Harry yet open enough to acknowledge her insecurities (Shaviro, 1993, p.8). Her brutal father, Frank, is probably the reason she became a 'cop'. She needed to be in control, and in that way is similar to Eugene. Her police uniform gives her that control, although, significantly, when she arrests her father for beating her mother, she is not in uniform. Subsequently, she lets him go - a moment of weakness, that could be seen to have happened

because she was out of uniform. The moments in the narrative when she loses control are mirrored by her wearing or not wearing her police uniform. Significantly, at the end of the film, she is in a man's uniform when she eventually kills Eugene, in a bloody shoot-out.

Turner's uniform seems to "lend her heroic recuperative powers", (Powell, 1994, p.147). She keeps on going with the aim of killing Eugene, while Eugene's decline into a dishevelled mad-man (rather than an Armani-suited one), likens him to a monster (i.e. a Werewolf) which, in the horror genre, is just as hard to kill as he is in Blue Steel. In general, the police uniform frees Turner from conventional gender restraints; it legitimises both her need for control over her own life, and her potential for violence (Shaviro, 1993 p.6). When she is asked why she became a cop, initially she answers, "I wanted to shoot people"; later, "So I can slam people's faces up against the wall", and lastly, "Him", referring to Eugene, but the 'him' can be taken to represent her father, and perhaps society's patriarchal systems.

Megan's family is revealed to the viewer as fundamentally unsound. Although our first impression of Megan's father, Frank, is that he has only a mistrust of the police, (perhaps from a rebellious youth), at the tense 'celebratory' family dinner, Frank, yells, "I've got a goddamn cop for a daughter!", possibly signalling a history of contention between father and daughter. At this stage nothing sinister is pointed at.
It seems only that Frank, a patriarchal father, would prefer

his daughter to stay at home helping her mother until she gets married, and begins her own family. It may also indicate Frank's need for control - Megan was part of his power base, and by joining the police force, she not only dilutes his power, but may be actually gaining power over him.

Soon, we are informed of Frank's long-standing brutality, when Shirley, Megan's mother, visits her at the police station, and Megan asks her if Frank has been hitting her again. Although Shirley denies this, the viewer becomes aware that Frank's animosity towards his daughter, as a cop, is grounded more in fear than mistrust. Megan has, be becoming a policewoman, refused to remain a victim of her father.

Once Megan's biological family is shown as dysfunctional, her pride in being a member of the police force can be seen as pride in gaining a new substitute family. Yet, her new family still cannot protect her from Eugene. It too, is lacking. Megan is still an isolated figure contrasted by her best friend Tracy's family, which can also be viewed as an image of what Megan 'could have had', or wished for, if she had not chosen a career. She confesses to Tracy that she would like to meet the 'right' man and have children, so the experience of her immediate family has not completely destroyed her desire for a family of her own.

It is Turner's position within the patriarchal setting of the police force that validates her uniform and gun. But is is also precisely these elements that contribute to her objectification and fetishization. The fact that she is still autonomous at the end of the film, is, for some feminist spectators, negated

by her use of 'eroticised' hardware, and an apparent uniform fetish running throughout the film. Curtis's facial features are androgynous and so, when she is in uniform, which conceals her very female body, there is an element of masquerade to her character, which perhaps helps the male spectator to identify with her more easily, i.e., reconditioning his gaze to identify with a protagonist of the opposite sex, just as a female spectator identifies with a male action hero.

In Blue Steel, the other male character parts are not really large enough for the spectator to make a narcissistic identification with one of them, so, it has to be either Eugene or Turner, and Eugene, as a psychopathic monster of a man, should not be capable of drawing much, if any, narcissistic identification from a male spectator. Therefore, Curtis's androgyny is a useful tool to retain the male spectator's gaze within the film. It is not suggested that the spectator must identify with the same character throughout. Essentially, it can 'to and fro' between characters of a similar nature, which implies that Turner, at times, can also function as an erotic object for the spectator, as indeed she is for Eugene. This is clever positioning on the part of Bigelow. It allows the spectator to understand Eugene's voyeuristic gaze, without having to identify with it. His voyeuristic fixation is not a vital thread of the narrative, but, in the supermarket shooting, his placing, and the camera's reverse shots, put him in a voyeuristic position, which comes directly after Turner "stalks through the supermarket alleys (which) acts as a long, slow buildup (to the shooting) that can be equated with the tension and suspense of sexual arousal.

"Turner's muscles are tense, her breath is held, she is perspiring, her taut body is the object of our gaze, and the gun-as-phallus imagery is overt. Eugene's fetish is triggered when he sees Turner shoot and kill. She becomes to him the ideal, cold, deadly mistress, and he sees in her a soul-mate." (Powell, 1994 p.154). In that scene voyeurism is equated with sexual arousal. As they are, even more perversely, in the sexual satisfaction Eugene achieves from killing and seeing his victims' fear - they are all shot in the chest at point-blank range. When he murders the prostitute and 'bathes' in the blood from her dress, the grunting noises he makes are noticibly those of a sexual climax.

In a key suspense scene, Eugene is holed up in Turner's bathroom, where he has gone to hide, after being shot by Turner. When she and Det. Nick Mann, (Clancy Brown) return to her apartment, having 'lost' Eugene in a chase, they are obviously unaware of his presence, and proceed to make love on Megan's bed, all the while being watched by Eugene. When the love-making is over, Nick goes to the bathroom, whereupon Eugene shoots him. He is lying severely injured in the bathroom, so there is no potential 'White Knight' to save Megan from Eugene. She is in the unenviable position of being totally powerless without uniform, gun or 'protector'. It is then that Eugene strikes most forcefully - he rapes Megan, in what could be seen as a punishment for her hunting him down. Her sexual encounter with Nick directly before, can be clearly contrasted with the violation that follows.

Within feminist psychoanalytical theory, such scenes are

understood in terms of the Freudian Oedipus Complex. As Anna Powell says, Hunt is "redolent of her Oedipal anxieties about Frank, another brutal and domineering male", (Powell, 1994, p.155). She also suggests that Karen Horney's essay: "The Flight from Womanhood: the Masculinity Complex in Women", can be applied to Megan. Horney traces the 'masculinity-complex' back to the over-repression of oedipal desires by the girl child, who, "not only renounces the father as a sexual object, but simultaneously recoils from the feminine role altogether. If the girl adopts a phallic role, she disavows her vaginal vulnerability of the dreaded/desired penetration by the father" - Powell, 1994, p.144). Similarly, Clara Thomson's essay, "Penis Envy in Women", could also relate to Megan with her "usage of guns as a talisman against her father's brutality, whereby she believes the man wishes to either dominate or destroy her. She wishes to be in a position to do similar things to him. In other words, the penis is to Megan a sword for conquering and destruction. She feels cheated that she has not a similar sword for the same purpose". (Powell, 1994, p.145).

It is questionable how much Bigelow intended to incorporate the aforementioned hypothesis in her film. Certainly she was concerned with elements attributed to psychoanalysis, conceivably with the intention of ridicule.

As action cinema places its emphasis on spectacle over dialogue, its emotional drama is often represented through a world of images. The meanings attributed to these images are often associated with the phallus or, its lack, due to the use of big guns in the genre. The guns are also metaphors of power and

empowerment, which is an important element in understanding the appeal of the action genre.

The spectators' desires for social justice, or their fantasies of power, are lived through the hero/heroine, and their battles with social evils, or persons who represent same. Critically, arguments surrounding films with a woman as violent protagonist, depend firmly on the conviction that the films should be read as political tracts, whose characters are representations of and for feminism. This thought stems mainly from male critics, and was considerably promoted upon release of Thelma and Louise.

Action heroines of the eighties were not seen as representations of and for feminism, mostly because of their exaggerated sexuality, e.g. Brigitte Nielson in Red Sonia (Fleischer, 1985) and Cobra (Cosmatos, 1986).

It was with the birth of protagonists like Megan Turner, Flight Officer Ripley and Thelma and Louise (who were in no way overtly feminised) that the "feminist representative" trumpet was blown. These characters are representative of the action heroine of the nineties, (the Ripley character was ahead of her time), not of feminism.

To dismiss a heroine because she shows a curvacious body, rather than looking at her character, is debilitating for women. There is also a feminist objective abounding wherein an overtly sexual woman, (on screen or off), is seen to be pandering to 'the male'; the objective is that this ceases. It is ironic that some feminists see the need to deny feminity in order to

"gain power". By so doing, they are denying themselves as women. The belief that patriarchal society produces feminity is clearly debatable. (The psychoanalytical opposition to this idea is noted later).

Although the 'nineties' heroine is seen by many critics as representative of, and for, feminism, feminists deride her for her Independent Heroine nature, because they view it only in terms of her being made sexually available:

> "From the point of view of essentialist theory, the goal of a feminist film practice must be the production of images which provide a pure reflection of the real woman, thus returning the real female body to the woman as her rightful property".
> (Doane, 1984, p. 225).

Who then, or what is, the 'real woman'? Whether one considers that cinema in general projects images of society at large, or, on society, the images of woman on screen must be reflective of 'real woman'; not all women perhaps, as all are not interesting enough to draw large audiences. Mary Ann Doane subscribes to the psychoanalytic theory that sexuality is constructed within social and symbolic relations; that one is not born with a sexual identity,"It is most unnatural and achieved only after an arduous struggle" (ibid,p.220). She also rejects the argument of a naturally engendered identity by saying it is "using the (female) body, in effect, as a 'prop'". (ibid,p.226)

Obviously, Ms. Doane sees men and women as intellectually and

emotionally identical. If this were so, the body would be the prop for gender differences. However, scientifically speaking, the different hormonal balances in men and women automatically make them emotionally and physically distinctive. If the goal of feminist film practice must be the production of images that provide a "pure reflection of the real woman", does this mean that "she" may not be a sexually attractive, 'available' woman? For indeed, there are many such women in the 'real world', even if they are an affront to feminist aesthetics. So why not on screen? If this 'real woman' that Ms. Doane describes was brought to the screen, surely she would become a feminist fairytale, who in turn ghetto-ises women in a manner to which 'feminists' should object.

Criticism of female characters is necessary, but it must be understood that criticism of any film, or its characters, stems from individual objectives and viewpoints, whatever they may be. This serves up a healthy range of argument and thought processes, some more extreme than others, which should promote diverse and interesting discourse. However, it should not be used to engender restrictive boundaries on the representation of women or men in film.

Chapter 3

ALIEN: REACTION TO SYMBOLISM

The role of Flight Officer Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver in the Alien Trilogy, is conceivably the most well known action heroine of recent years. Her image has been used in the advertising of Smith and Wesson guns (their 'women's range') and her emergence in Alien(Scott, 1979) is arguably responsible for the upsurge of interest in the science fiction genre among film theorists, cultural critics, and the cinema-going public alike.

Feminist critics have responded to the Ripley character in much the same way as they react to other action heroines; with differing degrees of pleasure, disgust, enthusiasm and scepticism.

The identifications and idealogies that different critics and theorists have felt the trilogy represents are manifold. Alien, the vanguard of the trilogy was the basis of some engaging, unusual, thought-provoking and amusing discourse, by people such as Barbara Creed, Judith Newton and James Kavanagh.

In Alien, the space-ship NOSTROMO and her crew of seven, are returning to earth with a cargo of twenty million tons of mineral ore. The ship's computer 'Mother' intercepts a signal from a nearby planet, whereupon three of the crew disembark and enter a derelict space craft. They encounter the skeletal form of an alien, and a hatchery of what is later

to be known as her off-spring. 'Kane' is attacked by an alien lifeform, which attaches itself to his face with a deadly grip. 'Ash', the science officer, disregarding Ripley's objections, opens the airlock so Kane can be taken back on board the NOSTROMO, thus breaking quarantine orders. The alien is on board and the remainder of the narrative centres on its killing of the crew, and their attempts to kill it. The Alien, however, is in a constant state of metamorphosis while 'growing up'. It is intelligent, menacing, secretive, and impossible to find or kill. Eventually, Ripley is the only one left alive, and she prepares to do battle.

As a woman, Ripley's character is contrasted with that of Lambert, who is weak and hysterical. Lambert functions to define what Ripley is not - emotional, passive and unheroic. In general, there is little resentment from the crew of Ripley's role as leader. 'Parker' and 'Brett', the two 'working class men' show a mild and ineffectual resentment of her position, but Ash disobeys her orders, by referring to 'Captain Dallas', and his hostility reaches a violent climax when he beats Ripley up and simulates a rape by trying to shove a 'girlie' magazine down her throat. At this point, Ash is revealed to be an Android, so his actions are safely disassociated from human behaviour and, therefore, any potential hostility on the part of the viewer. Such struggles set Ripley's character up as an outsider. "Marginality is crucial to the characterisation of the action hero/heroine within Hollywood cinema" (Tasker 1993 p.148.)

In order for the hero/heroine to fight the battles more-or-less alone, he/she needs to be somewhat isolated from communities or institutions. Although Parker became Ripley's 'side-kick' for a while, he, as the 'black worker' is also marginalised, and ultimately, she is left alone to fight the alien.

Ripley is somewhat masculinized by her clothing and weaponry (more so in Aliens (Cameron 1986) and therefore, standard feminist cricicisms apply. The positioning of a masculinized woman like Ripley at the centre of the action narrative, is seen to generate problems for the genre. She must be seen to have feminine qualities and thus, she becomes a protector and surrogate mother for the child 'Newt' in Aliens. She is required to have a 'normal' woman's sensibilities, to counteract her masculinization.

It is the climactic action sequences of Alien, where Ripley undresses before her final confrontation with the alien, that has been the most debated section of the film. Gratuitous voyeurism on the part of the filmmakers has been suggested, which overlooks the notion that Ripley's body - that of a normal woman - refreshes the sight and mind after horrific visions of the alien. Ripley signifies the acceptable form and shape of woman. As opposed to the alien's form, which Barbara Creed, in her essay 'Horror and the Archaic Mother: Alien' (Creed, 1993, pp 16-30) suggests is representative of "the Mother (substitute 'woman') as the cannibalistic creature .....the oral-sadistic woman .....and archaic force linked to

death."

Creed's extreme theory is grounded in the Oedipus Complex. She says that beneath the more obvious primal scenes of birth and exploration in Alien, lurks the figure of monstrous archaic femininity, the parthenogenetic mother. Creed continues, " Although the archaic mother, the creature who laid the eggs, is never seen in Alien, her presence is signalled in a number of ways. She is there in the text's various representations of the primal scene, and in its depiction of birth and death. She is there in the film's images of blood, darkness and death. She is also there in the chameleon figure of the alien, the monster as fetish-object of and for the archaic mother". (Creed, 1993, p.17)

According to Creed, the archaic mother forms a back-drop for the enactment of all the events in Alien.

To understand Creed's archaic mother, one must look briefly at Freud's theory on primal fantasies:

> "..... every child either watches its parents in the act of sexual intercourse, or, has fantasies about that act. These fantasies are about origins: the primal scene represents to the child its own origins in its parents' lovemaking". (Creed, 1993, p.17)

Creed suggests that the figure of the archaic mother is present in all representations of the primal scene in Alien - she is there as the sole origin of all life.

The first birth scene is at the beginning of Alien, where the

camera brings the spectator on an exploration of the space-ship's inner body, ending with a tracking shot down a smooth, clean electronic corridor, into an inner "womb-like" chamber, where seven curiously unsexed bodies slowly come to life, having been awoken by 'mother's' voice, monitering a call for help from a nearby planet. This scene of re-birth is clean, controlled and painless. Creed sees this scene as an interpretation of "a primal fantasy in which the human subject is born fully developed - even copulation is redundant" (Creed in Kuhn, p.129). Here Creed sees the archaic, parthenogenetic mother as present, in the lack of need for, or redundancy of the father: "The father is completely absent; the mother is sole parent and sole life-support" (Creed, 1993 p.18).

The second birth scene - more a conception - involves three of the crew entering a 'vaginal' opening between the upstretched 'legs' of an alien spaceship, then travelling up a corridor, the texture of which appears to be both organic and mechanical. Compared to the antiseptic atmosphere of the NOSTROMO, this ship is dark, dank and mysterious. In one chamber the three explorers find the skeletal frame of a long dead alien. In another chamber, they find a gigantic 'womb-like hatchery.' Kane goes to investigate one of the many eggs. At his touch, a grotesque 'thing' leaps up and attaches itself to his helmet, forcing its tail into Kane's mouth and stomach in order to fertilize itself. Finally, in a particularly horrifying 'birth', Kane dies in agony as the razor-tootched alien gnaws its way through his stomach, into the light. Creed 'explains': "The primeval mother does not need the male as a 'father', only as a host body, and the alien's birth leads to the male mother's death" (Creed, 1993 p.28).

The ejection of Kane's body and Ripley's 'escape capsule" from the NOSTROMO, the Mother-ship, is also redolent of the primal scene, suggests Creed.

By Creed's argument, the archiac mother is omnipresent in all the aforementioned scenes. "She is there in the images of birth, the representations of the primal scene, the womb-like imagery, the long winding tunnels leading to the inner chambers, the rows of hatching eggs, the body of the mother-ship, the voice of the life-support system, and the birth of the alien." (Creed, 1993, p.20)

Creed's archiac mother is totally dedicated to procreation. She is the origin of it, and conceives by herself. She is "outside of morality and the law". She is perhaps described by Ash, the Science Officer/Humanoid's plaudit to the alien of the film: "I admire its purity; a survivor unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality". (Creed, 1993, p. 27).

The alien, being representative of, and like, Creed's archaic mother, with her links to death, is, therefore, an image of "the unacceptable and monsterous aspects of woman" (Creed, 1993, p.23). Subsequently, when Ripley enters her sleep pod in the final scene of the film, not only is the alien disposed of, but, the image of Ripley as healthy, 'normal' woman, "represses the nightmare image of the archaic mother .... and the fear her image generates". (Creed, 1993, p.24)

Creed's essay is over-the-top. A prime example of how feminist cultural/film theory can mastermind extravagant argument when using Freud's theories as back-up or source.

A more convincing reading of Alien lies in exploring the relationship between corporate capitalism on the one hand, and individual modes and styles of human behaviour on the other, as discussed by Thomas Byers in "Commodity Futures" (in Kuhn, 1990, pp 39-49). He posits Alien as a warning of a capitalist future in which 'dehumanization' has become the most grave danger, and where there is an inevitable conflict between human feelings and bonds, and duty to the socioeconomic structure.

The NOSTROMO's crew work for a corporation who views all life as a commodity. At first the crew are unaware of the 'Company's' orders, which are impregnated in the space-ship's computer, and the humanoid Ash. The crew of the NOSTROMO are expendable and all considerations are secondary to the delivery of an alien life-form, which may prove to be an asset for the 'Company's' weapons division. Hence the crew are victims of the 'Company's' greed, which in turn makes them victim to the alien as a superior product of competitive evolution.

Alien, while reflecting gloomily on the reality of corporatism, can at least be critical of it. The deaths of the crew, and Ripley's ordeal, are a direct result of the greed of the 'Company', but also, the inability of the crew to see that Ash is different from them until it is too late. Perhaps because their own greed

is similar to that of the creators of the humanoid Ash.

It is ironic that Ripley's apparent inhuman following of procedure - denying Kane re-entry to the ship - is precisely the type of behaviour commended and demonstrated by a corporation that does not care for its workers at all. Initially, it is the sympathetic human gesture of the robot, Ash, that is responsible for bringing the horror of the alien on board the NOSTROMO.

"The ship's name makes allusion to Conrad's working-class hero: 'nostro homo'; 'our man', another company man, who dies understanding that he has been betrayed by 'material interests". (Newton, in Kuhn, p.82).

Byers suggests the deaths of the NOSTROMO's crew (with the exception of Ripley) may be seen symbolically in terms of moral retribution. Kane, the most eager raider of nature, dies first, and is the clearest embodiment of imperialism. (his name also harmonises with that of the first murderer). Dallas dies because, in ceding authority to the sinister Ash, (against Ripley's advice), he blindly accepts company policy, and thus fails to protect his colleagues adequately. Brett and Parker, the crew's working class, clearly hold the least allegiance to the corporation. However, they do buy into its values, as economic gain is their primary concern. (Brett is killed first, as he is the more overtly selfish of the two.) Lambert is a little different; she is weakened by her fear for her own life, lacks confidence, and fails to

help Parker. Her weakness, therefore, is fatal. (Byers, in Kuhn, p.42).

The sequence of deaths is a dig at white, male, power structures. The women, (Lambert and Ripley), and the minority character (Parker, who is black), are the ones who live longest. The heroes are Ripley and Parker, and not the more obvious, hero-type character, Dallas, the strong, attractive male figure who would normally function as the hero.

Alone, as surviving hero, Ripley is seen by the viewer to have gained her authority because of her intelligence and strength of character, rather than any hunger for power or greed.

This reading of Alien sees dehumanisation as necessary for human survival, in a world dominated by mega-corporations. It is questioning the value system of large-scale capitalism, thus posing the question: If we as a society choose to maintain our current socioeconomic arrangements, could we end up as the crew of the NOSTROMO did?

Byer's reading of Alien and Creed's reading do not intersect often. Byers sees the backdrop of the narrative as symbolic of conglomerates or corporations, ready to risk anything, even human life, for power and capital gains. Creed interprets the narrative as backdrop as symbolic of an omnipresent archaic mother. Unless mega-corporations are also symbolic of the archaic mother, these readings have no middle ground, signifying the ease with which one can put completely different interpretations on the same film.

As Byer's said, "it would be easy to make too much of this ..... Alien is intended primarily as entertainment" (in Kuhn, p.49). Such an acknowledgement is never made by Creed, and her version of events is much more extreme. Byer's argument is more compact and obvious within the Alien narrative, than Creed's argument.

The discourse surrounding Alien varies greatly, giving the reader much food for thought, and an opportunity for contra argument.

If outrageous arguments are posited only to keep critics or theorists in business, it is a shame. However, their divergence of opinions serve as a platform for more discussion, not only of the films themselves, but of society's social structures, the questioning of which is valuable. On the other hand, it would be refreshing if film was not always dissected to 'super-saturation', as potentially, this could affect the natural enjoyment and visual stimulation on the part of the ordinary viewer.

CONCLUSION

Having looked at feminist critical analysis of Blue Steel and Alien, along with analysis of other action heroines, it has become obvious that the image of violent women, of women-with-guns, does not sit easily within a politically correct feminist camp.

Action Heroines are often seen as surrogate men and/or objects of male fantasy. Therefore, it is felt that any 'self-respecting' female spectator could not identify with her image. Angela McRobbie states:

> "The spectator who does identify with the degraded or inhuman images of (women in) cinema, can only become what she already is insofar as no self-respecting person could identify with these images in the first place".
>
> (McRobbie, 1993 p.23)

This is a derogatary notion, which, in effect, places an injunction against the pleasurable identification a female spectator can make with any heroine. McRobbie's statement is in fact, meant to include all images of women in film.

Film viewing is a pleasurable and fascinating experience that relies upon spectator identification. Essentially, therefore, McRobbie's suggestion implies that any woman who enjoys, or is seduced by cinematic images, has no self respect. This is clearly untrue, and is an example of how easily an interrogation of film can go too far.

When Blue Steel was released, Pam Cook cited the most disturbing aspect of the film as its: "use of grotesque, anti-semitic stereotypes around the figure of Eugene", (Tasker, 1993 p.162). Sue Botcherby and Rosie Garland, along with their other arguments, saw Blue Steel as a criticism of Wall Street.

There is evidence throughout all film criticism, to support the fact that how anyone approaches a film is clearly defined and influenced by their subjectivity and position in society. Therefore, a lot of film criticism is relevant mostly to the author of the same. For example, Cathy Griggers sees Thelma and Louise's kiss at the end of the film, as the beginning of the film narrative. She read the film as, "a lesbian love story - a 'coming out' story" (Griggers, in Collins, et. al. 1993, p.134). She also writes, "Thelma & Louise don't become 'butch' because they are lesbians; they become lesbian because they've already become 'butch' to survive" (ibid., p.140). This reading of Thelma and Louise is not the standard reading by a general audience. That is the beauty of film, a spectator has the chance to take home any meaning he or she wishes.

Cinema holds: "the antagonistic and incompatible principles of the Post-Modern world: simulation and dissimulation, the obsenity of complete, transparent vision on the one hand, and the hidden play of seduction on the other." (Jean Baudrillard, in Shaviro, 1993, p.10), which leaves the medium open to interpretation. Its objective is to provoke instinctive reactions in the spectator. So, when theorists break down representations according to their

own objectives, they are numbing the ability of the medium to reach different people in different ways.

Cinema is a fantasy, a sensuous experience, and identification by a female spectator should not be negated because she identifies with the figure of a man (an action hero), or a woman who some perceive to be shrouded in masculinity (an action heroine.)

Freud said, "the realm of fantasy depends for its effect on the fact that its content is not submitted to reality testing". (in Doane, et. al. 1984, p.82)

Therefore, film, as entertainment need not be dissected. There is, admittedly, a need for certain female characters to be criticised, but, not the female viewer, merely because she identifies with them.

Often it is feminists' obsessions with their own agenda that informs their criticism, and this sometimes produces over-the-top reactions. This should be borne in mind by the viewer/reader, who should take whatever he/she wants from a film, unencumbered by extreme ideological ideas.

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