

**Bad Girls: The Female Killer and The Monstrous Gaze in
Contemporary Hollywood Cinema**

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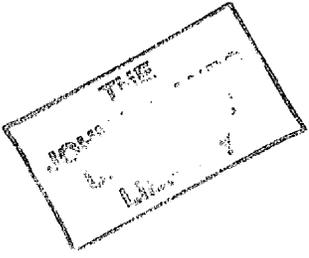
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Abstract

This study examines the figure of the female killer and the monstrous gaze within contemporary Hollywood Cinema: the action heroine; the serial killer; the Slasher killer; the rape revenge heroine; the *femme fatale*; the 'Bitch from Hell' and the witch. The theoretical aim of this study is to locate a form of visual pleasure for female spectators within these images which is active, sadistic and subjective, and yet remains figuratively feminine.

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines the relationship between the monstrous-feminine and the female spectator via an investigation of the female killer on screen. Theoretically, the aim of this study is to map the ways in which a sadistic female subjectivity is mapped across a meta-narrative of Hollywood cinema. This study has two dominant theoretical influences: psychoanalytic models of feminine spectatorship and critical discourse on monstrous and murderous women. Female killers come in many guises in contemporary Hollywood cinema, and this study looks at the following archetypes: the action heroine; the *agent provocateur*; the serial killer; the Final Girl of the slasher film; the female psychopath; the rape revenge heroine; the Bitch from Hell; the witch; and the *femme fatale*. This is not meant to be an exhaustive study of the female killer in Hollywood, rather she provides a convenient way of grouping together discourses on monstrous, violent, murderous, evil, sadistic and transgressive women.

Film spectatorship is tied up with the act of looking and operates around gendered binaries of subject/object relations. Narrative power is aligned with the bearer of the gaze. Within most models of spectatorship that relate to images of women on screen those textual power relations are constructed around a series of fixed binaries:

MALE GAZE

MASCULINE

SUBJECT

ACTIVE

SADISTIC

PHALLIC

FEMALE GAZE

FEMININE

OBJECT

PASSIVE

MASOCHISTIC

CASTRATED / CASTRATOR

<u>MALE GAZE (cont.)</u>	<u>FEMALE GAZE (cont.)</u>
VOYEUR	EXHIBITIONIST
ANACLIST	NARCISSIST
AGENT OF VIOLENCE	OBJECT OF VIOLENCE
KILLER	VICTIM

The active agency of the filmic look is masculine and its passive object is feminine. In dominant cinema, the man on screen controls the narrative action. He is bearer of the active look, and the mechanisms of seeing – point of view shots, camera positioning, etc. – draw the spectator into his gaze, which is controlling and dominant. The male gaze has however been addressed and theorised in opposition to itself across this binary. The male body on screen and the gaze of the male spectator have been read as having the potential to be objectified¹, passive², masochistic³, castrated⁴, exhibitionist⁵ and narcissistic⁶. These readings open up oppositional spaces for the male spectator to occupy and delineate those spaces as feminine, since they occupy the space which is opposite to the conditions of masculinity. Although within these analyses of male spectatorship a transgressive male gaze is produced, the binary is crossed but it remains firmly in place: what is not masculine – i.e. active and subjective – is feminine.

Readings of the female gaze in its binary opposite form have also tended to

¹ E.g. Steve Neale (1993) 'Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema' in Cohen and Hark (eds.) *Screening the Male*, Routledge, NY and London: 9-20.

² E.g. Carol Clover (1992) *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Slasher Film*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

³ E.g. Barbara Creed (1993) 'Dark Desires: Male Masochism in the Horror Film' in Cohen and Hark (eds.) *Screening the Male*, Routledge, NY and London: 118-133; Gaylyn Studlar (1992) *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich and the Masochistic Aesthetic*, Columbia Press, NY; Carol Clover (ibid.).

⁴ E.g. Barbara Creed (1993) *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, NY and London.

⁵ E.g. Richard Dyer (1982) 'Don't Look Now; The Male Pin-Up' *Screen* Sept-Oct 1982, vol.23, nos 3-4: 61-73.

⁶ E.g. Laura Mulvey (1975) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' *Screen* Autumn 1975 vol.16 no.3: 6-18.

masculinise active subjectivity⁷ or to read female visual pleasure in only terms of masochism⁸. These and other models of female spectatorship which are grounded in psychoanalytic theory maintain the fixed binaries listed above by either reading feminine subjectivity in its active state as masculinised; maintaining the location of femininity as passive; not allowing feminine subjectivity to take on an active form which is not constituted in masculine terms; or arguing that women are inherently drawn towards passive, masochistic identifications. The impossibility of active feminine subjectivity is the theoretical space that this study aims to fill, via an investigation of films in which the sadistic woman is located as bearer of the active gaze, escapes unpunished and yet remains resolutely constituted as feminine rather than masculine. I intend to argue that the feminine unconscious has a sadistic edge on screen, within psychoanalytic studies of femininity and in the mechanisms of visual pleasure on offer to female spectators.

Barbara Creed's study *The Monstrous Feminine* (1992) reads various tropes of female monsters as active and sadistic and yet constructed via the codes of femininity. It is the principal theoretical influence on this thesis, which extends the terms she sets up in relation to female monstrosity into models of female spectatorship. Creed identifies various archetypes of female monstrosity: amoral primeval mother; vampire; witch; woman as monstrous womb; woman as bleeding wound; woman as possessed body; the castrating mother; woman as beautiful but deadly killer; aged psychopath; woman as non-human animal; the monstrous boy-girl; woman as life in death; woman as deadly *femme castratrice* (Creed 1992:1). Creed's definition of 'monstrous' is broad: women can be described as monstrous when they are grotesque (too old, too fat, too thin), abject (bleeding, pregnant, barren), murderous, threatening, castrating or sadistic. Although

⁷ E.g. Laura Mulvey (1982) 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema': 24-35; Kaplan (1983) 'Is the Gaze Male?' in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (eds) *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, Monthly Review Press, NY: 309-327.

⁸ E.g. Mary Ann Doane (1982) 'Film and the Masquerade' in *Screen* Sept-Oct 1982, vol.23, nos 3-4: 74-87.

Creed's study is specifically located in the horror genre, I intend to demonstrate that these images of feminine monstrosity permeate all genres and all media, not just as objects of fear but are presented to the spectator as heroic figures. She uses the term 'monstrous-feminine' since the term 'female monster' implies a reversal of 'male monster'. The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different to the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience and Creed states that "A new term is needed to specify these differences. As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase 'monstrous-feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity" (ibid.3). In other words, the monstrous-feminine is monstrous and powerful because she is feminine and this thesis is concerned with the importance of her gender in the way her gaze is mapped across the texts she inhabits.

Creed argues that the monstrous women of horror express fears about women from the patriarchal unconscious, and that the horror text acts as a form of demarcation ritual for male spectators in which their worst fears about women are confronted and disavowed. Although *The Monstrous Feminine* is primarily concerned with male spectatorship, the location of women onscreen as active and sadistic *because* they are women offers the potential for female visual pleasure which does not masculinise the active gaze. Creed's emphasis is on the male subject, but this study picks up on her work and examines films in which the monstrous-feminine is located by the structural dynamic of the text as the bearer of the gaze on screen, rather than an object of fear for the male spectator. All of the female killers in this study have monstrous qualities and the texts they inhabit invite the spectator to identify with a monstrous gaze. Rather than examine the masochistic pleasure of the threatened male subject as Creed does, this thesis will look at the pleasure for female spectators in identifying with the sadistic gaze of the monstrous feminine and the various ways that they are encouraged to do so by the visual apparatus of the text. Instead of being

punished or contained for their transgressions through marriage or death, the monstrous women in this study escape unscathed and the texts they inhabit actively invite the spectator to identify with the transgressive gazes they carry. Using filmic representations of monstrous women in the form of various tropes of the female killer and the way their gazes are mapped across the texts they inhabit, this study aims to locate an area of visual pleasure for the female spectator which is textually constructed as active, subjective, sadistic, voyeuristic, and castrating, but which is most importantly symbolically constructed as feminine. In short, this study examines the female spectator's visual pleasure (or 'unpleasure') in relation to the monstrous-feminine on screen.

The methodology of this study is to examine the way in which the monstrous gaze functions on screen using textual analysis. All of the films included in this study have been selected because they feature sadistic women, consolidated in the figure of the female killer. This study examines female killers that are both heroines and villains, the sadistic gaze they carry, and the visual pleasure for female spectators in investing in this gaze. All the films have been selected because they specifically feature sadistic women as protagonists, and structure an identification with their gaze into the text. 'Identification' in this context has a specific meaning and relates to the way in which the invisible apparatus of spectatorship in the text structures a relationship between the subject or object on screen and the spectator. The I-camera (particularly in the horror film), flashbacks, voiceovers, camera positioning and narrative structure all guide the spectator into identifying with the gaze of a particular character on screen. Within dominant cinema, this structural gaze is usually aligned with the male protagonist and the visual pleasure accessible via these mechanisms of seeing is that of the masculine subject. The main aims of this study therefore are to investigate the way in which a sadistic form of feminine subjectivity is present via the structures of seeing in the text, and the potential visual pleasure for female spectators in adopting particular positions in relation to the woman on screen.

Although this study is concerned with the monstrous-feminine, it is not located exclusively within the horror genre since, as I will argue, images of female monstrosity appear across a variety of unlikely genres. I have organised this study into the different generic spaces inhabited by different tropes of the female killer: the professional (the assassin); the female serial killer; psychotic killers (female Slasher killers); vengeance killers (the rape revenge film); killing for money (the *femme fatale*); and women killing each other (the exchange of looks between the threatened female subject and her monstrous self). Most of the films discussed here are anomalous to their genre or narrative tale type, either because a woman inhabits typically male space, or because the ideological staging of the woman and the way her gaze is mapped across the screen breaks generic conventions by locating the monstrous-feminine as heroic bearer of the active gaze on screen rather than an object of fear.

As well as being structured along the lines of genre and character archetype each chapter is a response to various approaches to female spectatorship. The theoretical reworking of the active female gaze from masculine to feminine is also mapped across the structure of the thesis, beginning with female tropes of traditionally male killers and ending with killers who are exclusively feminine. Part I will locate this study within existing models of female spectatorship, and within existing research on violent women and the monstrous feminine. Part II will examine female archetypes of traditionally male killers (the action hero, the serial killer and the Slasher killer), looking at the way the text shifts its symbolic economy, generic conventions and mechanisms of seeing in order to accommodate a woman as bearer of the killer's gaze. The dominant theoretical aim is to locate these women within a symbolic economy which does not masculinise them. Part III examines archetypes of killers who are uniquely represented as female (the rape revenge heroine, the Bitches from Hell, and the *femme fatale*) where there is rarely a male

equivalent. Focusing on representations of the monstrous feminine as agent of the gaze on screen, this section will examine the visual pleasure for female spectators in identifying with this gaze.

PART I

CHAPTER 1: Approaches to Female Spectatorship and the Monstrous Woman

The first chapter of this study serves as a literature review in order to identify the absence of images of monstrous femininity in debates about the nature of female spectatorship, and the absence of notions of female visual pleasure in relation to the monstrous feminine. The lack of connection between these two areas of study is the theoretical space which this study aims to fill.

PART II

CHAPTER 2: The Monstrous Heroine: The *Agent Provocateur* as Action Heroine

The action film would seem a logical place to start seeking an active female gaze. The action heroine, according to the terms of her genre, is a violent killer and thus carries a sadistic gaze. The action film is generally constructed around a hyper-phallic landscape. When women are protagonists, masculine signifiers (muscles, guns, cars) are mapped across their bodies to denote them as active. Traditional responses read the female action hero as masculinised or phallic, and theorise visual pleasure for the female spectator in masculine terms. This chapter will examine the female assassin as a specific trope of female action hero, whose narrative power and place in the symbolic economy of the film is active, but is represented via feminine rather than, or as well as, masculine codings. *The Assassin* (1993), *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), *Charlie's Angels* (2000) and *Miss Congeniality* (2000) are all action films which also function as makeover narratives - the

heroine's success lies in her ability to adopt feminine codings in order to kill her target. This chapter will also examine the ways in which active female subjectivity is mapped into the apparatus of spectatorship via the mirror motif, which is a recurring mechanism in many of the later films in this study.

CHAPTER 3: Deadlier than the Male: the Female Serial Killer

Although serial killers on screen and in popular discourse have been well documented, the figure of the female serial killer is almost entirely absent from this research. Using *Misery* (1990), *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story* (1992), *American Psycho 2* (2002), and *Snapdragon* (1993), this chapter will examine case studies of female serial killers and how they correlate with the way that female killers are represented on screen, the 'true crime' story and the way in which these texts encourage an identification with the killer.

CHAPTER 4: Women in the Slasher Film

Women function as killers in the Slasher film in two contexts: as heroines and as monsters. This chapter aims firstly to theoretically 're-feminise' the figure of the Final Girl (the surviving heroine) as a response to Carol Clover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (1992) which reads her in masculine terms. Secondly, this chapter will examine the female Slasher killer who although extremely rare, is absent from critical accounts of the Slasher text. By looking at the female psychos of *Friday 13th* (1980), *Urban Legend* (2000) *Scream 2* (1987), *The Hole* (2001) and *Serial Mom* (1994) this chapter will discuss the ways in which the symbolic economy, narrative structure and structure of the gaze shift when both the Final Girl and the monster are female.

PART III

CHAPTER 5: Mapping the Gaze Across the Rape Revenge Film

The rape revenge drama is a precisely constructed narrative axis which operates around male castration phantasy. The rape revenge heroine, argues Creed, is an archetype of the monstrous-feminine, the *femme castratrice* (1993:127-31). This chapter will re-examine *I Spit on your Grave* (1978) as a paradigmatic example of the rape revenge narrative. Perhaps more than any other film in this study, it is the audience rather than the text itself which has been the focus of critical discourse. The place of the female spectator within this audience and the location of feminine subjectivity in the text have largely been ignored in discussions of this film which focus overwhelmingly on the visual pleasure (both sadistic and masochistic) for male spectators. Through a close reading of the way in which the gaze of the victim-hero is mapped in the text, this chapter will examine the visual pleasure for the female spectator in this 'maso-sadistic' gaze.

CHAPTER 6: Bitchfights: Sado-Masochistic Relations Between Women on Screen

To establish a spectator-screen relationship with the monstrous feminine, Chapter 6 examines the arena of conflict between women on screen. The films discussed in this chapter (which does not focus on a specific genre) depict a spectrum of feminine tropes rather than operating around a male/female binary. This chapter will discuss the way that sado-masochistic power relations on screen are altered when both the heroic and villainous spaces are occupied by women. In these films, the sadistic gaze is both carried by a woman, and directed at a female object. For female spectators, monstrous women in these films are staged both as narrative subjects, and as objects of fear at various points across the texts. Firstly this chapter will look at female castration anxiety in the 'Bitch from Hell' genre (*Fatal Attraction* (1987), *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992), and *Single White Female* (1992)) and *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (1997) to examine the ways that the

conflict between women is structured. Secondly, I will examine the relation between abject femininity and the female subject in *Aliens* (1986). Finally I will examine the figure of the witch, who functions simultaneously as both monster and heroine, and as an object of both fear and identification, in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Carrie* (1972), and *Carrie 2: The Rage* (1999).

CHAPTER 7: Dressed to Kill: The Iconography of the *Femme Fatale*

Although there is a huge amount of critical material on the *femme fatale*, there is a lack of emphasis on her appeal as a figure of identification for female spectators. This chapter examines the positioning of the *femme fatale* as textual subject and the visual pleasure for female audiences in identifying her murderous gaze. This pleasurable identification is also extra-textual – the iconography of the *femme fatale* also functions as a commodity fetish, turning the female spectator into consumer. This chapter also looks at the ways in which fashion and cosmetic advertising encourage and glamorise this identification, which is then written out on the body of the spectator. The textual focus of this chapter is representations of the *femme fatale* in *Black Widow* (1987), *The Last Seduction* (1994), *Les Diaboliques* (1955) and *Diabolique* (1997), *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Femme Fatale* (2003) – films in which the women cause murderous havoc and escape unscathed, unpunished and – most importantly – uncontained.

Because the archetypes of the female killers are so varied in terms of the context of their representation across a wide range of genres, each chapter foregrounds a different series of concerns within an overall investigation into the way in which the monstrous gaze operates within Hollywood cinema.

PART I

CHAPTER 1: APPROACHES TO FEMALE SPECTATORSHIP AND THE MONSTROUS WOMAN

This chapter will serve as a literature review in order to outline the way in which this thesis has been informed and shaped by existing work on female spectatorship and work on violent women. The chapter is split into three sections. Part I will discuss psychoanalytic models of female spectatorship in relation to masculinity, masochism, masquerade, the woman's discourse and the woman's film. Part II will summarise responses to looking at the representation of the monstrous woman on screen. Since this study examines a wide range of genres – action, horror, melodrama, film *noir* and their many sub-genres – it would be impossible to review all the relevant textual literature here. Each chapter will therefore examine the critical material relating to the action heroine, the female serial killer, women in the slasher film, the rape revenge film, conflict between women, and the *femme fatale* in more detail. Part III will examine existing work which looks at killer women and female spectatorship, looking at both psychoanalytic studies which examine the hypothetical spectator, and empirical audience studies which are concerned with socialised spectatorship. This chapter aims to identify the ways in which this study will consolidate the absence of sadistic femininity within existing models of female spectatorship and the absence of the female spectator within studies of monstrous women in the notion of the monstrous gaze.

I. MODELS OF FEMALE SPECTATORSHIP

“Femininity is produced very precisely as a position within a network of power relations” (Doane 1982:87)

Within the established system of cinematic representation and existing models of spectatorship, the textual positioning of femininity is consistently delineated within a

binary system as passive, masochistic and objectified. When women do take possession of the active gaze, they are inevitably punished for it: “the woman’s exercise of an active investigative gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimisation” (Doane 1984:72) and “the woman’s gaze is punished by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy” (Williams 1984:85). Jackie Stacey states of Hollywood cinema that:

Firstly, even though form and content interact, it is form that determines the reading of a given text; secondly, the gazes/looks of both characters are ‘male’ or at best, ‘masculine’ (this assumption basically gives up *looking* – or voyeurism – to the male); and thirdly, for any female brazen enough to assume the agency of the gaze, punishment is inevitable (1994:121)

I am not suggesting that female audiences do not or should not derive pleasure in films which present women on screen in this form, but that within contemporary Hollywood cinema it is not the only form of visual pleasure on offer to female spectators. Most films do fall into the figurative patterns above, but each individual text constructs its own internal system of meaning within this meta-narrative. It is these pockets of resistance to the dominant system which are the focus of this study.

VISUAL PLEASURE

It is rare to find any study of the gaze which does not take Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975) as its central reference point, “whether to extend and amplify her insights or to criticize the psychoanalytic or anti-Hollywood assumptions upon which they were based” (Bergstram and Doane 1989:7). Very few analyses do not concur with its central formulation that the cinematic gaze addresses a male spectator. ‘Visual Pleasure’ set the terms for all subsequent models of spectatorship, whether they support it or seek deviations from its central premise. This study is no different: it is not my intention to question the Visual Pleasure model of spectatorship, but to suggest that in certain texts there is a parallel female gaze which rests alongside the dominant male gaze

in the text – or, as with many of the films in this study, supersedes it by devaluing the dominant phallogentric system of meaning. Laura Mulvey's seminal article draws on psychoanalytic theory "as a political weapon, demonstrating the way that the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (1975:6). In other words, psychoanalysis provides the language to make visible the invisible apparatus which structures both the filmic discourse and the spectator-screen relationship. Phallogentricism depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world, and it is this image which dominates the film text. The discourse is structured from the male perspective and the woman exists only as castrated Other: "Woman's desire is subjugated to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound, she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" (ibid.:7). Within both film and psychoanalytic theory woman functions as "bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (ibid.:7): films speak about women rather than to them.

For the male spectator to whom the text is addressed there are two aspects of the pleasurable structures of seeing offered by the film text: a narcissistic identification with the male hero on screen; and a scopophillic pleasure in looking at the image of woman. These dual pleasures of identification and desire relate to the ego libido and the object libido respectively. The male hero is the bearer of the look of the spectator, and the filmic apparatus frames the narrative to draw the spectator into his gaze:

The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle...As the male spectator identifies with the male protagonist, he projects his look on to 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...The male protagonist is free to command a stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action (ibid.:12).

Mulvey links the omnipotent pleasure in identifying with the 'screen like' back to Lacanian constructions of the mirror phase. The identification with the male icon on screen occupies the position of "the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ego ideal conceived at the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror" (ibid.:12). The spectator's identification with the idealised version of himself on screen reproduces the mis-recognition of the self, the first time the child sees himself as the Ideal-I in the mirror.

The same active, omnipotent look is not on offer to the female spectator, Mulvey argues. In a world structured by sexual difference, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The image of woman on screen is constructed as sexual spectacle for the pleasure of the male gaze:

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance strongly coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as erotic spectacle is the leit-motif of dominant cinema...she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire...Her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation (ibid.:11).

The woman is displayed on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator. The 'showgirl moment' in which the narrative action is suspended to display the woman as sexual spectacle for the male on screen unifies these two gazes. The male body is not eroticised in the same way, since "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like" (ibid.:12)¹. The sexualised image of the woman on screen is also a source of anxiety for the male spectator since she also "connotes something that the look

¹ The problems of erotic and spectacular displays of the male centre around the implied feminisation and passivity of being the object of the gaze, which as Richard Dyer argues "does violence to the codes of looks and who is looked and (and how), and some attempt is instinctively made to counteract this violation" (1982:63). He cites the star's own 'look' (where and how he is looking in relation to the woman looking at him), the posing of the body ('ready for action'), and the association of muscularity with activity as potential strategies of resistance. Similarly, the exchange of looks between gay men also creates an instability in the traditional male/female, active/passive, subject/object equation if both the variants are male.

continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration, and hence unpleasure" (ibid.:13). The male unconscious has two areas of escape from this castration anxiety: to re-enact the original trauma and punish the woman; or through complete disavowal of her castration by reconstructing her as a fetish.

This thesis does not set out to question Mulvey's central argument in 'Visual Pleasure', that male fantasy structures dominant film form. What I intend to demonstrate is that in the films discussed in this study, the active, sadistic, controlling gaze on offer to the male spectator via narcissistic identification with the man on screen, has a feminine mode. The sadistic female gaze takes on a different form and function to that of the male. Through a close reading of the gaze of the female killer, this study examines the way in which feminine sadistic fantasy structures film form.

Many areas of resistance have been highlighted which disrupt Mulvey's model of male spectatorship and the binary structure upon which it rests. Steve Neale argues that masculinity can be constructed and represented as narcissistic (1983); Richard Dyer has examined the male body displayed as sexual object (1982); and Barbara Creed has argued that male visual pleasure can have a masochistic function (1993 and 1993b), as have Carol Clover (1992) and Gaylyn Studlar (1992). Whereas masculinity can be represented as passive, masochistic, exhibitionist and objectified, there is an absence of such fluidity in models of female spectatorship. When women are (admittedly rarely) represented on screen as sadistic, voyeuristic subjects the response is to read these images as figuratively masculine, or in terms of what visual pleasure they offer to male spectators – either in a cross-gendered identification with the woman on screen (Clover (1992)) or as a product of male castration anxieties (Creed (1993)).

MASCULINITY

When women on screen are depicted as sadistic and in control of an active gaze, a typical response is to read them as figuratively masculine. Laura Mulvey addresses the absence of the female spectator in 'Visual Pleasure' in a later article, 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema inspired by *Duel in the Sun*' (1981). This raises two further lines of thought: whether the female spectator is dictated her position by the text, and how the text is affected by having a female character as carrier of narrative agency. She bases her analysis on a reading of *Duel in the Sun*, using Freud's theory on the female oedipal trajectory in 'Femininity' (1933), to argue that the female spectator oscillates between masculine and feminine identifications, relating to active and passive textual positions respectively. In this paper, Freud outlines three possible outcomes of the female oedipal dilemma: 'normal' femininity, a masculinity complex, or neurosis, the inability to achieve a stable sexual identity in either. The heroine of *Duel in the Sun* (1946) is torn between two men and two opposing feminine functions, passive lady ('normal' femininity), and active tomboy (the masculinity complex). She is "unable to achieve a stable sexual identity, torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity" (1981:25). In Mulvey's analysis, feminine fantasies of action can only find expression through the metaphor of masculinity and in order to take up an active position in relation to the text, the female spectator, Mulvey argues, must adopt a masculine position: "the female spectator's phantasy of masculinisation is always to some extent at cross purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes" (1981:15).

Freud's paper on femininity contains two central contradictions which challenge the assumption that this active desire experienced by the female spectator always has its origins in masculinity. The active/masculine, passive/feminine equation is one that dominates Freud's work and the structures of Hollywood cinema, and subsequently is a

notion which extends into models of spectatorship. However, in 'Femininity', Freud emphasises that this model (which he frequently uses himself) is problematic:

... you cannot give the concepts of masculine and feminine *any* new connotation. The distinction is not a psychological one; when you say 'masculine' you usually mean 'active' and when you say 'feminine', you usually mean 'passive'...Even in the sphere of human sexual life, you can see how inadequate it is to make masculine behaviour coincide with activity and feminine into passivity (1933:414).

The further you go from the narrow sexual sphere, the more obvious will the 'error of superimposition' become. Women can display great activity in various directions, men are not able to live in the company of their own kind unless they develop a large amount of passive adaptability (ibid.: 415).

If you now tell me that these facts go to prove precisely that both men and women are bisexual in the psychological sense, I shall conclude that you have decided in your own minds to make 'active' coincide with 'masculine' and 'passive' with 'feminine'. But I advise you against it. It seems to serve no useful purpose and adds nothing to our knowledge (ibid.:415).

Freud is quite insistent in this paper that the fixed binary which aligns activity with masculinity, and passivity with femininity, is inadequate and over-deterministic. The Pre-Oedipal libido is unsexed/bisected and present in both males and females; it is convention and reductive terminology which labels it as masculine. The problematic labelling of this 'pre-gendered' phase of activity poses more of a fundamental challenge to the masculinisation of female spectatorship. Freud also emphasises that it is difficult to define whether passivity in women is inherent or enforced by social customs:

The suppression of women's aggressiveness which is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially favours the development of powerful masochistic impulses which succeed as we know, in binding erotically the destructive trends which have been diverted inwards (ibid.).

In other words, when applied to the female spectator it is impossible to tell whether her identification is naturally masochistic or whether she adopts the masochistic position as dictated to her by 'social conditions' (the apparatus of spectatorship) of the text.

Ann Kaplan, in 'Is the Gaze Male?' (1984), describes the same scenario as Mulvey in which women are excluded from the dominant filmic gaze, firstly because this gaze is constructed as male and secondly because femininity by its very nature prevents the positioning of woman as active subject. Given these conditions, Kaplan asks a number of questions which open up the mechanisms and psychological conditions which constitute feminine spectatorship:

...Is the gaze *necessarily* male? Or would it be possible to structure things so that women own the gaze? ...Would women want to own the gaze, if that were possible? ...What does it mean to be a female spectator? ...What is happening to them as they watch a cinematic apparatus that constructs a male viewer? ...Does a woman spectator of female images have any choice other than either identifying as female object of desire, or if subject of desire, then appropriating the male position?...Can there be such a thing as the female subject of desire? ...If a female subject is watching images of lesbians what can this mean to her? ...How do such images inform women's actual physical relations with other women? ...Is it possible for there to be a female voice, a female discourse? ...What can a female specificity mean? (Kaplan 1984:324)

The inherent problem is not the objectification or eroticization of women, she argues, since objectification may be an essential component of both male and female erotic desire, although the mechanisms at work are not symmetrical. There are two elements which will always ensure that the active gaze is delineated as male: "Men do not simply look: their gaze carries with it the power of action that is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act on it" (ibid.:323). Secondly, the image of woman-as-object serves a dual purpose: aside from the erotic pleasure obtained from the image, it is designed to annihilate the threat that woman poses². The dual mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism support this system of looking in which women are excluded from occupying the position of voyeur/subject. Moreover Kaplan argues (using a comparison of the sexual fantasies described in Nancy Friday's *My Secret Garden* (1995) and *Men in Love* (1993)) that women do not seem to appear to want to occupy the active or 'male' position. She

² A dread which she links to both classic Freudian castration anxiety and Karen Horney's 1932 article on 'The Dread of Woman' in which she argues that man's fear of woman lies not only in castration, but also in fear of the vagina (Horney, 1932:134).

notes, however, that in the lesbian fantasies Friday has collected, women occupy both positions as seducer and erotic object and thus “these fantasies suggest either that the female positioning is not so monolithic as critics often imply, or that women occupy the “male” position when they become dominant” (ibid.:328). The terminology is crucial here, since again the language of active desire is male:

When women are in the dominant position, are they in the *masculine* position? Can we envisage a female dominant position that would differ qualitatively from the male form of dominance? Or is there merely the possibility for both sex genders to occupy the positions we now know as masculine and feminine? (ibid.:329).

She argues that recent films from the 1970s and 1980s have begun to support the latter possibility in terms of “so-called” liberated women in film, and the objectification/fetishisation of the male star³.

It is significant in all these films that when the man steps out of his traditional role as the one who controls all the action, and when he is set up as a sex object, the woman then takes on the masculine role as bearer of the gaze and initiator of the action. She nearly always loses her traditionally feminine characteristics in so doing – not those of attractiveness, but rather of kindness, humaneness, motherliness. She is now often cold, driving, ambitious, manipulating, just like the men whose position she has usurped (1984:330).

Our culture is deeply committed to clearly demarcated sex differences, called masculine and feminine, that revolve on, first, a complex gaze apparatus; and second, dominance submission patterns. This positioning of the two sex genders clearly privileges the male through the mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism, which are male operations, and because his desire carries power/action, where woman’s usually does not. But as a result of the recent women’s movement women have been permitted in representation to assume (step into) the position defied as masculine, as long as the man then steps into *her* position, so as to keep the whole structure intact (Kaplan 1984:330).

It is impossible to dismantle the binary structure Kaplan describes here. The spectator-screen relationship, whether it involves men looking at women, women looking at men, women looking at women or men looking at men, is based on a fundamental separation of subject and object. While we can play around with the terms and conditions of any given

³ She cites *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Urban Cowboy* (1980), *Moment by Moment* (1978), as specific examples of films which subject their male star (John Travolta) to an erotic controlling female gaze.

situation, the basic structure remains one in which someone is always looking and someone is always being looked at, and this dynamic constructs a specific power relation between the two. Kaplan concludes by stating that “the gaze is not necessarily male (literally) but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the masculine position” (1984:331). Kaplan’s paper is significant to this study because she highlights the impossibility of reading active femininity as anything other than masculine within existing frameworks. Although she opens up several lines of enquiry, Kaplan does not stray from active/masculine, passive/feminine as the foundation of the spectator/screen relationship.

Men, Women and Chainsaws, Carol Clover’s study of gender in the Slasher film, also supports the notion that active subjectivity and sadism are quintessentially masculine. She argues that placing a woman in a heroic role, as bearer of the active gaze, necessitates her masculinisation and structurally locates her within the text as an object of identification for the male spectator. Female spectatorship is not a key concern of Clover’s study which focuses on male masochistic pleasure in horror film viewing, although she does acknowledge that

“female spectators may too engage at some level with the masochistic scenarios in which horror trades; if the particulars of these scenarios are by the lights of psychoanalysis, typically male, the general masochistic fantasy of passivity (“pleasure without responsibility”) knows no sex, and women, practiced as they are at wresting their own pleasure from forms made by and addressed to men, can presumably translate from horror too. It is also possible that the surface stories of certain subgenres – slashers and rape revenge films, for example – may offer satisfactions of their own to women viewers, including, perhaps, satisfactions of a more sadistic nature” (1992:223).

It is this potential ‘sadistic’ viewing pleasure which is the focus of this thesis. In Clover’s reading of the horror text, sadism is gendered masculine and masochism is gendered feminine. Two chapters in this study are a response to Carol Clover’s work. Chapters 4 and 5 will examine visual pleasure for the female spectator in the slasher film and the rape

revenge narrative. A key aim is to re-read the heroines of these films as figuratively 'feminine'.

What is common to Freud, Mulvey, Kaplan and Clover's work is a rigid definition of femininity and a subsequent reduction of active feminine subjectivity to masculine terms. The term 'feminine' denotes a fixed set of conditions – passivity, narcissism, objectification, castration – in both binary and fluid models of gender. When women are represented in ways which disrupt these conditions, they are read as masculine. There is no space within this set of meanings for a female gaze which is both active and 'feminine'. A key aim of this study is to resist reading the female gaze as figuratively masculine by demonstrating that femininity can have both active and passive tropes. The films discussed in this thesis construct a system of meaning in which 'femininity' functions as an active signifier. Barbara Creed argues that the monstrous feminine is powerful because of her gender, not in spite of it: "the notion of the monstrous-feminine challenges the view that femininity, by definition, constitutes passivity" (Creed 1993:151). This alternative set of meanings associated with femininity opens up the potential for a form of female spectatorship which is both active and sadistic, yet figuratively (monstrously) 'feminine'.

MASOCHISM

Raymond Bellour (1979) expands the notion of a structural apparatus of seeing formulated within 'Visual Pleasure' to seek a feminine subjectivity, through analysis of the mechanisms of enunciation in Hitchcock's films. He concurs with Mulvey's central notion that the apparatus of cinema is structured to eliminate the threat of sexual difference for the male spectator. Women's desire appears on screen only to be punished and controlled through assimilation to the desire of the male character. Within this model, feminine desire is explicitly masochistic, fixed as such within a rigid binary of active/male/sadistic, passive/female/masochistic produced by the text. Although he addresses the presence and

possibility of a feminine subjectivity, it only finds expression through passive masochistic desire and therefore does not deviate from the original structural model of 'Visual Pleasure'. Mary Ann Doane's formulation of the female gaze falls into a similarly masochistic position, based on an over-identification with the image on screen:

Proximity rather than distance, passivity, over-involvement and over-identification (the use of the terms "weepies" to indicate women's pictures is symptomatic here) – these are the tropes which enable the woman's assumption of the position of "subject" of the gaze. It is, of course, a peculiarly ironic assumption of subjectivity, for, although spectatorship is thus conceptualised in terms which appear to pre-eminently feminise it, feminist film criticism has constantly demonstrated that, in the classical Hollywood cinema, the woman is deprived of a gaze, deprived of subjectivity and repeatedly transformed into the object of a masculine scopophilic desire (1987:2).

Doane's study is textually located in melodrama and the 'woman's film', which is read here as a body genre in which the action (misery, sorrow, illness) is mimicked on the body of the spectator. The tears are a physical reaction to the action on screen and the identification is written out on the body of the spectator. This reading of female spectatorship as masochistic and 'weepy' is seen in narrative form in *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993). The processes and pleasures of female spectatorship are displayed on screen and defined as pleasurable masochistic. The heroine and her best friend bond by watching *An Affair to Remember* (1957) together, weeping and surrounded by tissues. The film uses *An Affair to Remember* as an inter-textual reference point to link the female characters; all the 'good' women are seen watching it, acting out this 'masochistic' over-identification and being seduced into believing in the idea of 'movie love'. The identification with the heroine of *An Affair to Remember* is played out as a narrative event.

Not all feminine identifications exist in this masochistic form, however. *Sleepless in Seattle* is a classic example of the 'woman's film' as described by Doane, but in a significant number of the films in this study women on screen are displayed as spectators, acting out their identifications within an entirely different context. In *Femme Fatale*

(2003), the heroine is seen watching *Double Indemnity* (1944) and ends up killing her husband. In *Urban Legend* (2000), the (black) female cop is depicted watching *Foxy Brown* (1974), posing with her gun and quoting the dialogue as Foxy speaks it on screen. In *Serial Mom* (1995), the heroine's killing spree is accompanied by a diet of Slasher gore and serial killer adoration. Laura Shapiro describes female viewers mimicking *Thelma and Louise* (1992): "Last week four women who had seen the film were walking down a Chicago street when a truck driver shouted an obscenity at them. Instantly all four seized imaginary pistols and aimed them at his head. 'Thelma and Louise hit Chicago', yelled one" (1991:63). This is clearly indicative that there are certain viewing pleasures on offer for female spectators in this film which were actively adopted by its female audiences: fantasies of power and dominance; punishing male bad behaviour; fetishising the male body (this is of course the film which sealed Brad Pitt as iconic object of desire); power over technology; and bonding (both homoerotic or platonic) between women. The repeated use of *Thelma and Louise* iconography in advertising successfully commodifies this identification to sell products to women (for example, a long-running series of Fiat car adverts on British television). Clearly, the female spectator in these scenarios is invited to draw both pleasure and power from acting out an identification with murderous, monstrous or transgressive women on screen. There is an element of control in the identification – a mastery over the image – which is absent from Doane's account of a passive, masochistic over-identification with a passive, masochistic textual position in the traditional 'woman's film'.

MASQUERADE

Doane utilises Joan Riviere's (1966) reading of the feminine masquerade which she argues offers relief for the female spectator from 'over-identification' and over-presence of the image on screen. "For the female spectator, there is a certain over-presence of the image – she is the image. Given the closeness of this relationship, the female spectator's desire can

be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism – the female look demands a becoming” (1983:78). In Riviere’s paper, femininity operates as a series of recurrent masquerades, there is no ‘true’ womanliness lurking beneath. To masquerade is to reproduce oneself as an excess of femininity: “Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she were found to possess it” (Riviere 1966:213).

Doane argues that by reproducing herself as an excess of femininity, the woman is able to construct the distance between self and image required for subjectivity:

Above and beyond a simple adoption of the masculine position in relation to the cinematic sign, the female spectator is given two options: the masochism of over-identification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one’s own object of desire, in assuming the image in the most radical way. The effectivity of masquerade lies precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible and readable by the woman (1982:87).

Within these readings, masquerading produces a passive, masochistic form of subjectivity.

This study however looks at instances in which women self-consciously flaunt the masquerade in order to control, manipulate and kill men rather than to appease them. The performance has a sadistic end. The way in which masquerade is staged and performed on-screen within the films discussed in this study produces a very different form of feminine subjectivity and performance from that described by Doane and Riviere. The *agent provocateur* (chapter 2) and the *femme fatale* (chapter 7) both overtly utilise the feminine masquerade as a weapon, and the texts they inhabit invite the spectator to adopt this active, sadistic textual position which is constituted via the terms of femininity. I intend to argue that the woman’s relationship with the mirror is used at key moments in the narrative to inscribe an active form of subjectivity into the masquerade. In the texts examined here, this gaze is neither punished nor reconstituted as masculine, but instead offers a re-reading of the feminine masquerade as a strategy of subversion.

It is of course possible to argue that women's desire and subjectivity on screen will always be subjugated within a male-dominated system of filmic production and reception. When women's desire is represented on screen it is a falsely constructed desire, filtered through a masculine interpretation. Similarly, the psychoanalytic discourse upon which much of feminist film theory relies also marginalises femininity: "The male – or masculine – voice that dominates our society and structures sexuality and gender also structures the very theories we use to explain them. Not surprisingly, these theories lack an explanation of change and so consign women to an inevitable secondary status" (Byars 1988:112). A number of responses have developed to negotiate a way past this seemingly immovable barrier to the development of a female subjectivity on, and in relation to, Hollywood film.

THE WOMAN'S DISCOURSE

"The *progressive or subversive reading*, which shifts the focus of criticism from the interpretation of immanent reading to analysis of the means of its production, seeks to locate not the 'image of woman' centred in character, but the woman's voice heard intermittently in the female discourse of the film" (Gledhill 1978:12).

Christine Gledhill goes on to argue that this approach can be problematic, in that it tends towards an assessment of female characters and female subjectivity in terms of its truth to the actual condition of women or a perceived feminist ideal, neither of which are fixed and constant referents. In addition, seeking the woman's voice as the dominant element in the text can dilute the importance of the cinematic mechanisms which structurally locate her in the narrative. Gledhill argues that "if a positive heroine is to be created, who can speak from and for the woman's point of view, then there has to be a change in the structures of fictional production and these have first to be identified for their patriarchal determinations" (1978:13). As an alternative strategy, she suggests that the notion of a *woman's discourse* avoids the collapse of text into character. Discourse differs from point

of view, which is attached to a particular character or authorial position, in that it stretches across the text through a variety of different articulations of which character is only one. Feminist strategies of resistance therefore look for gaps and contradictions in which the woman's voice disrupts the patriarchal mechanisms of the text. From Gledhill's perspective the question to ask is not 'does this image of woman please me or not, do I identify with it or not?' but 'what is being said about women here who is speaking, for whom?' (1978:13). Deborah Jermyn argues that appropriation is an essential element of finding a female voice in a text, since the "notion of an active female spectator is absolutely crucial to understanding the pleasures that women are able to recuperate from texts that initially seem to suggest only female masochism" (1996:252). She does however note its limitations:

It does not adequately challenge the actual mechanisms of dominant ideology in popular culture, and seems to accept that female spectators/readers have been placed in a marginal subject position and must recuperate their pleasures by furtively reinterpreting the texts before them (Jermyn 1996:252).

Jermyn argues that there is pleasure in both the dominant and oppositional readings of films. The gaze discussed in this study is however generally the dominant gaze as dictated by the text. The spectator is directed to identify with particular viewing positions via the way the gaze of the protagonist is mapped across the text via the use of camera positioning, the I-camera, voiceovers, flashbacks and dream/fantasy sequences. In the films discussed here the apparatus of seeing takes on a specifically feminine point of view. These structural devices draw the spectator into the point of view of a specific character, although it is not assumed that the spectator will necessarily take pleasure in adopting those positions. In most of the films discussed here, the woman's sadistic gaze is directed at a male object. When women are pitted against each other however, as I will discuss in Chapter 6, the texts offer a variety of identifications to female spectators which are carried via multiple tropes of femininity on screen rather than around a female/male binary. For example, in a

film such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987) there may be pleasure in identifying with the monstrous woman, but there is no reason why the spectator may not instead (or simultaneously) take pleasure in her defeat and expulsion. The text presents the monstrous-feminine as both object of identification and agent of fear, and invites multiple forms of visual pleasure.

THE WOMAN'S FILM

“Feminist film theory will not readily dispel the ennui that now troubles it without engaging itself as fully in women's laughter as it has in their tears, and without expanding its scope beyond the familiar terrain of melodrama and television soap opera to a wider range of cultural texts and the models of subjectivity they might suggest” (Rowe 1995:5).

Much of the work on female spectatorship has focused on the woman's film, typically seen as a genre which is comprised of a variety of narrative structures, themes and ideological discourse. Annette Kuhn argues that the 'woman's film' differs from the 'women's discourse' in the way that the female voice is present in the text: “One of the defining features of the woman's picture as a textual system is its construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point of view” (Kuhn 1984:18). The women's discourse is present in the apparatus of seeing via the way the text aligns its dominant gaze with the woman on screen.

Mary Ann Doane describes the primary features of the woman's picture thus:

The label “woman's film” refers to a genre of Hollywood films produced from the silent era through the 1950s and early '60s but most heavily concentrated and most popular in the 1930s and '40s. The films deal with a female protagonist and often appear to allow her significant access to point of view structures and the enunciative level of the filmic discourse. They treat problems defined as “female” (problems revolving around domestic life, the family, children, self-sacrifice, and the relationship between women and production), and, crucially, are directed towards a female audience (Doane 1987:3).

Molly Haskell defines four broad thematic categories of the woman's film which deal with emotional issues and are generally set in the home: the romance, the social problem film, the illness film and the invasion of the home film (1974). A genre is broadly defined as 'feminine' via its location in the domestic arena. Haskell's much cited description of female spectatorship in terms of 'wet, wasted afternoons' presents a narrow form of masochistic visual pleasure for women, confined by the limited space that they occupy on screen. In *Chick Flicks: A Movie Lover's Guide to the Movies Women Love* (1997), Jamie Bernard widens the traditional definitions of the chick flick/woman's film and divides up her recommendations into the following categories:

Tearjerkers; Emotional Rescue; Bad Girls; Hunks; Role Models; Impossible Love; Funny Girls; Schoolgirl Crushes; Catfights; Daddy Dearest; Hurts So Good; Lesbian Inclinations; Female Bonding; the Maternal Instinct; and Perfect Love (1997: vii-ix).

Many of these films have little in common with the narrative patterns or themes of the traditional woman's film. Some categories stand out as directly relevant to this study: Bad Girls (*La Femme Nikita* (1991), *Frances* (1982), *Gilda* (1946), *The Last Seduction* (1994), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946, 1981)); Hunks (*America Gigolo* (1980), *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Hud* (1963), *Picnic* (1955), *Witness* (1985)); Role Models (*Ms. 45* (1981), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Silkwood* (1983), *True Lies* (1994), *An Unmarried Woman* (1978)); and Catfights (*All About Eve* (1950), *Ivanhoe* (1952), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1992), *The Women* (1959), *Working Girl* (1988)). Implicit in this selection of films is the acknowledgement that while female audiences enjoy seeing other women take revenge, the spectacle of women bitching at each other, behaving 'badly', and the male body as erotic spectacle also hold appeal, as well as the established visual pleasures of the romantic, female bonding, oedipal love and homoeroticism. The term 'role model' implies an aspirational identification on the part of the spectator, and the ego ideals Bernard identifies in these texts are heroic women rather than romantic heroines, fighters rather than brides.

This opening up of what is perceived to be a 'woman's film' is clearly due to a historical shift in the representation of women on screen. Early feminist film theory, working with the textual material available was unable to map a gaze which, if present at all, was contained by the text by either punishing or marrying off the transgressive woman. The simple equation of 'good girls get married, bad girls die' which mapped women's narrative function in Classical Hollywood is still present in contemporary film but there are more exceptions. Very few of the films in this study could be termed contemporary 'women's pictures'. Some - *Snapdragon* (1994), an erotic thriller starring Pamela Anderson, for example - are overtly aimed at a male audience but also map a path of visual pleasure for female spectators across the narrative structure and apparatus of seeing. The 'woman's picture' is usually melodrama, but this thesis seeks to locate female visual pleasure across a diverse selection of genres which feature violent women: action, horror, neo-noir, thriller and melodrama to widen the notion of feminine cinematic space.

II. VIOLENT WOMEN ON FILM

"In the last ten years, deadly dolls have filled the screentoday, women kill as central characters, not just sidekicks, in films which mix elements from comedy, science fiction, horror and melodrama, as well as the thriller" (Holmlund 1993:127)

Because the female killer takes so many forms and is present across such a large range of genres, it would be impossible to review all this material in detail here. The rise of the violent woman on screen has obviously produced much debate within feminist theory as well as in a wider context. Each chapter will therefore address the critical material relating to each archetype of the female killer in more depth. In each case, I aim to highlight the absence of the female spectator within discussions of the female actions hero, the female serial killer, the final girl, the female psycho killer, the rape revenge heroine, the femme fatale and the depiction of conflict between women.

THE MONSTROUS FEMININE

Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine* is the key text which inspired and informs this study. The female monster – although frequently situated as other and punished – is the bearer of an active sadistic gaze on screen which is constituted in feminine terms: “the phrase ‘monstrous-feminine’ emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity” (1993:2). She identifies numerous tropes of female monstrosity: the amoral primeval mother; vampire; witch; woman as monstrous womb; woman as bleeding wound; woman as possessed body; the castrating mother; woman as beautiful but deadly killer; aged psychopath; the monstrous girl-boy; woman as non-human animal; woman as life-in-death; woman as deadly *femme castratrice* (ibid.:1). “The presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about male desire or female subjectivity. However, this presence does challenge the view that the male spectator is almost always situated in an active, sadistic position and the female spectator in a passive, masochistic one” (ibid.:7). She classifies tropes of female monstrosity as having two main origins: social taboos concerning abjection, as outlined in the work of Julia Kristeva, and woman's relation to castration within Freudian theory. Horror reflects male desire and fears about women, played out via the body of the female monster, and castration anxiety is its central project: “male castration anxiety has given rise to two of the most powerful representations of the monstrous-feminine in the horror film: woman as castrated and woman as castrator” (ibid.:122). Creed reads the monstrous-feminine as a product of male desire and therefore her focus is on the visual pleasure for male spectators in the horror text. The primary aim of this study is to relate Creed's work on monstrous femininity to female spectatorship and examine representations of the monstrous feminine outside the horror text.

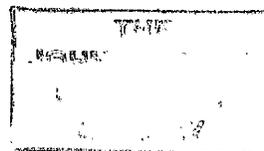
HOLLYWOOD AND THE FEMALE KILLER

Michele Aaron, in her article on the female sexual killer in Hollywood, also sees sadistic femininity as a by-product of male masochism within a fixed binary system in which women ultimately function as passive conduits of active male desire:

It is this sexualised self-endangerment, this 'masochism', that reveals the male pivot of these productions. Identifying the males' attraction as masochistic has serious implications for the films' [*Body of Evidence* (1992)] representations of sexual difference and their prevailing power dynamics. It determines the shift to male control, finding (female) sadism a front, for ultimately 'it is the masochist who controls the other's control' (Aaron 1998:168, citing Williams 1989:13).

Film is primarily produced by men, thereby privileging male desire in its apparatus of both production and reception. This does not mean, however there is no pleasure for female spectators in these texts or that female visual pleasure is always subjugated to male desire – factors which are often repressed within feminist theory, which itself can get trapped within a masculine system of meaning and foregrounds male visual pleasure.

In 'A Decade of Deadly Dolls', Christine Holmlund addresses the debates surrounding the recent proliferation of female killers on screen in terms of the following issues: "how to define violent women in relation to men, in relation to male violence, and in relation to feminism" (Holmlund 1993:144). What is notably absent from the above quote is a discussion of violent women in relation to other women, both on screen and as spectators. The way in which some of these films set women against other women tends to resist a reading of them as ideologically feminist (see Hollinger 1998). However that does not mean that there is no visual pleasure for women in directing a sadistic gaze at another woman or observing the spectacle of women attacking each other. Chapter 6 addresses the absence of debates concerning conflict between women within feminist theory and the nature of sado-masochistic relations between women on screen.



Although the term 'deadly doll' emphasises the dangerous femininity of the female killer, Holmlund also highlights the way in which these killer women are represented and read in masculine terms: referring to Alex in *Fatal Attraction* as "the more masculine of the pair"; *Aliens* and *Blue Steel* "assert more strongly that women who kill are almost men"; and *Thelma and Louise* also "links murder and masculinity" (ibid.:136-9). Because they carry an active gaze, violent women are consistently read as symbolically 'masculine'. Part I of this study examines genres in which women occupy traditionally male roles – the action heroine, the serial killer and the psycho killer – and a primary aim is to read these women as in relation to the monstrous-feminine rather than to masculinity in order to show that the female gaze can take an active form which need not be read as masculine.

Holmlund also notes the consistent "murmured fear of lesbianism" surrounding representations of violent women (ibid.:149). Given the cinematic association of lesbianism with monstrosity, deviancy and criminality, it is hardly surprising that some of the women in this study are explicitly denoted as lesbian, and framed as the object of the erotic gaze of another woman. Jackie Stacey argues that the Freudian separation between 'object libido' (wanting to have) and 'narcissistic / ego libido' (wanting to be) is not necessarily a clear cut boundary since it overlooks the way in which all object relation start with the child's own image. She argues that "narcissism is not just a love of self, but always involves an image of the other... 'wanting to be like' does not necessarily exclude an erotic component" (1994:30). In other words, narcissistic recognition of the self in the image on screen can have an erotic look attached to it. In Sandra Calvert's audience study of *Xena: Warrior Princess* for example, the heroine's perceived attractiveness was a greater factor for heterosexual women than for men in determining whether they would continue watching the series (2001). Whether there is a homoerotic element or not, there is a consensus among critics that women take pleasure in gazing upon other women on screen.

Jackie Byars utilises Nancy Chodorow's revision of Freud's Oedipal family romance to argue that "the female child does not give up her attachment to the mother during the Oedipal stage, as Freud argues, but develops instead a different model, a triadic model for relationships" (Byars 1988: 113), thereby implying that there is always an element of homoeroticism in exchanges of looks between women. Where an erotic exchange of looks between women in the text is significant then I will draw attention to it, but whether identification (as opposed to desire) functions differently for lesbian spectators in these texts is not a major concern of this study for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is no need to repeat work which already exists in a very similar vein. Linda Hart for example has examined the relationship between lesbianism and criminal/monstrous women – and the implications of this in terms of visual pleasure for lesbian viewers – in *Fatal Women* (1994). Likewise, the female vampire is both monstrous and desirable, and is often framed in a homoerotic context and so would seem an obvious figure to be included in this study, but again female visual pleasure in relation to this particular form of horror is well documented⁴. Secondly, as a heterosexual spectator, I am not best placed to theorise a lesbian gaze, particularly since this study is based so much on my own personal taste in film viewing. The lack of emphasis on lesbian spectatorship in this study is also methodological. This study examines the way in which the spectator is encouraged by the texts into narcissistic identification with the woman on screen, rather than desire for the woman on screen – the ego libido rather than object libido. However, I am not proposing that this will or should be the position adopted by all spectators, particularly in relation to sexual identity: "No film text belongs to any one constituency. It seems foolish to argue that is intrinsically lesbian as to argue that any text is exclusively heterosexual... [we nevertheless live in] a viewing world where we still have the chance to call everything our own" (Whatling 1997:195). For lesbian spectators, the split between object libido and ego

⁴ See Cherry (1999b), Weiss (1992) and Whatling (1997).

libido in this exchange of looks is potentially ambivalent. The woman on screen can be a conduit for both a narcissistic and an anaclitic attachment, which can be either simultaneous, fixed or oscillating. This study does not necessarily assume a heterosexual spectator, rather that heterosexuality – although significant since sexuality is so closely tied to gender identity – is not crucial to the form of visual pleasure present in the texts discussed here.

Holmlund states that “the murderesses in these films are, to a woman, white, lithe and lovely, because Hollywood sees female violence as erotic and defines ‘erotic’ within narrow parameters” (1993:128) Only one of the significant women in this thesis is not white, Reese the security guard in *Urban Legend* and she is not the main character in the film. She is clearly linked with the 1970’s Blaxploitation heroines – for example *Foxy Brown* (1974), *Coffy* (1973) and *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) - via her own viewing practices and imitative behaviour. Kimberly Springer argues that “In U.S. cinema, the violence of Black women always seems a result of their being Black, while the violence of white women is often celebrated as liberatory...understanding how Black women are defined in opposition to white women is key to understanding African American women’s violence” (2001:173). The Blaxploitation heroines exist within a specific time frame and context of socialised reception which requires more detail than I am able to give here. Although sexuality, race and class are obvious considerations when looking at both ideological representation and film reception, this study is primarily concerned with the hypothetical spectator and therefore simple reasons of space I have not foregrounded them.

III. THE FEMALE KILLER AND THE FEMALE SPECTATOR

The key absence which this thesis aims to address is that of the sadistic female gaze. Although there is plenty of material relating to female spectatorship, and to violent/monstrous/sadistic/killer women on screen, very few studies link them together.

Those which do fall into two broad categories: psychoanalytic studies which address the hypothetical spectator and do so via textual analysis, and empirical audience studies which address the socialised spectator. Although it is the former which is the primary methodology for this study, there are several empirical studies which have considered issues or produced results which are relevant to this thesis.

PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDIES

Although the female spectator is not a primary concern of *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed does raise questions regarding female visual pleasure in relation to her work: "What is the appeal of the horror film to the female spectator? Does she recognise herself in the figure of the monstrous-feminine? To what extent might the female spectator feel empowered when identifying with the female castrator? Does she derive a form of sadistic pleasure from seeing her sexual other humiliated and punished?" (ibid.:155). She does note that few texts encourage spectator identification with the monstrous-heroine via structural filmic codes but dismisses the idea that the feminine imagination is essentially non-violent or that the female unconscious is fearless, without monsters. Feminine fears and desires are instead not fully explored in the horror text because women lack access to the means of production. Creed also states that "the unconscious is [not] subject to the strictures of gender socialisation and it is to the unconscious that the horror film speaks" (ibid.).

In Linda Williams' reading of the horror text, it offers only masochistic visual pleasure to the female spectator. She notes the similar status of woman and monster as

Other and the “the female look – a look given pre-eminent position in the horror film – shares that male fear of the monster’s freakishness, but she also recognises the way in which this freakishness is similar to her own difference” (1984:88). The horror film “permits the expression of woman’s sexual potency and desire, and associates this desire with the act of looking, but does so...only to punish her for this very act, only to demonstrate how monstrous female desire can be” (ibid.). When women do look, that look is punished in the same way that the monster is expelled from the text: looking in itself defines women as monstrous. Although this reading of the horror text is about women looking, it is the male spectator’s visual pleasure which is its main concern. It does not consider the gaze of the female spectator other than the assumption that women do not look: “Habits of viewing, not to mention habits of *not* viewing, of closing our eyes to violence and horror in general, may keep us from seeing” (1984:95). Williams refers to the horror texts she discusses as “offensive” (ibid.:95), and states that “there are excellent reasons for this refusal to look, not least of which is that she is often asked to bear witness to her own powerlessness in the face of rape, mutilation, or murder” (ibid.:83). Within this very negative reading of women’s gaze in horror, Williams does identify the potential for subversion in aligning the woman’s gaze with monstrosity: “there is a sense in which the woman’s looks at the monster are more than simply a punishment for looking, or a narcissistic fascination with the distorted version of her own image that patriarchy holds up to her; it is also a recognition of their similar status as potent threats to vulnerable male power” (1984:90). Within this exchange of looks between woman and monster “in the classic horror film, the woman’s look at the monster offers at least a potentially subversive recognition of the power and potency of a female sexuality” (1984:90). These looks are usually punished and contained within the framework of the texts they inhabit. However the notion that the monstrous gaze aligned with femininity carries with it power, potency and threat opens up the possibility of a female gaze which is both powerful and specifically not made powerful via masculinity, as is the case with the films I examine in this study.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Brigid Cherry (1999b) argues that female spectators do not 'refuse to look', but actively enjoy horror films, and read such films in feminine ways. Her study is based in an empirical survey of female horror film audiences rather than textual analysis and is one of the few studies to acknowledge that this audience exists. This audience were self-identified horror fans whose practises did not fit into the viewing patterns delineated to women by much feminist theory: "The female horror film fan may only rarely adopt the passive female spectatorial position when viewing horror films, refusing to look (Williams) and watching only with reluctance and fear" (1999b:212). Similarly, "in the female viewer's appropriation of strong femininity and predatory female sexuality, we cannot say that immascultation has occurred in any great sense" (ibid.:213)⁶. This study picks up Cherry's findings in more detail in chapter 4, relying on the same assumption that there is a female audience for horror, and examines the way in which this active gaze is mapped across film texts.

Women Viewing Violence (1992) is an empirical audience study, in which the authors "consider how various discourses, rooted in particular contexts (such as class, gender and ethnic background) and given experiences (such as being at the receiving end of domestic or sexual violence), are brought to bear upon the interpretation of men's violence against women on television" (Schlesinger et al. 1992:8). They conclude that women's experiences of violence in real life is the most dominant factor in the way they interpret violence against women on screen. Tina Vaares also argues that real life

⁶ Cherry's conclusions were: female fans are a hidden percentage of the audience; female horror viewing takes place in isolation; female horror fans do not participate widely in organized horror fandom; female fans excluded from fandom due to inherent sexism in fan publishing and culture; female horror fans prefer 'feminine' forms of the genre; they derive greater pleasure from watching films with an erotic interplay between victim and monster; 'horror' is a fluid category and its features extend into mainstream film; female horror fans might enjoy romantic images and elements (i.e. they refuse to refuse to look); they do not exhibit viewing practices seen on teenage girls (i.e. looking away, screaming); female horror fans do not see the genre as misogynist or disregard the fact that it is; and little evidence suggests that horror viewing involves a feminist revenge fantasy against men (Cherry 1999b, chapter 8).

experiences of violence affects the ways in which female viewers read violence committed by women on screen in the action genre. Her study investigates the “contradiction between many feminists’ embrace of non-violence and pacifism, and feminists’ pleasure and satisfaction with representations as physically violent, in particular, acts of revenge against violent male protagonists.” (2001:221). She argues that an empirical audience is necessary in order to fully investigate spectatorship and female violence, and states that

While some writing in this field has assumed women’s “pleasure” in these images of women’s violence, the conversations with the particular women who participated in this study suggested that, although some women talked about their positive reactions, many women do not respond pleasurably to these representations. This indicates the inadequacy of both textually and anecdotally based assumptions about women’s responses to films that feature action heroines (ibid.: 222)

In the films examined in this study, I am not assuming that all members of the audience will adopt the viewing positions promoted by the text, merely that there is a form of visual pleasure on offer to female spectators in these films which has been neglected in both psychoanalytic analyses and empirical audience studies relating to the representation of violent women.

Jackie Stacey states that the most typical split in approaches to female spectatorship concerns a dichotomy between the ‘textual’ spectator and the ‘empirical spectator’ as practised by psychoanalytic film theory, and the ethnographic approach used in cultural studies (1994:23). Stacey brings together these two approaches in *Stargazing* (1994), using an empirical study of female audiences’ fan practises to design a theoretical model of spectatorship within which these women’s identificatory desires function. Barbara Creed however highlights four different definitions of the female spectator: the diegetic (the “woman” on the screen); the imaginary (the construction of patriarchal ideology, the one to whom the film is addressed); the theorised (in feminist film criticism); and the real woman in the audience (1989:133). These are, for Creed, separate categories which do not overlap:

“a cinematic female spectator has certainly been constructed within feminist theory, but “she” is very much a construction of critical discourse, based in psychoanalytic theory, and probably bears only a tenuous relation to the woman who sits silently in the darkened auditorium eating her peanuts” (Creed 1989:132). Jackie Stacey’s work on stars and female audiences however has demonstrated that there is a parallel between the ‘imaginary’ spectator conceptualized via psychoanalytic theory and the socialized spectator who carries this ‘active’ identification into consumption patterns. Many of the films in this study have produced images which also exist in other forms of media. Chapter 2 and chapter 7 will address the ways in which cinematic images of sadistic women – the action heroine and the *femme fatale* - appear in advertising aimed at women particularly for products aimed at the construction of gendered identity such as make-up hair products, perfume, and clothing. These images are relevant to this study because they present monstrous women – albeit extremely glamorous ones - as aspirational figures to the female consumer, and rely on her identification with the image in order to sell the product. A consistent criticism of psychoanalytic approaches to film is that they are ‘over-hypothetical’ and bear no relation to the ways in which audiences consume and ‘read’ texts. There is no factoring of the ways in which race, class, age, geography, and date impact on the ‘unconscious’ reading of the text. Although the social spectator is not the primary focus of this study, the presence of the monstrous feminine in advertising does demonstrate that the hypothetical spectator produced by the text takes on a socialised context in the form of the female consumer, who acts out these identifications in her consumptive practises.

This thesis therefore aims to address two key absences identified in the literature reviewed here – representations of the monstrous woman within debates about female spectatorship and the female spectator within debates about the representation of monstrous women on screen.

PART II

CHAPTER 2: THE MONSTROUS HEROINE – THE *AGENT*

PROVOCATEUR AS ACTION HERO

Perhaps the most obvious place to seek out an active female gaze is within the action genre. Women feature as professional killers in a number of roles both within the action narrative and the peripheries of the genre: as cops (*Blue Steel* (1990), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Copycat* (1995)), as soldiers (*GI Jane* (1997), *Aliens* (1982)), as warriors (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (TV 1997-2003), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (TV 1995-2001)) as assassins (*The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), *Nikita* (1990), *The Assassin* (1993), *Leon* (1995)). These women are trained killers, they have a legitimate motive for violence. They are aligned with various archetypes of the monstrous-feminine and yet they are imbued with heroic qualities. They are the narrative centre of the film and bearer of the active gaze, and they survive triumphant and unpunished within an ideological system which validates their killing. Taking *The Long Kiss Goodnight* as a main study, the female assassin is the central focus of this chapter. She is a professional cold-blooded killer who sits on ambiguous ground: professional but not legitimised, existing somewhere between heroic and monstrous.

As women in traditionally male roles, action heroines are typically saturated with masculine and phallic signifiers – guns and knives as the tools of their trade being the most obvious examples. Of all the types of films discussed in this study, the exaggerated masculine space of the action narrative presents its female in the most masculine context, yet simultaneously resists this masculinisation. Gender is fluid within the action film in that both masculine and feminine signifiers can be mapped across both male and female bodies. However, within both critical discourse and the symbolic economy of most films, the meaning of these gendered signifiers tends to be fixed within binary opposition in

which masculinity is aligned with activity and femininity with passivity. In order for the heroine to function as 'active' within the action film she is traditionally adorned with an excess of phallic imagery and her textual positioning as bearer of the active gaze is written out on her body. Similarly, approaches to visual pleasure for female spectators in these texts masculinise the active female subject.

In *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, *The Assassin*, *Nikita* and *Charlie's Angels* (2000, and television series 1976-81), the figurative staging of the heroines disrupts the notion that phallic masculinity is the only visual pleasure on offer for the female subject or the only way of gendering these women. The professional killers in this chapter operate within action narratives which simultaneously function as narratives of transformation in which the success of the heroine is dependent on her simulating feminine rather than masculine guises. Within the overall symbolic economy of these films, masculinity is not the default signifier of activity. The films examined in this chapter open up a space in which femininity functions as a weapon. Although Hollywood is bursting with spies, hitmen and action heroes, the combination of these roles within the figure of the *agent provocateur* is uniquely feminine and doubly dangerous because of it. Each film contains an on-screen transformation sequence in which a masquerade of femininity is written across the body of the heroine to signify a shift in identity towards an active subjectivity. In *The Long Kiss Goodnight* in particular the masquerade of femininity is employed as a weapon, in that the *agent provocateur* seduces in order to kill which aligns her with the monstrous-feminine in Creed's terms: "Woman is monstrous because she castrates, or kills the male during coition" (Creed 1992:129). She is dangerous precisely because she is female. This sadistic appropriation of the masquerade, and the way that the gaze of the female protagonist is mapped across the text as both monstrous and heroic offers a parallel form of female subjectivity which resists a process of masculinisation. In doing so, this offers both a figurative representation of active femininity on screen and a gaze which is both active and

feminine to the female spectator. This chapter will re-evaluate the masculinised gaze imposed on this specific archetype of the action heroine as feminine via her alignment with the masquerade and monstrosity, and will demonstrate the ways in which femininity functions as active, both within the symbolic economy of the films and the potential viewing pleasures that this offers to the female spectator.

THE HEROINE AS HERO

Critical discourse on the action genre tends towards a regendering of the action heroine as figuratively masculine, prompted by both the excess of phallic signifiers attached to her on screen, her textual placing as an active protagonist and existing frameworks of spectatorship which equate active spaces with masculinity. Power, in the traditional action film, is connoted via the muscles of the hero and mastery over phallic iconography in the simple equation of gun = penis = masculine power = narrative power. Phallic power is written across female bodies via masculine signifiers. Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* (1991), Ripley in the *Alien* franchise, *Red Sonja* (1985) are all muscular heroines, carrying narrative power via what Yvonne Tasker refers to as 'musculinity' (1992). In both *The Long Kiss Goodnight* and *G.I. Jane*, the heroine uses the expression "suck my dick" as a war cry, within a barely concealed system of meaning in which she has earned herself a figurative penis.

As protagonist, the action heroine controls the active gaze on screen, and ego identification with this gaze across the narrative of the film 'gives the spectator a satisfying feeling of omnipotence' to use Mulvey's terms in 'Visual Pleasure'. Ann Kaplan states that although the bearer of this gaze need not be male "to own and activate the gaze is to be in the masculine position" (Kaplan 1984:33). Within both the symbolic iconography of the genre and existing models of spectatorship it seems an impossibility that femininity as a signifier could be aligned with anything other than passivity. For male spectators, the

visual pleasure relating to these women is multiple. The figurative masculinisation of heroines, argues Carol Clover, allows them to function as figures of identification for the male spectator which, along with their sexualised staging as fetish objects, disavows them as a site of anxiety (1992:53)¹.

This symbolic re-gendering of the heroine as masculine is foregrounded in *GI Jane* which addresses the 'problem' of women in the military. 'GI Jane' is an experiment engineered by a female senator to get a woman into the Navy Seals, but Jordan, our heroine, is set up to fail to prove that a woman's place is not as part of an elite killing squad. Jordan is initially selected for the programme because she fits a political agenda: she looks classically feminine and thus wholly unsuitable for warfare. She is described as "top drawer with silk stockings", and has a solid heterosexual grounding ("Have you got a man, some kind of solvent heterosexual?" she is asked in her interview). Applications from butch looking women are rejected as too visibly masculine or too visibly lesbian, and therefore too likely to succeed. Throughout her training, Jordan becomes increasingly masculinised and seeks sexual sameness with her environment. This regendering is made most explicit in two crucial scenes in the film – when she is threatened with rape and when she shaves her head. Jordan is captured on a mock mission, tied up and threatened with rape in front of her platoon to prove that women are a liability, and that the men's natural instinct would be to endanger their mission to rescue her. She fights back from the most 'feminine' of positions to overcome her attacker and emerges with the triumphant challenge to "suck my dick": the shift in power is conveyed in phallic terms.

Jordan's symbolic engendering is also written out on her body. She becomes

¹ The pre-publicity for *Tomb Raider* (2001) for example was concerned entirely with Angelina Jolie's breasts. Angelina, apparently, is a 36C. The computer generated body of Lara Croft is a 36DD. In the film, Angelina wore padding, meaning that she appeared onscreen as a 36D. These 'vital' statistics were printed in every single article and review of the film that I read at the time of its release.

increasingly muscular and her periods stop through lack of body fat. She is linked to obvious phallic signifiers – guns, machinery, cigars – and her muscles phallicise her body (“Muscularity is the sign of power – natural, achieved, phallic” (Dyer 1982:71)). Her muscles are fetishised, displayed in excess via a series of close ups. The sequences where she works out in the gym are stylised, fetishised and visually almost homoerotic due to the close ups of her muscles. She is on display for the camera, but more significantly she is on display for her own gaze as she works out in front of the mirror. The starkest physical change to her appearance comes when she shaves her head, and the function of the mirror is also crucial to this sequence². In order to reproduce herself as the masculine subject required to function in her environment, Jordan must first see herself as a masculine object. The only times she looks in the mirror are when she needs to deny her femininity and confirm her masculinity at times when her strength, represented in masculine terms, is called into question.

The narrative function of the mirror is crucial in the context of psychoanalytic models of visual pleasure which rely on an analogy between the screen and the mirror. This autoerotic gaze present within the mirror scenes places the body – or more importantly the recognition of the codings mapped out on to the body – at the centre of textual subjectivity. In Lacanian theory the pursuit of masculinity or rejection of femininity for women involves a conscious distancing from the narcissistic identification with the mother, which is mediated by visual similarity. Since for girls the mirror stage provides the first taste of narcissistic identification with a feminine image in relation to their own, the mirror is the obvious place to subsequently reject this image by constructing a visual

² The head shaving sequence is common to war army narratives in order to demonstrate the power of the institution over the individual. *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) for example shows the trainee marines having their heads shaved en masse but unlike *GI Jane* the mirror is not central to the transformation: to place them in a narcissistic position would detract from the manliness the process aims to achieve. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis dramatically transforms his appearance with a Mohican but the process of transformation takes place off-screen.

distance from a feminine image. "The transvestite wears clothes which signify a different sexuality, a sexuality which, for the woman, allows a mastery over the image and the very possibility of attaching the gaze to desire" (Doane 1982:81). Abandoning the visual codings of femininity and writing masculinity across the body is the clearest visual signifier of an 'active' woman on screen. Figurative regendering therefore forms the main narrative trajectory of this film and is underwritten in the cinematic apparatus. The path to subjectivity is via masculinity for both the heroine and the spectator.

THE FEMININE MASQUERADE

Masculinity is however not the only masquerade written onto the female protagonist to signify the transition to an active subjectivity. In the films discussed in this chapter, it is via an exaggerated femininity that the heroines achieve success. Joan Riviere argued that 'the masquerade of femininity' – an exaggeration of 'feminine' physical and behavioural characteristics such as make-up, clothing, flirting and assuming a passive role – was performed by women in order to reassure the man whose status she has just usurped: "Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she were found to possess it" (1966:213). The feminine masquerade in this context serves a passive function; it puts the woman back in her rightful place in the mind of the male subject, as object of desire rather than intellectual subject. For Riviere there is no distinction between 'genuine' womanliness and the masquerade – they are one and the same. Femininity is constituted via a series of performances. For Mary Ann Doane the process of masquerading offers relief from the problem of "over-identification" on the part of the spectator (see chapter 1). Doane conceives this notion of an over-identification in masochistic terms, referring to Molly Haskell's description of female spectatorship as 'wet, wasted afternoons' (1974.: 80) in which the woman's film become a Body Genre, replicating the (weepy and tragic) action

on screen onto the body of the spectator³.

This 'over-identification' (acting out a narcissistic identification) does not however necessarily demand a masochistic or passive positioning of the female spectator. In the texts discussed here, the narcissistic identification with the woman on screen is structured via a narrative in which she is placed as textual subject rather than object, active rather than passive, sadistic rather than masochistic. Sherrie A. Innes argues that masquerading as an excess of femininity undermines the toughness of tough women. Of Mrs Peel in *The Avengers* (TV 1961-69), she writes "her toughness can be seen as only another example of her play with disguises; we need not fear her if we believe that underneath the tough exterior a "true" woman resides. As we shall see in *Charlie's Angels* and *The Bionic Woman*, masquerade is often used to reveal that a woman's attitude is only skin-deep" (Innes 1999:35). She also argues that the staging of these women as sexual objects also undermines their toughness. This rests on the assumption that toughness is incompatible with femininity, which denotes passivity. Innes does however emphasise how popular these shows were with female audiences, and admits that she loved them herself growing up because they depicted a "fashion utopia":

The Angels presented a fantasy of ideal femininity; viewers never saw the make-up artists, hair stylists, clothing designers, or the many others who laboured to create the Angels' look (ibid.:41).

The masquerade although obvious via the constant shifting of identity is doubly invisible since the processes of disguise are never revealed. There is no makeover sequence which structurally reveals the disguise as artifice and the various masquerades are naturalised. This is also true of the film version of *Charlie's Angels* (2001). The Angels adopt various

³ The defining feature of the Body Genre is the replication of the action on screen on the body of the spectator. Thus melodrama produces tears, horror causes the heart to race and the hairs on the back of the neck to stand on end, porn causes sexual arousal (see Linda Williams 'Body Genres: Gender, Genre and Excess' in *Film Quarterly*, Summer 1991).

guises to carry out their mission – geisha masseuses; foxy garage mechanics; belly dancers; Austrian kissograms; and a dominatrix management consultant – but not once do we see the process of transformation from one identity to the other.

Miss Congeniality (2000) utilises the artifice of masquerade as a narrative event. The film opens with a shot of Gracie, our heroine, as a child, reading a book in the playground. She is wearing glasses and watching some boys pick on another boy. She goes over to help him and he rejects her (better to be bullied than be friends with the geeky girl) so she punches him in the face. The film cuts straight to her adult life as a cop. She is on stakeout in a café, again wearing glasses and observing her suspects from behind a book. She is a professional watcher and a trained killer connoting, in Doane's terms, intellectuality and undesirability: “but the moment she removes her glasses, she is transformed into a spectacle, the very picture of desire” (1982:83). This transition from subject to object, observer to spectacle forms the narrative trajectory of the film: Gracie must go undercover as a contestant at a beauty contest to stop a bomb.

It is continually emphasised that Gracie is the least suitable woman for this job, because she is not really a woman at all. The way she is staged amongst her colleagues emphasises this. When someone asks her for “a woman’s point of view” on a case, a colleague interjects “you’re barking up the wrong tree there”. A female student asks her if “all the women in the field have to wear such masculine shoes”. “No”, she replies, “I got these made by the same guy who did the tattoo on my ass”. She can’t cook, she boxes and wrestles, she eats with her mouth open, looks a mess, and doesn’t “even own a dress”. She is forced to do the assignment because she loses a bet, and forced to ‘masquerade’ as a woman. Via Gracie’s transformation to beauty queen the film articulates then seeks to resolve a conflict between feminism and femininity. Gracie is hostile to the whole concept of a beauty contest – “It’s like feminism never happened” she grumbles to the organiser,

who tells her “I’ve been fighting all my life against your type who think we’re just worthless airheads. You know who I mean. Feminists! Intellectuals! Ugly women!” – the implication being that they are one and the same. Although the dominant trajectory of the film works to rid Gracie of her feminist agenda and propels her towards a heterosexual feminine identity, it also undermines the notions that these two positions are incompatible. Gracie makes friends with the dumb airhead contestants, enjoying the company of other women in stark contrast to the sexist abuse she puts up with in her all male workplace; she stays undercover to protect them off duty when the assignment is pulled; and ends up being voted ‘Miss Congeniality’ by her fellow contestants because they love her so much. The villain of the piece is also another woman, the organiser of the contest and mouthpiece of the anti-feminist agenda of the beauty pageant. Gracie succeeds in getting her woman and locks her up for crimes against feminism, as well as planning to blow up her own beauty contest.

In both *Charlie’s Angels* and *Miss Congeniality*, the physical transformations do not function as part of the subjectivity formation of the films. In the *Charlie’s Angels* film, although each woman is introduced in her off-duty persona, the process of transformation is absent. The women seamlessly shift between identities with no acknowledgement of the subject’s distance from the masquerade, crucial in Doane’s model of female spectatorship for active visual pleasure (1987). Femininity exists as a series of masquerades as in Riviere’s original model. In *Miss Congeniality*, the processes of feminine masquerade are depicted as torturous. The waxing, plucking, highlighting, teeth whitening, walking in high heels and starvation required to reproduce a ‘desirable’ feminine identity are depicted very clearly as ‘unpleasure’, although ultimately the film concludes that this is all worthwhile because Gracie is rewarded with a man and the respect of her fellow women. *Miss Congeniality* is a hybrid action/makeover film. The makeover takes place for practical purposes – Gracie must go undercover – but is also a highly stylised sequence. She is

framed from the point of view of a male gaze; her colleague removes his glasses to get a better look at her and the camera is aligned with his look. A crowd pulls back to reveal Gracie, sashaying down a runway and tossing her hair in slow motion, as a classic 'showgirl moment' (Mulvey 1974: 11-12), only for her to fall flat on her face because she can't walk in stilettos⁴. This scene destroys the illusionary image of perfection present in *Charlie's Angels*, and also emphasises the impracticality of feminine guises (Gracie later wonders where to stash her gun in the swimsuit round). Although both *Charlie's Angels* and *Miss Congeniality* do not present their heroines in the most traditionally 'feminist' context, these films were hugely popular with female audiences and both have spawned sequels.

Sandra Calvert's audience study of *Xena: Warrior Princess* revealed that the female respondents actively enjoyed consuming images of beautiful women: "Future viewing of the series was predicted primarily by the perception that Xena was physically attractive, particularly for women. Men were more likely to view the series again when they perceived Xena to be nurturant" (2001:46). For these viewers, the attractiveness of the heroine was more important for the women than for the men. Susan J. Douglas also argues that the display of femininity is crucial to women's pleasurable consumption of *Charlie's Angels* (the TV series) which is all about: "women working together to solve a problem and capture, and sometimes kill, really awful sadistic men, while having great hairdos and clothes" (1994:213).

THE SPECTATOR AS CONSUMER

The use of Hollywood film and stars to sell cosmetics to female consumers is not new. What is significant about these modern adverts in relation to this study is the type of

⁴ A similar sequence occurs in an episode of *Sex and the City* when Carrie models for Dolce and Gabbana, and also falls over on the catwalk. The desired illusion of perfection is revealed as artifice to the horrified onlookers.

feminine images presented for women to aspire to. This L'Oreal advert relies on the female spectator's narcissistic identification with the Bond Girl in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997) in order to turn that spectator into a consumer and continue that identification out of the pro-filmic event on to the body of the spectator.

Figure 2.1: Advert for L'Oreal 'Tomorrow Never Dies' campaign



In this image, the make-up itself is fetishised, this time staged as an explosion. The product names - 'Explosion', 'Chase', 'Glamour' and 'Black Tie'- associate action with glamour. Jackie Stacey examined the ways in which female audiences took pleasure in acting out their identification with movie stars via 'extra-cinematic identificatory practises'⁵. Of the extra-cinematic identifications she describes it is Copying which has a commodity value in that the tools of this performance – make-up, hair products, and fashion – can be marketed in order to turn the spectator into consumer. Marketing products via the action film also associates them with power. The iconography of *Thelma and Louise* has been used in countless adverts (particularly for cars), for example. *Charlie's Angels* contained a product placement for Nokia phones and had a concurrent advertising campaign, exploiting an aspirational identification with the heroines in order to sell the associated product to

⁵ She categorises these as Pretending (to be favourite film stars), Resembling (a connection with the star is established because of a physical resemblance with the spectator), Imitating (behaviour of stars in favourite roles) and Copying (acting out the identification physically via hairstyles and make-up) (1994).

women. The power of the image of Uma Thurman in a leather cat suit in *The Avengers* (1998) was also available (albeit in a diluted form) to female spectators in the form of the Emma Peel PVC Wonderbra.

The association of products with action heroines and warrior women – particularly the tools of feminine masquerade – provides evidence that female spectators willingly take pleasure in the staging of these women as active protagonists, and take their identifications beyond the pro-filmic event.

This process involves an intersection of self and other, subject and object. In front of a reflection of herself, the spectator attempts to close the gap between her own image and her ideal image, by trying to produce a new image, more like her ideal (Stacey 1994:167).

This spectator-screen relation, and the use of the feminine masquerade in order to close the gap between the self and the ideal, is made into a narrative event in the action films in this chapter. The association of the feminine masquerade with power is also made explicit, although in Riviere's formulation and within many films the masquerade connotes passivity, an objectification in which the woman colludes. It is performed to appease the threatened male subject. However, the use and performance of masquerade is clearly pleasurable to female audiences and consumers, and when adopted by the female killer as a means of disguise it serves a sadistic function. The female assassin uses her skills of masquerade and seduction to get close to her targets and assassinate them. In the action films in this chapter, the masquerade of femininity is utilised by the heroines for sadistic ends and is staged within a context of specifically female visual pleasure. Far from pacifying the threatened male subject, the female assassin or *agent provocateur* uses the tools of the feminine masquerade to seduce and kill her target.

THE ASSASSIN FILM

In *True Lies*, Helen Tasker gets the opportunity to escape her dull domestic life and play at being a spy. The film makes the female subject's identification with a more glamorous more powerful self into a narrative event. She is about to start an affair with a sleazy man who has seduced her with tales of his glamorous and exciting life as a spy, and involves her in his 'missions'. Her husband Harry, a real spy, finds out and in order to simultaneously punish and seduce her, he kidnaps her in disguise and gives her a mock assignment. Her 'mission' is to masquerade as a stripper, while bugging the hotel room of her client. The strip scene is a classic showgirl moment, shot from the vantage point of an anonymous male voyeur (Harry) whose face is in shadow. Before she enters the room, she stops at a mirror to check her appearance, which she finds inadequate for the role of *agent provocateur*, she look dated and frumpy. In order to play the part, she must look the part. She applies make-up, rips the flouncy ruffles off her dress, slicks back her hair and practises her poses, taking pleasure in the temporary loss of self in the performance of an ideal other. She derives pleasure from this process, the visual enactment of becoming her fantasy self, simultaneously inhabiting the positions of exhibitionist and voyeur, the subject and object of her own gaze.

The mirror sequence injects an element of explicitly feminine subjectivity into a sequence otherwise framed entirely from a male gaze. We see the showgirl the moment before she steps out onto the stage for the 'showgirl moment', to use Mulvey's term. These mirror sequences allow women to function as visual spectacle for the female spectator. Although this scene places her as an object for male consumption, Helen is given a subjective gaze in relation to her own body, which is primarily autoerotic in the acting out of fantasy. It is the transformation and being her own object of consumption, rather than the position of exhibitionist which is depicted as pleasurable for Helen. The strip which follows is clearly unenjoyable for her – she is uncomfortable and falls over. Once Helen

has mastered the image of foxy pretend spy, she gets to be an action heroine for real. She also eventually out-glams her love rival, a conflict which culminates in a catfight to the death between the two women (no weapons, just nails, slaps and hair-pulling, but vicious nonetheless)⁶.

This self-generated transformation in front of the mirror exposes the masquerade of femininity and its processes whilst simultaneously effecting both a distance from the image and maintaining a narcissistic proximity to it. The inclusion of this transformation serves to both glamorise the woman by producing her as an object of desire/spectacle/fetish, and simultaneously de-glamorise her by exposing the image as artifice and foregrounding the masquerade. Placing the mirror at the centre of a woman's physical transformation inscribes a subjectivity which is absent from the passive makeover narrative. For Luce Irigaray, it is the confirmation of self offered by the mirror which is "most adequate for mastery of the image, or representation and of self-representation" (1985:93).

This pleasurable identification with an idealised other in the mirror is reproduced in the spectator-screen relationship. Laura Mulvey emphasises this narcissistic identification with an ideal other on screen as crucial to male visual pleasure: "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects 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, giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (1974:12). Jackie Stacey identifies this pleasurable loss of self in an idealised other as even more pronounced for the female spectator. In her research on female audience's fascination with female stars she notes that the relationship is one based on a negotiation of distance and

⁶ The pairing of heroines and villainesses in the action film – which has clear boundaries between good and evil – is repeated in *Miss Congeniality* in the conflict between Gracie and Catherine and *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* in which the good angels take on a former angel gone bad. This axis of conflict between women, defined around opposing tropes of femininity is something I will discuss in detail in Chapter 6.

proximity to the image:

On the one hand they value difference for taking them into a world in which their desires could potentially be fulfilled; on the other they value similarities for enabling them to recognise qualities they already have...Thus the processes here involve the negotiation between self and other, but also between self and imaginary self which temporarily merges with the fictionalised feminine subject to test out new possibilities...operating simultaneously with a desire to maintain the difference between self and ideal. (1994 128-9)

This is made into a narrative event in *True Lies*; Helen is given the chance to temporarily live out a fantasy role. The screen/mirror analogy could not be clearer: for the female spectator, identification with her screen ideal offers the same omnipotent pleasure of the active look.

THE LONG KISS GOODNIGHT: MASCULINITY V. MONSTROSITY

The process of transformation from one identity to another is mapped across the narrative structure and the mechanisms of seeing in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1994). The film orchestrates a split between two personae – Sam and Charly – in the body of one woman and sets up a series of binaries relating to each:

<u>SAM</u>	<u>CHARLY</u>
PASSIVE	ACTIVE
MASOCHISTIC	SADISTIC
CASTRATED	PHALLIC/CASTRATOR
OBJECT	VOYEUR
OBJECT OF VIOLENCE	AGENT OF VIOLENCE
PURSUED VICTIM	TRAINED KILLER

Yvonne Tasker reads the fluctuation between Sam and Charly as a tension between masculinity and femininity and both are mapped across the same body. This split in gender is represented through a contrast in dress: Sam wears flowery, mumsy jumpers, while

Charly is a butch-femme, dressed in the classic white vest of the action hero and defined through an excess of phallic imagery (Tasker 1998:87). Sam is passive and maternal, Charly is a violent, sexually aggressive psycho. These opposing personae represented by the same woman can be read as passive, masochistic and active, sadistic points of identification in the narrative on offer to the female spectator. Charly also functions as masculine within an oedipal trajectory. She is following in the professional footsteps of her dead father, and the narrative operates to overcome her masculinity complex and send her on the path to 'correct and proper femininity' by marrying her off at its conclusion. Charly is saturated with phallic signifiers, knives, language ("suck my dick") and guns – and not just any old gun, but the gun she removes from the crotch of her boss/surrogate father⁷.

This reading of the film as an oedipal trajectory into the masculinity complex is a perfect illustration of Laura Mulvey's model of the female gaze put forward in 'Afterthoughts' (1981). The split in Pearl's desire in *Duel in the Sun* (1946) is the same split personified by Charly and Sam, that of "the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity" (1981:25). Pearl chooses masculinity and dies, Charly assimilates femininity and lives. This model of spectatorship works perfectly in relation to this text, but I would suggest that there is a parallel gaze on offer here which functions as active and sadistic but is also explicitly gendered as feminine. Reading the active/passive split in the protagonist as a split between masculinity and femininity does not tell the whole story, either in the way that the relationship is constructed between the two women on screen, or in relation to the active form of subjectivity on offer to the female spectator.

It is impossible to deny the excess of masculine signifiers attached to Charly. However she is also consistently represented as monstrous, specifically as various tropes of the

⁷ In a scene in *Out of Sight* (1998) Karen is given a gun by her father as a sign of her 'coming of age'. Both women are symbolically bestowed the phallus by their fathers.

monstrous-feminine. She is positioned at various points as *femme castratrice* (through many images which mark her as castrating as well as phallic – chopping carrots, stabbing a would-be rapist in the eye); *femme fatale* (she seduces her targets in order to assassinate them); *vagina dentata* (through repeated flashing shots of her bleeding mouth); and female vampire (she licks her victim's blood off the knife). In other words, she is both powerful and monstrous *because* she is female, not in spite of it.

The Long Kiss Goodnight was the film which inspired this study because of the ways in which it draws the spectator into the gaze of the monstrous woman and I will return to it at the end of chapter 7. Reading this heroine as a monstrous female Other, as castrating rather than phallic, gives the female spectator access to a parallel gaze which theoretically does not exist – that of the active, sadistic female subject. The film functions as a narrative of transformation, across the structure of the film, the heroine's textual positioning shifts from passive, masochistic object to active, sadistic subject and this shift can be read in terms of a shift from passive to active femininity.

The plot in brief is as follows: Sam is a schoolteacher who has amnesia. She woke from a coma to find that she was pregnant. With the help of Mitch, a private detective, and via flashback, she discovers that she was a government assassin called Charlene Baltimore and regressed into the persona of Sam when she had amnesia. The film then becomes less of an investigation into the past and develops into a full-blown action film. *The Long Kiss Goodnight* adopts a male-female buddy pairing in which the woman is dominant. It is Charly who repeatedly saves Mitch rather than vice versa, as she is after all a professional; he is an amateur when it comes to escaping terrorists and stopping bombs. Although the film breaks all the traditional gender rules of action cinema, the power dynamic between Charly and Mitch is structured around the traditionally regressive white dominant/black

subordinate relationship⁸ which is underlined by class. In the closing scenes, Charly is reunited with the family in an idyllic scene and Mitch's family watch him on television. This dynamic is self-conscious. Mitch refers to Charly as 'Miss Daisy' and of her pass at him as "the white lady seducing the hired help". The film also depicts a binary tension around the split personality of Charly/Sam. The two personas merge together as the film progresses, and by the end the woman is a composite of her two opposing selves.

The title sequence runs across family photographs, intercut with images of knives, bullets and guns. The film opens with a voiceover of Samantha telling her story over scenes from her life – domestic, teaching at school, Mrs Claus in the Christmas parade. 'Sam' has only existed for eight years and she has no knowledge of her previous identity: "The woman I used to be has gone. I kissed her goodnight". Her first words are "I was born eight years ago" – she was found unconscious on a beach and pregnant – "I entered the world fully grown". Samantha is established in the opening scenes therefore as lacking a stable identity – she lacks full consciousness, she is an unformed ego, an incomplete self.

Charly first appears in Sam's dreams, via flashbacks and unconscious slips and changes in behaviour, locating her as the return of Sam's repressed self. Sam discovers knife skills she didn't know she had, and the film cuts to close-ups of her chopping carrots and anything else she can get her hands on. This chopping scene marks Charly early on as castrating (scenes of angry women chopping carrots likewise frequently appear in soap opera, television drama etc. – it is a very simple and now ubiquitous visual analogy). Sam starts swearing and has a much deeper voice, denoting the difference between 'Sam' speaking and 'Charly' speaking. An assassin comes to her house, and after her initial terror Sam disposes of him with ease, dodging rocket launchers and using makeshift weapons from her kitchen before finally knocking him out with a pie and breaking his

⁸ See Ed Guerrero (1993) 'The Black Image in Protective Custody'.

neck. She licks the blood from her fingers and gives her husband an evil stare, before she remembers that she has just thrown her child out of a window. Soon after she survives another assassination attempt, relying on her quick wits, physical prowess and newly discovered shooting skills to escape to safety.

The way in which Charly emerges as Sam's repressed self is negotiated via the mirror, in that when Sam stares at her reflection Charly stares back. When the psychical transition is complete, Charly then erases 'Sam' from her body in a transformation sequence in which the mirror plays a crucial role in consolidating the gazes of Charly and Sam. Firstly, as Sam tells her history in the opening scenes, she looks at herself in the mirror, trying to guess her age, and why she has so many scars on her body. Charly's presence is written on to Sam's body via these scars.

While man's castration is genital, woman's castration is depicted as part of a separation from part of her own self and/or separation from another woman. In this scenario, a part but not all of a woman dies. This part constitutes woman's active, phallic self. The self that survives is represented as symbolically castrated through the image of the scar (Creed 1993:132).

These scars support a further representational binary between Sam as castrated (and the distance between seeing the scars and knowing their origins creates castration anxiety) and Charly as phallic, although she is also repeatedly represented as castrating. She is saturated with phallic imagery but is also aligned with various tropes of the monstrous-feminine, and therefore the Charly/Sam relation also negotiates woman's relationship with her monstrous Other.

Sam gets a bump on the head in a car accident which prompts flashbacks of her memory. The camera zooms in on her eye and moves inside to start a dream sequence in which Sam is on a cliff top looking into a mirror. The *mis-en-scene* evokes the imagery of the female gothic: windy cliff tops, candles, thunder and lightening, billowing nightgowns

and the motif of the female doppelganger who, as Deborah Jermyn states, “frequently exists in the form of a woman from the past...who emerges in some sense to haunt the victim and is an expression of her multiple self/selves” (1996:264). In Freud’s writings, the doppelganger is also linked to the uncanny – those things which relate to the notion of a double – a cyborg; a twin; a multiplied object; a ghost or spirit; an involuntary repetition of an act (Creed 1992:53). The appearance of the reflection changes during this sequence: firstly her own reflection appears, then Charly appears as a mirror image of Sam with blonde hair, and the third time the camera cuts to the mirror she has short slicked back blonde hair and heavy make-up. The way their appearances polarize and the fact that Charly speaks *to* Sam marks her as Other rather than part of the same self. Charly is framed as the object of Sam’s gaze.

Next, Sam is in a motel room on the run from whoever is trying to kill her. She opens the suitcase that Mitch found at her old landlady’s house and finds a knife and a gun. Sam initially recoils in horror, then picks up the gun and assembles it automatically while watching herself in the mirror. As she stares at herself holding the knife, her reflection switches to Charly, who leaps out of the mirror and slashes her throat – another hallucination. In this scene, Charly is again located as Other to Sam, and the way that she attacks her marks her as a monstrous other. This time in the mirror Charly has a manic stare, a sadistic gaze directed at Sam, straight to camera and the spectator.

This emphasis on the mirror as negotiation between self and other is also played out in the spectator-screen relationship via the obvious analogy of cinema screen as mirror. Therefore the way that the relationship between Sam and Charly is played out offers a model for female spectator-screen relations with the monstrous feminine. The more powerful Ideal Self which is reflected back in these mirrors is sadistic, placing the female spectator as the masochistic object of the gaze of another woman. Having established

Charly as Sam's monstrous Other (and therefore as monstrous Other to the spectator, since it is Sam's gaze and not Charly's which dominates the first section of the film) and denoted her as both powerful and sadistic, the film goes on to invite an identification with this monstrous Other through the way that it shifts point of view from Sam to Charly in a scene which forms a key axis point in the narrative.

Before this transformation into monstrous Other is enacted on the body in another mirror sequence, it is enacted figuratively via the textual positioning of the heroine. Aside from the narrative quest for her identity, the bad guys (Charly's former colleagues at the CIA) who tried to kill Charly before, are back to finish the job), which gives provides 'action' in the action film. They have planted a bomb, giving Charly a mission beyond saving herself. During the first section of the film Sam is under attack, in danger and on the run, but doesn't know why. Her narrative positioning is passive. It is only the skills she has retained as Charly that save her from repeated attacks. After three attempts, they finally catch her and torture her.

This scene is key to the way the textual positioning of the female subject in this film shifts from passive to active subjectivity, from masochistic to sadistic positioning, from pursued object to active aggressor, from housewife to professional killer. The first shot is of Sam tied to a water wheel, or to be more accurate a shot of her breast, followed by a shot of her bound hands and then her terrified face. The camera is physically positioned with the gaze of her captors and is explicitly sadistic, as is their language: "A woman's face is never so beautiful as when it's contorted in pain, look at the beauty of childbirth". This scene uses bondage, S&M imagery and medieval torture ("drown the wench") to emphasise Sam's status as passive object of the sadistic gaze of the male subject, and then directly reverses those terms by establishing Charly as active subject.

As Sam is repeatedly ducked underwater, she gets flashbacks to her former life, the more she recalls, the more capable she is of escaping. The first time underwater, she sees the dead body of her former mentor (the one with the gun in his pants) and emerges screaming still unaware why she is being tortured. The second time underwater cuts to Sam's flashback, as Charly in the boot of a car, the sequence opening with a point of view shot from her perspective of the same men who are torturing her in the present. This is the first staged use of the I-camera, and it is from the perspective of 'Charly', who has until now appeared on screen only as the object of Sam's gaze. During this sequence, the gaze is aligned firmly with Charly. Before he drugs her and throws her off a cliff, it is implied that one of her captors is about to rape her, but as he runs his hands under her top she leaps up and stabs him in the eye with his own syringe. This mini-rape revenge drama, as I will discuss in more detail later, specifically marks her as castrating and presents symbolic castration as a response to rape (it is the same man who attacked her at home, bursting in and shouting "I want my eye back bitch" – the blinding acts as a form of symbolic castration). He then shoots her and she plunges off the cliff top into the sea. In the present she resurfaces from her torture as Charly rather than Sam. She goads them into submerging her again, frees herself while underwater, retrieves her mentor's gun from his crotch and shoots her captor when she gets to the surface. "Who's Samantha?" she says to him when he pleads for his life.

The active/passive split between Charly and Sam is reinforced by the narrative pattern of the film which is structured around this pivotal point. Until this scene, Sam is passive, under attack and does not control narrative events. She is acted upon rather than propelling the narrative action. The nature of her gaze is therefore passive and masochistic as there is no narrative or figurative power aligned with her gaze. Until this point, Charly is positioned as Other to Sam: she threatens her, she scares her and she is positioned as an object of fear. During the torture scene, Sam recovers her memory and becomes Charly,

her repressed monstrous Other, and it is the monstrous gaze which then takes over.

The escape from the water wheel is the point in the film at which Sam/Charly is at her most masculine. The following scene however is the key point which marks her as feminine, and completes the transition to Charly via a physical makeover in which Charly reclaims her body from Sam. The sequence opens with a shower scene focusing on close ups of the wounds on her body followed by a 60 second, 20 shot sequence of Charly rewriting her own identity over the body which has been occupied by Sam. The transformation is told via close-ups of 'Sam' applying make-up and cutting and dyeing her hair to look like the woman who took the place of her reflection in the mirror in her dreams. She adopts the masquerade of femininity (exaggerated femininity in the form of bleached hair and heavy make-up) in order to establish a visual and symbolic distance from Sam and take up a subjective position. Charly sees Sam as separate from her 'true' self – "Look what *she* did to *my* ass" – in contrast to the way that Sam refers to Charly as part of herself: "Charly was *my* name in the dream".

In the final mirror exchange between Sam and Charly, the physical transformation is depicted in two shots. Firstly the image of Sam stares both into the mirror and straight into the camera. She opens the cabinet and closes it, and Charly's reflection stares back from the mirror, again straight into the camera. This gaze straight into the mirror and straight into camera constructs a moment of unity between subject and object. The cinema screen is literally represented as mirror, the female subject is both the subject and object of her own gaze, and the spectator is positioned as both the object that is reflected and the subject looking.

After the transformation, Charly becomes instantly sexually aggressive and makes a pass at Mitch, who rejects her. This analogy with the *femme fatale* as both sadistic killer

and active agent of the gaze further locates Charly as a manifestation of active femininity. As a CIA assassin, she seduced her targets in order to assassinate them; in the present, she still flirts with the bad guys. In the context of this film, the masquerade is utilised in order to signify power and dominance over men rather than weakness.

The relation between Sam and Charly is also played out through their respective relationship to the child as the socialised mother versus the monstrous other. Motherhood is not a choice for either of them: Sam awoke from her coma to find she was pregnant and Charly discovers that she had a child whilst living under another identity. As Charly re-emerges from Sam's unconscious she starts shouting at her child (specifically, Samantha's child): "Life is pain, get used to it" she snaps at Caitlin when she breaks her arm. Sam is aligned with maternity; Charly ransacks Caitlin's room to get the key to her safety deposit box. The first time Charly looks at Caitlin, it is through the sight of a gun. It is the child however who consolidates the opposing selves. Charly is all set to abandon Samantha's life when Caitlin is kidnapped and Charly willingly offers herself in exchange. Charly then sets out to rescue her, knowing she faces death in doing so. "They'll blow my head off, you know", she says to Mitch, "this is the last time I'll ever be pretty." Although Charly rescues her and risks her own life doing it, it is only when Caitlin saves them both from death that Charly reconciles her identity as the child's mother by seeing a reflection of herself and embraces her. There is no mention of Charly's own mother. When her father died, she was 'adopted' by the CIA group he worked for, and trained in his trade.

The film firstly locates monstrous-feminine as an object of terror for the threatened female subject and then goes on to structure identification with her monstrous gaze. Although every structural device is utilised to focus the gaze on Charly as the dominant point of view in the text, she is initially set up as a threat to Sam. She attacks her in her dreams, she bursts out of a mirror to slit Sam's throat, she attacks her child. However,

rather than the monstrous-feminine being expelled from the text as part of a traditional demarcation ritual, she is absorbed into the identity of the female subject. It is this relation and its resolution which marks *The Long Kiss Goodnight* as a feminine rather than a masculine narrative. For masculine-identified female spectators, it also offers a masculine path down the Oedipal trajectory, but this is not the only story told within this film.

The resolution of this film is unsatisfactory, and provides a form of closure which puts the woman back in her 'rightful' place. Having seduced the spectator into the glamorous life as a spy the film then re-domesticates its heroine. Charly has killed all the bad guys, saved Niagara Falls from being blown up and rescued the child, then goes back to being a teacher and mother. When the president offers her more exciting spy work, she tells him she has papers to mark. This scene also plays on the intertextuality of Geena Davis' role in *Thelma and Louise*. She is driving a pink convertible; even the air freshener in the car has a logo of a silhouette of a naked woman, the same as the truck driver's mud flaps in the earlier film. The final scene is an idyllic sequence, Charly sitting in 'Little House on the Prairie' scenery surrounded by her family. The resolution does however absorb rather than expel Charly's monstrosity: the final shot is of her throwing knives around for pleasure and smiling to herself. The composite of Charly and Sam is also written out on the body signified through the hairstyle, which is mid-shade and length between Charly and Sam.

Put within the terms that Freud sets out on female Oedipal development *The Long Kiss Goodnight* tells an Oedipal story, working towards a reconciliation with what Freud refers to as 'normal heterosexual femininity' (1933), the resolution of Sam's neurosis (the inability to achieve a stable identity via amnesia) and Charly's masculinity complex. The woman at the end of the film is a composite of the two selves. This attraction of female viewers to the 'dark' side of the persona is supported by Sandra Calvert's research into

Xena audiences: "Women...saw Xena as a role model most when she had an integrated shadow, that is, she accepted her dark impulses and integrated them into her current personality" (Calvert 2001:16). She concludes that "The most effective formula for presenting heroic female portrayals [the one which would most encourage female viewers to continue viewing the series] is one in which female characteristics triumph, such as physical attractiveness, nurturance, compassion and using the mind over the sword." (ibid.17). *The Long Kiss Goodnight* specifically structures a sadistic identification with the monstrous feminine, which is then consolidated into a more passive positioning at the end of the film. The heterosexual resolution brings Charly back under the control of a man, in her rightful place as wife and mother.

This reading of Charly as monstrous-feminine and of the split between Charly and Sam as a split between different tropes of femininity opens up a space in which the delineation of the boundary between active and passive is not a simple opposition of masculinity and femininity. Femininity has both a sadistic and masochistic form, an active and passive function which is mapped across the film through the way that these positions are aligned with the gaze of the woman on screen.

The Assassin however utilises a similar structure and system of meaning, but works towards an open-ended conclusion in which the heroine rejects a return to the heterosexual unit. The film opens with a group of junkies robbing a drugstore. There is a shootout with the police and only one of the robbers, Maggie, survives. She shoots a policeman before she is arrested. She is dirty, unkempt and the opening scenes mark her as violent and out of control. She is found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. Her death is staged and she wakes up in an underground government training school for assassins, and is given a choice: either she enlists or she will end up in the grave which already bears her name. The opening scenes establish her as violent, unsocialised and abject (as she is given the

injection, the camera cuts to urine trickling down her legs, this shot serves a symbolic rather than a narrative function). She attacks everyone she comes into contact with, and it is this natural disposition towards violence that prompts the CIA to select her. Since she has no choice, Maggie joins the training programme to become a CIA assassin. The training has three functions – to hone her assassin skills, to socialise her and to transform her appearance: since she is already a natural fighter, it is feminine skills which she needs to learn.

The film operates as a narrative of transformation, from natural born killer to professional assassin, from lack of control to autonomy. This transformation is dependent on Maggie's ability to assimilate feminine qualities as much as the technical killing skills of the assassin. Her socialisation and physical transformation is overseen by Amanda, a matriarchal figure who is responsible for teaching etiquette and grooming skills to the recruits. Maggie is taught how to eat, speak, walk, use correct grammar and speak different languages.

As in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, the scenes set around a mirror are key to this transformation. The first part of the physical transformation happens in front of a mirror. Maggie is dressed in a vest, combat shorts and boots and looks out of place in the chic Regency surroundings of Amanda's room. She is initially stropic and uncooperative. Amanda starts gently but gets nasty when Maggie refuses to smile like she's told to. Maggie is unable to change her behaviour until she changes her appearance. Although the major physical transformation happens predominantly off-screen, the mirror still plays a crucial role. Its presence forms an essential part of the formation of subjectivity in these films. Amanda sits her down in front of a mirror and puts a blonde wig on her, and forces Maggie to look at herself. "Belief is half of being" she says, meaning that Maggie is unable to function in the role of *agent provocateur* until she sees herself in those terms in the

mirror for the consumption of her own gaze, just as Helen Tasker does in *True Lies*. The subject has to narcissistically identify with her own image in order to function in the role. "You have to find your feminine strength", Amanda tells her, "the sun to balance the moon, the poet to balance the warrior". In other words, Maggie's success is dependent on her assimilation of feminine rather than masculine qualities. Aside from the technical skills of fighting and shooting her power lies in the ability to masquerade.

Across the film, Maggie assumes various identities: she initially gives a false name to the police; she is discharged from the programme with a new identity ('Claudia' the computer programmer); she is given the code name Nina; and she is given two assignments where she has to masquerade firstly as a chambermaid to plant a bomb in a hotel room and secondly to pose as a target's girlfriend in order to get close enough to assassinate him. She watches videos of the woman she is imitating, noting every gesture, accent and visual appearance. Her job is dependent on her ability to observe and disguise herself as other women. Maggie also adopts this imitation in her domestic life. She is discharged from the training centre, rents an apartment and goes to the supermarket to buy food, but having no idea what to buy she follows another woman around copying everything she puts in her trolley.

Maggie has a traditional masculine mentor figure in the form of Bob, the man who recruits and trains her. Under the training program, he controls every aspect of her life and she has no autonomous power. He is less her mentor than her jailor. Although she is defined as a sadistic killer from the opening scene, Maggie occupies a passive position within the text; she has no autonomous control over her life while she is still under the control of the agency. After confronting Bob about making her assassinate someone while on a romantic trip with her boyfriend, she relaxes by watching Bette Davis shoot Claude

Rains in *Deception* (1946)⁹. Her final mission is one of self-rescue: after she has messed up her last assignment by being unable to look her target in the eye and shoot him, the CIA send someone to dispose of her. She escapes and kills him – a particularly nasty death under a car – but it is only because Bob is in love with her that he tells the CIA that she is dead so she is able to walk away. Although she occupies active subjective space (for example we share her gaze via the point of view shot as she looks through the sight of a gun) she lacks narrative agency in that she never fully autonomous until she escapes.

Many action films tell the Oedipal story of identification with the father and the pursuit of masculinity. *The Assassin* also contains an Oedipal trajectory, but rather than pursuing the path to either masculinity or femininity (as in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*), the film works towards finding a balance in its subject. It is the path away from the Law of the Father. Initially, Maggie refuses to accept the paternal authority of either Bob or the CIA; she is eventually forced to because she has no choice. Her lack of power could be read as a form of castration which prompts the basic Oedipal trajectory of the film. She transfers her affection from Amanda (the mother) to Bob (the father) and then on to her boyfriend JT. However, the film does not resolve itself, as one would expect with a heterosexual union. Rather than attaining what Freud refers to in ‘Femininity’ as “normal heterosexual femininity” (Freud 1933:424) via marriage (symbolic or literal) to JT, she rejects both marriage and the life of the assassin.

It is the ending of *The Assassin* which makes it a transgressive text. Although Maggie has a boyfriend, the film does not push towards a romantic conclusion to contain her through marriage. After escaping, she leaves him and the film ends with her walking away. The title credits roll over a photo of her face that her boyfriend took, slowly

⁹ In *Deception* (1946) Bette Davis shoots her benefactor/mentor for interfering in her marriage. The intertextual use of the film shows that Maggie is having murderous thoughts towards Bob.

zooming in to end on a freeze frame of her eyes returning her gaze to the camera, which places her at the film's conclusion as an active textual subject, a position reached along a feminine rather than a masculine path.

Narratives of transformation are commonly enacted on the body of the women on screen. For example, each path of the traditional Oedipal trajectory in women can be seen in psychical form on screen, acted out by the women on their own bodies. Neurosis, trauma or the inability to find a stable sexual identity is physically written out on the body of the woman – in *The Accused* (1988) Sarah cuts off her hair as a response to rape, in *Wild at Heart* (1990) Lula's mother smears make-up across her face in a psychotic frenzy. The physical enactment of the masculinity complex can be seen in films such as *GI Jane* on both the body of the heroine and her textual positioning. Similarly, the path to 'normal heterosexual femininity' in Freud's terms is written across the body of the heroine in countless makeover narratives (e.g. *Grease* (1978), *Pretty Woman* (1990), *The Breakfast Club* (1985) – the list is endless) in which the heroine undergoes a physical transformation and is rewarded with a man.

Models of spectatorship – particularly those relating to narcissistic identification – operate around an analogy of screen and mirror, and the mirror scenes form a crucial part of the way that the female gaze is mapped across the narrative. The mirror scenes allow for the creation of a distance between the image and the visual staging of the artifice that creates the image within the text of the film, as well as in the spectator-screen relation. In the films discussed here the construction and performance of this artifice is depicted as pleasurable to the female subject but most importantly has a sadistic application. Both the active and passive sides of the woman can be read as feminine in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, opening up a space in which the monstrous-feminine is situated both as an object of fear and object of identification.

CHAPTER 3: DEADLIER THAN THE MALE

– THE FEMALE SERIAL KILLER

The female serial killer is absent from critical accounts of the serial killer film. To fill this gap, this chapter firstly looks at the most typical ‘real life’ archetype of the female serial killer – the ‘Angel of Death’ – and her screen representation in *Misery* (1990). Secondly, I will examine the narrative translation of the ‘true crime’ story of the case of Aileen Wuornos. It is not my intention to rake through the details of the case again here (particularly since Wuornos’ own account of the killing has changed several times over the course of writing this study), but instead to examine the ideological staging of her story and the way her gaze is represented in the TV movie *Overkill* (1992). Lastly, *American Psycho 2* (2002) and *Snapdragon* (1993) fit into the narrative patterns of traditional serial killer films. They also share striking similarities in the staging of their killers. All three stories are told from the point of view of the female killer, and structure an identification with this sadistic gaze via flashbacks, voiceovers and point of view shots. These films are populated by women who, as well as being killers themselves, are also obsessed with other serial killers. In other words, the subjects’ identification with a sadistic gaze is made into a narrative event and subsequently offers a model for the spectator-screen relations between the female spectator and the gaze of the female killer onscreen.

GENERIC CONVENTIONS OF THE SERIAL KILLER FILM

The serial killer film is a narrative tale type rather than a specific subgenre, although most are found on the peripheries of the horror/thriller genre. Critical accounts of the serial killer film often group it together with the Slasher film (Taubin (1995), Simpson (2000)). There are however a number of differences between the Slasher film and the serial killer film – such as differences in the narrative trajectory and the way the gaze is mapped - that are significant enough to separate them for the purposes of this study. The concurrent police

investigation is a key part of the serial killer subgenre and is absent from Slasher films, narratively and figuratively. The police and other authority figures are useless and ineffectual within the Slasher text, whereas the serial killer film privileges police procedure and intelligence. Serial killer films are extremely self referential: they feast on statistics and the profiling of the killer is a key element of this self-reflexivity. The relationship between the killer and the cop on their trail is often a battle of minds and both carry an intellectual discourse. The staging and psychosexual make-up of the killers themselves also differs significantly. Slasher killers are 'other', in that they are marked as psychotic by their 'gender distressed' and 'human, but only just' appearance (Clover 1992:27), while serial killers blend into a crowd. On a technicality Slasher killers are mass murderers rather than serial killers – the killings all take place as part of the same plan, and there is no 'cooling off' period between killings¹.

There is no single paradigmatic narrative to use as a control but serial killer films share certain generic features². The serial killer film has three basic narrative structures: the killer's story (*Henry*, *Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986), *Natural Born Killers* (2000), *American Psycho* (2000)); the cop's story (*Copycat* (1995), *Silence of the Lambs* (1992), *Seven* (1995)); or a dual focus structure depicting both (*Kiss the Girls* (1997)). All of these either work towards the killer being captured/killed (ending A) or escaping back into society for a franchise deal (ending B). Although there are films which feature point of view of the victim in places – *Misery* for example is shot from the point of view of one potential victim – the nature of serial killing (multiple victims) mean that this gaze is rarely

¹ "Mass murderers kill many victims, but they do so as part of one single plan. The killings are not separate and there is no cooling off period between murders. The key point to remember is that the mass killer does not cool down and reflect upon each homicide before taking another life. Instead, these murderers kill one victim and then proceed directly to another as part of one emotional thought process." (Scurman-Kauflin 2000:9).

² Phillip L. Simpson attributes the generic features of serial killer fiction to Thomas Harris: "It is little exaggeration to say Thomas Harris has, for all practical purposes, created the formula for mainstream serial killer fiction back in 1981 with the publication of *Red Dragon*. His 1988 follow up, *The Silence of the Lambs* solidified the formula (controlling Gothic tone, two killers, a dark and troubled law-enforcement outsider in uneasy alliance with a murderer)" (Simpson 2000:70).

fully consolidated within the text.

The defining feature of a serial killer film which separates it from Slasher/psycho films is the self-reflexive discourse on its subject matter. A key element of the narrative structure is the psychological unravelling of the killer, and the importance of the profile in catching the killer. In most serial killer films (apart, obviously, from those discussed in this chapter), the killer is male and the victims are female. In the Slasher film, both men and women are killed, although the female deaths are more pronounced. The male serial killer in Hollywood film has a symbiotic relationship with his real life counterpart. Real killings form the basis of Hollywood narratives, and in turn the fetishisation of the killer on screen gives rise to added interest in real life events³ – or, as D’Cruz states, “The fictional and non-fictional texts feed off each other in such a way that they become indistinguishable from each other in the public imagination”(1994:328). Serial killers on film are of course exaggerated versions of their real life counterparts, and the staging of the killing and the overall symbolic economy of the text often imbue the killer with an exotic otherness and an intellectual dialogue. Amy Taubin states that the serial killer is represented by Hollywood as one of “three pathological archetypes: the child murderer; the Bluebeard figure whose victims are wives (i.e. good girls); and Jack the Ripper who specialises in killing prostitutes (i.e. bad girls)” (1995:124). Philip L. Simpson organises his study of fictional representations of serial killers into five categories: outlaw artist, visionary, hyper-intelligent gameplayer, masculine hero or demonic punisher (2000:22). Critical accounts of the killer within these films do not discuss or even acknowledge the presence of female serial killers, either in real life or onscreen.

Women in peril are clearly a feature of the serial killer film, however they also

³ Ed Gein, for example, has been cited as the inspiration for *Psycho* (1960), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1992), as well as his own biopic, *Ed Gein* (2001).

serve as cops and profilers as well as corpses. In both *Copycat* (1995) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1992), for example, the female cops on the trail of the killer occupy the same narrative space as the heroines of the Slasher film (see chapter four for a more detailed discussion). She is the Final Girl graduated to professional status, with a legitimate motive and licence to hunt down the killer. They function as both hunter and the prey: not only do they have to uphold the law to protect other women but they must save themselves, because they are always placed in danger at some stage. As the only cop up to the job, Clarice Starling enters Buffalo Bill's lair alone, all her colleagues on stakeout at the wrong location. In *Copycat*, the female profiler and the female cop must save each other when the men supposed to protect them are all dead. They are also both 'special' to the killer in some way. In *Copycat*, Helen is a criminal profiler, well known and as a result "a pin-up girl for serial killers". Those seeking notoriety know they have made it when they become the subject of one of her books. This also puts her in danger – for her obsessive fans, she is also a prize trophy and fetish object: two of them try to kill her, but they are also desperate for her attention. In *Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice is almost killed by Buffalo Bill⁴, but she is also intellectually fetishised by Hannibal Lecter. At the end on the film when he has escaped from custody his last act is to ring to tell her she is not in danger. Again, in *Hannibal* (2001) when she captures him and handcuffs him to her, he cuts off his own hand rather than hers in order to escape. This investigative gaze carries with it the same active/passive, sadomasochistic viewing pleasure as that of the Final Girl (see Chapter 4): the woman fluctuates between victim and predator and ultimately emerges victorious.

⁴ This is only because she tries to arrest him. His victims are not random women – he needs their skin, so targets fat women and starves them before he kills them to loosen their skin. In this respect, Clarice is too thin to be one of his victims.

THE FEMALE SERIAL KILLER

Critics differ on the precise definition of a serial killer. On the most basic level, the serial killer is defined by the multiple number of bodies that pile up⁵. There is a cooling off period between killings, which is what distinguishes the serial killer from the mass murderer. Demographically, profile of a typical serial killer is a white male, age 25-35, who kills strangers (mainly women) in his own racial group. They are also American: "With just 5% of the world's population, the US is believed to have 75% of the world's serial killers" (Taubin 1993:124). This profile, used by the FBI, obviously neglects female serial killers. Twelve to fifteen percent of all murder is committed by women, and 17% of all serial killers are women (Hickey 1991). Most research on serial killers is focussed exclusively on men. In *The New Predator: Women Who Kill* (2000), Deborah Schurman-Kauflin draws the following conclusions about female serial killers which differentiate them from men:

- A male serial killer is usually identified because bodies are found with signs of violent death, but female killers are identified because of a cluster of deaths, which individually arouse no suspicion⁶.
- They are geographically stable, whereas male killers are more likely to drift.
- The 'Angel of Death' is the most prevalent form of female serial killer. They are usually care givers, they gravitate towards female dominated professions⁷. Male killers render their victims defenceless, whereas female serial killers tend to choose victims who are already weak – the elderly, children, the sick in their care – and over 50% of their victims are either very young or very old (Hickey 1991). In Schurman-Kauflin's

⁵ Although researchers differ on how many victims constitute a serial killer. Geberth argues that two victims make a serial killer (1996:438), Keeney and Heide state three victims (1994:384), Dietz (1986) suggests that in order to be a serial killer 10 victims are needed, whereas Hickey simply defines serial murder as killing over time (1991). All cited by Schurman-Kauflin (2000:7)

⁶ Because they leave less evidence, they are able to kill for longer periods of time without being apprehended. The average male serial killer kills for 4.2 years before being apprehended. The average length of time from murder to arrest for a female serial killer is 8.4 years (Hickey 1997).

⁷ "Female serial killers are typically raised in families where there are clear traditionally defined roles within the family unit" (Kirby 1998). "Because they come from homes where sex roles are rigorously defined, female serial killers gravitate towards female dominated professions" (Schurman-Kauflin 2000:17). Of the seven female serial killers profiled by Schurman-Kauflin two were babysitters, one was a nurse, one a housewife who killed her own children, one a secretary, one a stripper and one was a prostitute (ibid.:60).

study seven women killed 36 victims, not one of whom was “capable and healthy”(2000:62).

- They do not generally mutilate or torture their victims: “*Male* serial killers use overt murder methods such as bludgeoning, stabbing and strangling. But *female* serial killers typically kill using covert methods such as suffocation and poisoning” (Schurman-Kauflin 2000:10).
- While men kill strangers, women are more likely to kill people they know⁸.
- Male serial killers tend to fall into a specific age group, women kill at any age⁹. Similarly, the average age of the victim is higher than for male killers (48.5 years – no comparative figure given for male killers), because many of the victims were elderly (2000:61).
- Male killers kill mainly women, but female killers kill both men and women. In Schurman-Kauflin’s study the victim split for female murderers was 44% female and 56% male (2000:61).

THE FEMALE SERIAL KILLER IN HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

Despite Hollywood’s obsession with violent women, female serial killer narratives are rare. As stated previously, women commit 17% of all serial murder. The percentage of female serial killers in Hollywood film who are women is much smaller. When they do appear, the films rarely draw upon discourse about their real-life counterparts in the same way that male serial killer films feed off real crimes. There are two dominant archetypes of the female serial killer: the ‘Black Widow’ (women who kill their husbands or men they are involved with) and the Mercy Killer or ‘Angel of Death’ (women who kill patients in their care). Although there are many films in this study in which the female multiple killer is technically a serial killer, the ‘Black Widow’ figure tends to appear in narratives other than the serial killer film. The *femme fatale* for example is often a serial killer, but because the genre she inhabits stages her differently from the typical serial killer film, I have separated them in this analysis.

⁸ Of all the female serial killers recorded between 1826 and 1995, over 70% killed someone they know, whereas only 24% killed strangers (Hickey 1997).

⁹ The sample group of seven female serial killers interviewed by Schurman-Kauflin range from the ages of 17-58 (Schurman-Kauflin 2000:60).

THE ANGEL OF DEATH

Misery (1990) is perhaps the most 'authentic' Hollywood representation of a typical female serial killer. She is presented as monstrous in the context of a horror film, and from the point of view of a male victim. Annie Wilkes is an archetypal Angel of Death, an ex-nurse with a captive patient – a carer who kills those in her charge. Hollywood tends towards representing its killers as lithe and lovely, but in Schurman-Kauflin's study all the killers were overweight (2000:81), and Annie fits this profile. The film however does not follow the classic narrative pattern of its tale type or indeed the criteria for film selection in this study: the film is not shot from her point of view and she dies. However I include it because of the nature of its killer and to demonstrate the distance between the nature of women who kill, and Hollywood's eroticisation of the female killer in later films in this chapter and in later chapters. The film is shot from the point of view of one potential victim, and it is only implied later on in the film that there are other victims. *Misery* was marketed as a horror film, so clearly it takes liberties in order to make the monstrous woman as scary as possible.

Paul Sheldon, a writer, crashes his car in a snowstorm and is rescued by Annie, his "number one fan". He is missing presumed dead, because his car is found buried in the snow. Paul has broken legs so Annie nurses him back to health, but then refuses to let him leave. When Paul has begun to recover and tries to escape she turns psychotic, and breaks his ankles so that he can't leave¹⁰. The camera reinforces the active/passive dynamic, and she is shot from low angles from his point of view, making her look even bigger and more imposing. The house is isolated: the only visitor is the local sheriff, who becomes suspicious and links Annie to Paul's disappearance, only to be shot by her. Paul eventually

¹⁰ In the Stephen King novel she cuts off his feet, making her staging as the agent of castration

manages to kill her and escape.

Annie's aim is not to kill Paul, but to keep him imprisoned and dependent on her. She used to be a nurse, so in this respect the killer/carer, victim/invalid dynamic of the female serial killer is born out in the bare bones of the narrative. We learn that Annie has killed before: when she goes out and Paul searches her house, he finds a scrapbook filled with newspaper cuttings about a nurse's trial for killing babies in her care, and cuttings about other unexplained deaths. This is the only glimpse into her past, or reference to events outside the timespace of the narrative, and there are no flashback moments or back-story indicating what made her a killer – the scrapbook serves merely to indicate that she is dangerous. It is also the only reference to her being a multiple killer rather than a deranged fan.

The basic story of a nurse killing her patients is imbued with the exoticism of the fan-idol relationship. It provides Annie with extra impetus to keep Paul locked up – he is not a randomly selected victim. Lisa A. Lewis states that cultural representations of female fans usually associate them with “danger, abnormality and silliness” and well as “pathological deviance” (1992:1). Annie's obsessive fan worship relates to Paul as the writer who she keeps as a trophy, but also to over-identification with Misery, the heroine of Paul's novels. Her name alone indicates that the nature of this identification is masochistic. Paul has killed Misery off because he wants to write ‘proper’ novels rather than trashy women's gothic romances. When she reads of Misery's death Annie is very, very angry at the loss of her heroine, and it is at this point that she switches from carer to captor. She forces Paul to burn the only copy of his manuscript and rewrite it to bring Misery back from the dead.

Gamman and Makinen read female fan behaviour as a form of anthropological fetishism: "The fan's primary desire is to be in the star's presence and pay homage to the star" (1994:20). This would explain why Annie keeps Paul as a trophy rather than kill him. His novels function as "metonymic substitution for the *part* standing in for the *whole*" (ibid.:20). However, there is no evidence that she exhibited any form of obsessive fan behaviour (stalking, making shrines, etc.) before they met, which was through pure chance anyway. Misery herself functions as an alternative object of desire, and Paul as the totem object which allows Annie access. Annie is also a sympathetic figure in that she is isolated and alone. Annie's attachment to Misery's life acts as a substitute for similar attachments in her own. By forcing Paul to burn his manuscript, she is able to control what happens to Misery. The final scene sees Paul having lunch with his agent. As he looks at an approaching waitress pushing a desert trolley and holding a knife, Annie's face appears. Reality is quickly restored, but for the male subject the threat is still out there, every "number one fan" is another potential Annie Wilkes.

AILEEN WUORNOS AND THE 'TRUE-CRIME' STORY

Aileen Wuornos is the most famous female serial killer. She was convicted of killing seven men and executed by lethal injection on the 9th October 2002. She has so far been the subject of three films, *Overkill* (1992), *Monster* (2003) and the Nick Broomfield documentary *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1993). It is not my intention to go into the rights and wrongs of the case here, rather to examine the way that Aileen Wuornos has been cinematically portrayed and the ideological implications of how she has been represented on screen. This analysis will examine the construction of the real life female killer in relation to the structural implication and absolution of her guilt through the use of masquerade, the constructed absence in depicting the lesbian relationship, and the representation of Wuornos as victim rather than killer. The notoriety of her crimes and the American acceptance of courtroom cameras and the televisation of trials ensured that

Wuornos received maximum publicity. This began before she was even arrested as soon as the story broke that there was a female serial killer at work. The TV movie *Overkill* was produced before she was even convicted, which explains its deliberate ambiguity over her guilt although it does go to great lengths to present her violence against men in the context of a background of violence committed by men, and does little to engage sympathy with the victims.

I was initially undecided as to where to place this film within this study. In many ways the Wuornos case and the *Overkill* film could just as easily be placed within the category of the rape revenge narrative. There is no doubt that Wuornos has a history of rape, paternal sexual abuse and maternal neglect to contextualise the murders. It is mentioned in the film that her father hung himself whilst in prison for sodomising a seven year old child, and that she was raped as a child by both her brother and grandfather¹¹. There is also an element of *Thelma and Louise* present as a cinematic reference point: a parallel narrative of the sympathetic cop who appreciates that he is chasing a victim of abuse rather than an abuser, but who nevertheless continues his pursuit, as well as visual similarities – lots of shots of Lee (as she is referred to in *Overkill*) and her girlfriend Tyria driving down open roads in a convertible to a Country and Western soundtrack.

Structurally, the film is a dual focus narrative with two parallel storylines: Wuornos killing her victims and the police on her trail, slowly catching up with her. Lee is inscribed with structural point of view through the use of flashback, I-camera and shared knowledge and experience. The police narrative also serves to give background information about Lee

¹¹ *The Selling of a Serial Killer* asserts that the crime spree is essentially Wuornos “killing her father over and over again”. Wuornos claimed self-defence in court in each of the seven counts of murder, stating in court that “self-defence is self defence, no matter how many times”. She was initially tried in court for the first murder alone, although the judge allowed evidence and insinuations about the other charges to be presented in court. What was not mentioned in court as she faced this first charge was that her victim, Richard Mallory, had served a 10 year sentence for attempted rape. Presented in a different light as a single entity, this first attack and subsequent killing were believed to be the events which triggered the killing spree.

and the killings in the absence of their direct depiction. Lee's history is told through flashback and information inserted into conversations. Each incident in the present is linked to her childhood through the use of flashback. When she kills the second man, she goes through his possessions and finds and opens a music box. The scene cuts to a shot of herself as a child using the music link past and present, dancing in front of a mirror dressed as a ballerina, before her father comes in and hits her. The ballerina/music box is a recurrent motif throughout the film, appearing as she dances drunk in a bar and in the final sequence as she makes her confession. There are also other flashbacks featuring violent men, which link abuse in her past to abuse in her present. It is through these images that Lee is cast as the primary point of identification rather than an object of terror. Every narrative device is utilised to encourage the spectator to identify with her.

However, although the traditional devices denote structural point of view to Lee – it is her experience and knowledge we share – this film is evidently Tyria's story, and Tyria's absolution. Although the film is a surprisingly balanced and unsensationalised portrayal of Wuornos, it is even more so in its treatment of Tyria. The most notable absence from this film is the lesbian relationship between Lee and Tyria, which is not only absent, but is overtly disavowed. There are two scenes in which it is made clear that they sleep in separate bedrooms, and there is an open denial that they are anything other than friends. Tyria tells her sister that "Lee's like a sister to me, like I am to you. We take care of each other. I'm the only family she's got. She needs me". The removal of the lesbian relationship is curious since it forms a large part of the cultural mythology that surrounds Aileen Wuornos as the man-hating lesbian serial killer. Female criminality is linked to sexual deviancy, and appears as a recurrent motif in Hollywood film as Lynda Hart has argued in *Fatal Women* (1994). It also serves to remove any active sexual agency from both Lee and Tyria, and indirectly labels lesbianism as represented by Wuornos as resultant from bad treatment from men. It also serves to distance Tyria from Lee and the

crime, as does the rest of the film. It is interesting to note that when Helena Kennedy refers to the Wuornos case, she mistakenly talks of “a recent case in the United States in which *two* gay women were convicted of killing repeatedly and cold-bloodedly in the commission of a series of petty robberies. The popular press needless to say, blamed their deviance on their sexuality” [my emphasis] (1992:248). Tyria has seemingly become absorbed into Wuornos’ guilt, and this film does its best to separate her from it, and any lesbian relationship. The final scene, Lee’s confession to camera, absolves Tyria from any responsibility, and an end title states that “Tyria Moore was not charged with any crime. She testified as a material witness at the trial of Aileen Wuornos”. The lasting image of the film is Wuornos’ remorse, which is in direct contrast to the way she appears in the courtroom footage in which defiance and lack of remorse are her defining features¹².

The depiction of the killings and of the exchanges between Wuornos and her victims becomes increasingly visually explicit as the events take place. Wuornos is linked to the first killing implicitly rather than overtly, moving through to the final exchange and subsequent killing being shown. The film is ambiguous in the narrative depiction of her involvement, refusing to either conclusively verify self-defence or imply murderous guilt. The construction of the narrative locates Lee closer to each killing as it progresses.

She is linked to the first murder only through false suture. The opening declaration that “This film is based on a true story” is followed by shots of Lee and Tyria in a car crash. They crawl out and Lee produces a bottle of cleaning fluid, wipes her fingerprints and removes the number plate. They refuse help from an ambulance, denying that they were in the car. The next scene cuts to a police station where a report of a body has just

¹² The footage of Wuornos in court and her taped confession are included in the Nick Broomfield documentary, and Lynda Hart also refers to her defiant stance and total belief in her action, quoting Wuornos in court as having said “here’s a message for the families. You owe me. Your husband raped me violently.” Hart presents this as part of her refusal to reabsorb herself into the Patriarchal symbolic, as the assumption of guilt and remorse is part of the process of this assimilation (1994:136).

come in, linking the women via juxtaposition of these events. The next shot of Wuornos in the shower bathing her wounds in this context relates to nothing other than injuries from the car crash. The second killing is also represented through its visual absence. We see Lee assuring Tyria that she can take care of herself as she goes to work, before packing her gun. A car picks her up and drops her off, and we do not see the man or any exchange between him and Lee. A later shot of Lee holding a Bible and saying out loud "He must have been a religious man" implies that it is a trophy she has stolen from the victim's car.

The next killing locates Wuornos closer to the scene of crime both literally and metaphorically, and although we see a body for the first time, she is structurally both dislocated from it yet implicated in the crime. Lee is shown running from the woods, gun in hand, stealing a van and the contents of the glove compartment and then driving off. The next shot slowly pans in on a body and is overlaid with dialogue:

Lee: What about my money? You said you was going to pay me before.

Man's voice: Sure I am. I've got a crisp \$10 bill for you, now come over here whore and earn it.

Lee: You always call me names before you do things to me...now come on, let's see you do things to me.

(implication from the sound effects here is that he attacks her, she pulls a gun and he starts pleading)

Lee: You want to rape me?

(gunshot)

The exchange here is ambiguous. Both poles of representation are covered here – this dialogue encompasses both immediate self defence and a revenge murder. The fourth killing is depicted in a similarly ambiguous way, with a shot of Lee returning home and replacing her gun, overlaid with dialogue:

Lee: I told you before, don't do that

Man's voice: And I told you, I don't take orders from sluts

Lee: I said step away from the door

Man's voice: I'm paying for the ride, not you
(*implication that she has found a weapon in the car*)
Lee: What were you going to do with this?
(*gunshots*)

Again there is the implication that she is in immediate danger, but the film refuses to commit itself to either condemning her or absolving her within these terms. The fifth victim is actually shown. He is cruising a lorry park looking for prostitutes, rejecting the first one he sees in favour of a blonde, and we later see him and Lee chatting in his car. The next shot is of his body, the juxtaposition of images becoming ever more explicit in locating Lee at the spatial crime scene.

The sixth killing is much more explicitly depicted. Lee is in a car with a man, who she propositions for sex. It is made quite clear that it is Lee who initiates it, and who directs him to a secluded spot in the woods. When he pulls a police badge and tries to arrest her, she accuses him of faking, although we learn later that the man was actually a policeman. There is a struggle, she pulls out her gun and he takes it off her. He then starts to punch her, and places his hands around her neck to strangle her. As she starts to lose consciousness, the scene cuts to a flashback to an identical situation with another man. As he tries to strangle her, she gets a rush of energy (triggered by the flashback sequence), pushes him off her, retrieves her gun and shoots him in the back as he runs away and once again in the head. This scene represents a shift in the structure of the film. Until this point, the killings have been ambiguous: we do not see them, and we have no evidence to either condemn her or absolve her, but this scene is shot from Lee's point of view as she is being strangled, using the I-camera. Despite this scene being more explicitly drawn than the previous killings, the ambiguity remains, however. Lee entices him into the woods for sex, and it is made clear that this man is giving her a lift rather than picking her up as a prostitute, and although it is Lee who initiates the violent struggle between them, she is

clearly in serious danger – this man will kill her if she does not kill him first. The construction of the scene elicits both possible ‘truths’, it is both clearly a case of entrapment and of immediate self-defence. The inclusion of the flashback sequence supports the narrative that these are revenge murders, a displaced retaliation against the man who attacked her in the past and yet whilst this is the point of the film which most conclusively seals her guilt, it is also the point where we are most directly encouraged by the cinematography to identify with her as a victim rather than a killer. Regardless of the immediate situation and what prompted it, this man is placed within a continuum of men who have abused, raped, attacked and endangered her. Within the narrative of *Overkill* as in the rape revenge film (see chapter 5) all men are corporately liable for the widespread abuse of women, especially prostitutes.

Although in its narrative structure *Overkill* is ambiguous in its condemnation of Wuornos as murderer, it uses more subtle means to outline her guilt, which are then expanded to greater proportions within a wider cultural discourse, condemning her for her deviant sexuality, her status as a prostitute – and a lesbian one at that. The ‘post-rape’ shot of Lee in the shower is deliberately desexualised, and indeed there is no indication that she has been raped at all. The camera focuses exclusively on her face and her wounds; there are no fetish shots, in contrast to a similar scene in *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995) where Elizabeth Shue – another raped prostitute – is in the shower washing away the blood and the camera overtly and continually sexualises her. Similarly, there is a scene where Lee gets drunk in a bar and as she is dancing on her own she takes off her top and flashes the watching crowd, yet the camera sees nothing. This absence of fetishisation and visible denial of Lee as a sexual object for the camera has several possible implications. The fact that Wuornos was a prostitute is central to her condemnation, both within the film narrative itself, and within a wider cultural discourse. The female body as fetish is central to the representation of the woman on the cinema screen, and its constructed absence in this film is therefore unusual.

Wuornos is not a threat to women either literally or in terms of the symbolic, she is a threat to men therefore in terms of a female audience and she does not need to be made into a fetish to negate this threat. Although I am not suggesting that the absence of fetishisation be in any way a negative thing, but that the de-fetishising of her within the context of the film takes on a certain meaning. As a prostitute, Wuornos' power over her victims lay in her ability to seduce and entrap them with the promise of sex. She is caught up in the iconography of the treacherous blonde, her blondeness emphasised by the way one of her punters picks her and rejects a brunette ("I fancy a blonde one"). Lynda Hart argues (in relation to Wuornos herself, not her representation in the film) that in her incarnation as *femme fatale*, Wuornos has acted out a fantasy for men, but since the danger is no longer imaginary, the fantasy is made redundant. There was ample opportunity with this film to go down the *Basic Instinct* route, but it is resisted at every turn¹³. The rewriting of the story of 'America's first female serial killer' in *Overkill* as the rape-revenge narrative of an abused woman is at odds with much of the discourse surrounding the original case. Aileen Wuornos is simply not glamorous enough to function as a sexual killer, and both *Overkill* and *Monster* go out of their way to ensure she is never an object of desire.

THE 'HOLLYWOOD' FEMALE SERIAL KILLER

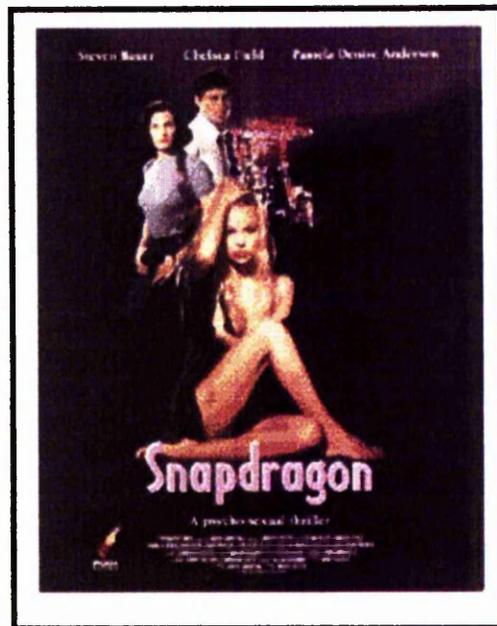
THE SEXUAL SERIAL KILLER : *SNAPDRAGON*

Snapdragon (1993) also tells the story of abused woman turned serial killer, but the politics of her representation are dramatically different. It is a serial killer narrative which promotes itself as an erotic thriller. It stars *Baywatch*-era Pamela Anderson as an amnesiac with an evil twin who is a serial killer. This film clearly operates around the staging of

¹³ This disavowal of her as an object of male desire continues outside the narrative of *Overkill*. The Broomfield documentary features an interview with Mike Reynolds, author of *Dead Ends* about the case. He says that she "didn't put much effort into being a prostitute. Didn't put much effort into the killings. She didn't have much of a commodity out there. She was overweight, beery, she didn't dress as a prostitute, she never wore make-up, she wore cut-offs, sneakers".

male phantasy. The scenario is similar to *Basic Instinct* – a male protagonist is investigating a female killer. He knows she is dangerous but he is sexually drawn to her, even more so knowing he could be her next victim.

Figure 3.1: Promotional poster for *Snapdragon* (1993)



There are various fantasy scenarios on offer here for the male spectator. Firstly and most obviously, there is the visual pleasure in the fetishisation of Pamela Anderson. Felicity's amnesia offers "a golden opportunity, a clean slate, the chance to make a perfect woman" according to her boyfriend. Secondly, there is the *femme fatale* scenario of the demystification, containment and punishment of a dangerous woman: we learn about the killer via the police investigation, and also witness the murders first hand. The evil twin motif allows for the dual ending of death and marriage/redemption. This investigative gaze is carried through the figure of David, the killer's psychiatrist, who has sex with her even though he knows that she is a serial killer who kills her victims during sex. David is a useless psychiatrist. He is the last to know his patient/mistress is a serial killer. All the murders are sexualized, the victims are killed during sex and ejaculate after death. Dying during sex and the placing of black silk over the eyes symbolizes "the elevating of a soul to

a higher place; the ending of a life on a sexual high; pleasure, not pain” according to David’s research. Felicity is staged as *femme castratrice*, who as Creed states “arouses a fear of castration and death while simultaneously playing on a masochistic desire for death, pleasure and oblivion” (1993:130), and she lures her victims to death via the promise of sex.

It is easy to dismiss this film as soft porn nonsense which, of course, it is. It does however map various forms of visual pleasure and feminine subjectivity into the text for the female spectator. The relationship between the female cop and the female killer on screen is key to this structured identification with the gaze of the female killer. It also contains all the narrative conventions of the serial killer film and frames the woman specifically as a serial killer rather than a *femme fatale* providing a psychiatric discourse and concurrent police investigation. Finally, it is also of interest because of the way it stages its killer against a mythic background of violent women. In *Snapdragon*, all the victims are male, and the film creates a set of sexual politics in which the victims are killed because they are men, in the same way that the victims of male serial killers are chosen because they are female. They are being punished for the past abuses of other men literally and symbolically.

The killer has a clear *modus operandi*, and the way that the murders are staged is rich with exotic symbolism. There is a fetishistic, ritualistic nature to the killings. Each victim is killed during sex, in the same position each time, with the same weapon in the same mode. The body is then dressed after death, with a black silk cloth over the eyes. This mode of repetition is underscored by the cinematography, which has an equally ritualistic set of conventions in the staging of each death. Each murder is framed in exactly the same way, and the lighting and music are constant in each scene. The camera starts with a close-up of candles, pans around the room past the reflection of a couple having sex in a mirror,

a blonde woman sitting on top of a man. The camera continues to pan, and zooms in on body parts, the woman leans in to kiss the man's neck on the left side. A blade appears from her mouth, she slits the man's throat and the camera pulls back to reveal the blood. There are four murders within the narrative timeframe. The first victim is an elderly missionary; the second "a borderline sex pervert, likes to pick up women in the sleazier parts of town, a real low life" as the cop puts it; the third is a Chinese flower seller. They are all killed in hotel rooms, presumably lured there as punters. The fourth is David's best friend, killed because according to David "she wants to be caught, and she wants me to be the one to catch her". This murder is the only one not depicted onscreen – instead, David finds his body on his bathroom floor, laid out according to her MO, but he is fully clothed rather than killed during sex. All are linked in some way to the killer: No.1 was the man who sold her into sex slavery; No.2 was a punter; No.3 was her pimp; and No. 4 a doctor working on her case, David's friend.

The film opens with Felicity's back-story which sets up the thematics of the film and places the murders within a wider context of myth (invented for the purposes of the film). The opening flashback shows a child in an un-named Oriental city witnessing the murder of her parents and being sold as a sex slave. The contemporary narrative is set mainly in a Chinatown somewhere in America, and the ambience is seedy and dangerous. The Oriental backdrop provides a symbolic economy which runs throughout the film and which provides the *mis-en-scene* and narrative for the killings. Whenever Felicity is confronted by something Oriental, she gets murderous thoughts – the Chinese New Year Parade, the Chinese flower seller and dinner in a Chinese restaurant are the triggers for the killings. Felicity has the mark of the Snapdragon tattooed on her upper thigh, the same mark that she leaves in blood on the mirror at the scene of her crimes. According to the professor David visits, the snapdragon is the 'mark of the virgin' which the Emperor's concubines were branded with to prove they were pure. The snapdragons were also trained

assassins- they were the only ones allowed to use the Dragon's Tongue blade, which they kept under their tongues to slit the throats of the Emperor's enemies during sex. Felicity is depicted as vampiric: she always goes for the neck and her victims willingly submit as she kills them with a kiss.

As well aligning the killer within a mythic tradition of violent women, the film also contains a psychiatric discourse on the killer. The back-story of sexual slavery provides the trauma which explains the killings. Although the deaths are carefully staged, the victims are not chosen at random. Other than the psychiatrist who is killed to get David's attention, they are all responsible for her abuse and legitimate targets for her vengeance. In this respect, the film functions as a simple rape revenge narrative – bad men are punished for their sexual crimes in a sexual way. However, the textual politics are different from the classical rape revenge story as I will discuss later. The film professes the notion that women are essentially pure, and only become violent through trauma. When Felicity wonders if she may have been born evil, David reassures her “No, not you, certainly not you”.

Felicity has amnesia and no identity – she was named ‘Felicity’ by the nurses who cared for her after she was found unconscious at the bottom of a cliff. She has no memory and is having nightmares and flashbacks of herself “having sex with faceless strangers and then killing them”. Rather than linking her with the actual murders, David diagnoses her as having a severe split personality – her conscious self is placid and docile, her unconscious self is a monstrous killer. The amnesia allows for a clear delineation between the conscious and unconscious self and good and evil tropes of femininity. This split personality is emphasised by the dualism of the mirror motif. It is a consistent element in the staging of the murders, and Felicity is repeatedly framed via her reflection in the mirrors. She also leaves the mark of the Snapdragon in the mirror in blood. The visual symbolism which

distinguishes the good and bad self clearly rests along the lines of the virgin/whore dichotomy: Felicity is always dressed in pure and innocent white except when she is feeling murderous, she dresses in vampy red, so it is clear in no uncertain terms to the viewer when she is dangerous.

Felicity's unconscious murders are, as it turns out, not caused by a split personality after all, but by her evil twin. The use of the mirror at the murder scenes means that the twin is always visibly present in that there are two images of the killer. The woman dressed in red wasn't Felicity, but her twin. They share thoughts, which is why Felicity has been visualizing the murders. Near the film's conclusion, David has let Felicity escape from the police (again), and she is kidnapped by her evil twin. Her twin worked in the same brothel but rather than let Felicity escape she pushed her off a cliff to kill her, and now she is back to finish the job. In *The Monstrous Feminine*, Creed examines the twin motif of *Sisters* (1973) in terms of a literalisation of woman's twin role of castrated and castrator within the horror text. She notes that "the motif of twin sisters, one good, the other evil, is a popular structure of the woman's film... the twins always look alike, but are essentially different" (1993:131). This analysis is not so appropriate here. The killer is not represented as castrating, and neither is she excessively phallic – her weapon is a circular blade, concealed in her mouth. She is however aligned with certain tropes of monstrosity: the vampire, the *vagina dentata*, the deadly *femme fatale* whose seductive powers render her victims defenceless, and the black widow who kills her victims after sex.

In the film's climax, David goes to rescue Felicity from her evil twin, but he messes it up and the female cop has to burst in and intervene. The difference in clothing has vanished, and for the first time they are dressed the same (in white) and indistinguishable from each other. The bad twin is killed and the good twin is saved. Or is she? Although the killings have been written off as the work of her evil twin who has now

been disposed of, Felicity is implicated at the end. She (or the evil twin) returns home, and after gazing at herself in the mirror, she opens her bathroom cabinet to reveal the Dragon's Tongue dagger. The weapon is literally concealed behind her image, on the other side of the mirror. Although one of the twins is dead, the killer is not contained at the end of this film

Snapdragon sets up a dynamic in which both the killer and the cop on the case are female¹⁴. The first time we see Peckham she is in Vice squad, masquerading as a prostitute to entrap clients. She is assigned to the murder case when the second body is discovered, and is adamant that she has a serial killer on the loose, despite the disbelief of her colleagues. From the very start, she has an empathic connection with the killer "It's like she's inside of me" she exclaims at one point, and "She did it again, I knew it, I knew she would". She is initially placed as the anchor for the investigative gaze on screen, but as David gets more involved with the case this gaze is transferred to him. Peckham's hunches are always right however, and David is always wrong – he is the last one to realise that the patient he is sleeping with is a psychopathic killer. For her sins Peckham is also David's girlfriend and so Felicity is her love rival, as well as her professional prey. Peckham walks in on them having sex, dumps him and becomes even more determined to pin the murders on his new girlfriend. It is also Peckham who is granted right of execution at the end of the film. She bursts in and saves David and one of the twins, and admits to him later that she didn't really care which one she killed. Peckham is represented as masculine in certain ways – she has the same qualities as the Final Girl (see chapter 4).

However there is also a series of events which align her more closely with the monstrous feminine – her relationship with the killer draws her back into the realm of femininity. An early scene of Peckham and David having sex mimics the *mis-en-scene* of

¹⁴ This is repeated in *Black Widow* (1987) discussed in chapter 7.

the previous murder – the camera cuts to candles and pans around the room before focusing directly on the couple having sex, the only difference being that the camera does not pan past the mirror. The blonde woman bends over towards his neck in the same way as the previous murder. She bites his neck and he pushes her away, complaining she is too rough. “Every fantasy has to have a little pain” she replies before removing her wig. The camerawork, music, *mis-en-scene* and narrative of the sex is almost identical to the previous murder scene, except it is not the killer, it is Peckham and her boyfriend. He later refers to the love bite she gave him as “the mark of the vampire” linking her symbolically with the killer. This acting out clearly offers fantasies of sadism and dominance via the staging of an S&M scenario in which the woman is active. Peckham identifies with the killer to the extent that she masquerades as her and acts out this murderous masquerade in the arena of sexual fantasy. Felicity dreams about the murders, placing herself in the position of the killers in the phantasy. She over-identifies with her twin to the extent that she shares her sister’s thoughts. A structured identification with the gaze of a sadistic woman is made into a narrative event within this text.

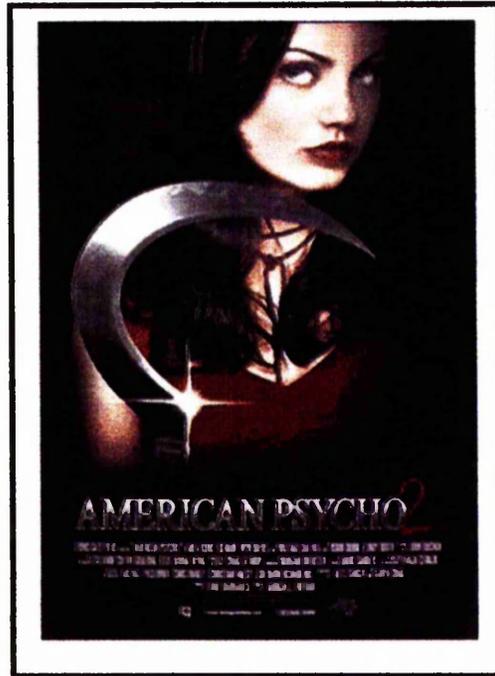
THE CAREER KILLER: *AMERICAN PSYCHO 2*

Snapdragon offers a series of feminine identifications structured into the text via the relationship between the cop, the killer and her twin. *American Psycho 2* (2000) goes a step further and structures the whole film around the gaze of a female killer who is utterly ruthless and has no sympathetic backstory to explain her psychosis. Rachael is a “textbook sociopath”.

Despite the poster (see Figure 3.2) which sexualises the killer and the video box which talks of a story in which “stakes are high, and sex kills”, this film does not excessively sexualise either the context of the deaths or the killer herself – she is never undressed or unduly fetishised. Only one of the murders is facilitated via the vague

promise of sex, but it is never realised or eroticised in any way. In contrast to the fetishistic excess of *Snapdragon*, the film pays little homage to the visual pleasure of the male spectator. The film aligns itself predominantly through the gaze of the female killer and is reinforced by her narration, flashbacks, and point of view shots from her perspective.

Figure 3.2: Promotional poster for *American Psycho 2* (2002)



American Psycho 2 (2002) is a good example to use as a comparison between the screen representation of male and female killers, since it clearly has a masculinised narrative precedent. *American Psycho*, (2000) based on the Brett Easton Ellis novel, is an unusual narrative archetype in itself – the film is shot from the killer’s point of view and there is no concurrent police investigation. The only one other than the victims who knows a killer is on the loose is the killer himself, and no-one whom he confesses to believes him. Patrick Bateman kills his victims in a random way – as the pleasure in the sadistic dominance of torturing and murdering the victims is his primary motivation, he gains nothing from the violence other than the pleasure in committing it. ‘Patricia Bateman’

targets her victims deliberately in the sequel, and their deaths serve a beneficial function other than the pleasure of the killing in itself.

American Psycho 2 picks up the tale with the backstory of its own killer and links to the earlier narrative, told in flashback with her voiceover which is present throughout the narrative, inscribing events with her point of view. At age 13, Rachael was taken on a date with Patrick Bateman by her babysitter, who herself had tracked him down to seduce him, because she had seen his picture and read her (psychiatrist) boyfriend's case notes on him and thought he sounded "interesting". As Bateman raises the knife to his victim, Rachael stabs him from behind with what looks like an ice-pick which she has taken from Bateman's killing kit, laid out on an instrument tray. She uses something similar in later murders, which implies that she kept it as a trophy. Bateman was found dead a few days later, with his latest 'victim', and it was assumed by the police that they died in a mutual struggle. Except that she was never his last victim. Rachael implies in her voiceover that she killed the babysitter herself, after she killed Bateman: "As for me, I was never tied to the scene, and rather than self-destruct, or spend the rest of my life on some shrink's couch, I told no-one what had happened. I silently vowed to devote my life to stopping other psycho killers. I couldn't wait to grow up". *American Psycho 2* plays on the irony of serial killer as serial killer profiler, pitting its own parodic archetype against a background of the 'science' of profiling, and a discourse about serial killers.

Rachael is a goal-orientated killer and has a clear motive – she disposes of those who get in the way of achieving her goal of becoming a teaching assistant for Robert Starkman, an academic serial killer expert who worked on the Bateman case and also an object of obsession for Rachael. The motif of the serial killer profiler as trophy for the killer seen in *Copycat* and *Silence of the Lambs* is repeated here, with a woman as fetishist and man as fetish object. Getting the job is an automatic path to the Quantico FBI training

academy in order to become a serial killer profiler. As she states in her voiceover "I'm killing for a better tomorrow. I'll be in a position to stop dozens, maybe hundreds of serial killers every year. I'm killing the few to save the many, like Robin Hood". She sits in her lecture, and points out her rivals for the post to the spectator, rivals with whom for various reasons she can't compete, and later kills them off one by one. Brian is rich enough to buy the position, Keith is an academic star, Cassandra is sleeping with Starkman, and Elizabeth McGuire is the current teaching assistant. The lecture on serial killer aliases used by the media ends on the Black Widow, and the camera zooms in on Rachael.

The first contemporary victim is the secretary who refuses to accept Rachael's application form for the job even though Starkman has told her to apply. The hooded killer follows her home (the I-camera voyeuristically stalks her from the bushes) and puts her cat in the microwave to entrap her. As Gertrude rescues the cat, she is beaten to death with her employee of the month plaque (the cat survives unharmed). The next victim is Brian, who asks her out on a date to offer her money to drop out of the running – he is rich enough to buy his way into the job, so he must be disposed of. Afterwards, they go back to her room, and she puts her killing top on and nips out to get some condoms. As Brian notices the ice-pick by the bed and the imminent danger slowly dawns on him, Rachel strangles him with a condom and then buries his body on campus. Next is Cassandra, Rachael's friend who is having an affair with Starkman – Rachael's jealousy propels her fury further when she hears at a party that Cassandra has the position because of the affair (Rachael has put special effort into being "dressed to kill", as she puts it, for the occasion). She lures Cassandra away from the party and stages the murder to look like a suicide: the camera cuts to shot of her body hanging from the ceiling with a note attached ("he didn't love me enough, I'm sorry"). Rachael then kills Keith, her only academic rival, in the library (his spiritual home) with an ice-pick to the head. Upon finding Cassandra's body and Rachael's note, Starkman takes a sabbatical, meaning the teaching assistant job is cancelled, foiling

Rachael's plans. Rachael then goes to his office and kills him when she can't persuade him to change his mind.

The film uses Starkman's death to add extra back-story and create a pre-diegetic link between the characters, using flashback. Clara, the babysitter who Rachael killed along with Patrick Bateman, was Starkman's girlfriend and thus he was the psychiatrist whose case notes she read. Rachael taunts him that Clara went to Bateman's apartment to be unfaithful, and that "she was a slut who got what she deserved". Rachael also reveals that she has had a crush on him since she was little, and that Cassandra also got what she deserved. She arrives at his office dressed in Cassandra's clothes, and attempts to seduce him. When he rejects her, she kills him by blowing him a kiss which forces him backwards out of the window¹⁵. The janitor sees her leave with Starkman's body, and the film cuts to his head impaled on his mop. Driving away with his body, she kills a security guard who sees her leaving with the body. This death is not depicted, but we see the weapon behind her back and are later shown a shot of his body, with Rachael's ice-pick impaled through his hand. By now, the bodies are piling up (although it has taken weeks for anyone to notice) and Rachael is getting steadily more nuts, talking to Starkman's body and planning their date for the evening, as if he is still alive. Rachael is now being followed by the police who were tipped off by Dr Daniels, her psychiatrist and the lone voice who knows a killer is on the loose. The car they are chasing then plunges off a cliff and explodes. Rachael is presumed dead and the film depicts a montage of news reports and crime scene photos of her murder spree.

¹⁵ This, and the fact that Rachael is tiny but seemingly possesses the superhuman strength required to lug bodies around with ease, are the only references to a supernatural explanation for Rachael's murderous desires. The video box hints at a supernatural element to the film. The film starts with the premise that when she killed him, Bateman's 'evil spirit' is absorbed by Rachael – or, as the blurb on the video box puts it, "Patrick Bateman is dead, but his evil legacy continues in the body of the beautiful, young, Rachael Newman".

The true extent of Rachel's masquerade is revealed at the end of the film, when it becomes apparent that she has been deceiving the audience as well, and the privileged point of access to her gaze is nullified to a certain extent. Towards the end of the film, Rachael's mother reveals on a visit that Rachael is not her real name, and that her parents are far from the abusive, adulterous alcoholics she described to the viewer earlier in the film. 'Rachael' then returns to her room to remove the body of the real Rachael from the wardrobe for disposal.

After 'Rachael' is presumed dead, the film jumps to two years in the future to bring her back to life. She appears as 'Elizabeth McGuire' at one of Dr. Daniels' lectures where he is promoting his book of the case. Should the viewer have forgotten, at this point the film includes a flashback to the session with Dr Daniels where Rachael said that if she could be anyone, she would be Elizabeth McGuire, Starkman's teaching assistant. This desire is ultimately realised: it is clear that 'Rachael' has killed her and absorbed her identity. Her deceit has been planned in meticulous detail, and previous scenes take on retrospective meaning – an innocuous scene of her jogging by a river turns out to be located in the same place as that where her car exploded containing the real Rachael's body; faking her death was always part of her grand scheme. Not only has the killer got away, but she has pinned the murders on one of her victims. The killer in this film as in *Snapdragon* ultimately has no fixed identity and we never find out who she really is. Her masquerade absorbs the identity of her victims, it facilitates her agenda, and allows her to act out her phantasy via the identities of these other women.

This film like its generic counterparts is littered with references to serial killers but because this film is set on a profiling degree course the self-reflexivity is even more pronounced. The factual information about serial killers is conveyed primarily through Starkman's lectures, but almost everyone in the film has a legitimate opportunity to be

discussing serial killers all the time. Rachael is also seeing a psychiatrist, so we also get an ongoing commentary on her mental state. After Rachael has killed Brian, she visits Dr. Daniels “in need of professional help”, but to help her focus on her goals not because she is aware her behaviour is unusual. He diagnoses her as a “textbook sociopath” and warns Dr. Starkman that one of his students is dangerous, but doesn’t say her name – and Starkman assumes that it is Cassandra. Daniels is the only one who is aware that ‘Rachael’ is dangerous although he doesn’t realise quite how dangerous until it is too late. It finally clicks when he goes to the police and discovers that Rachael Newman went missing the same time that ‘Rachael’ arrived. He is the only character who disrupts the absolute domination of Rachael as subject, the only point of resistance in the text. It turns out though that Rachael has allowed him to bear witness to her crimes for a specific reason, and that he is a mere cog in her grand scheme. He is the one who eventually writes her story and creates her legend. The film ends by cutting to Quantico two years later where Dr Daniels is giving a lecture on Rachael Newman, and promoting the book he has written about her: “As a case study, Rachael Newman was as rare as they come, more obsessed than Dahmer, more calculated than Bundy and certainly more faceless than Bateman. In a perfect world, she’d still be alive...She is one in a billion, a league of her own”. As her psychiatrist he has had a privileged point of access to the killer, and is perfectly placed to write up her case study.

Part of the motivation behind Rachael’s murder spree is the desire to be a case study with no precedents – to create a new archetype of serial killer. The model she creates is revealed in a debate with Keith during class about whether Ted Bundy was an organised or disorganised killer. Rachael argues both – his early killings were meticulously planned and premeditated, but his last victim was chosen randomly, out of sheer availability and the need to kill. He began as an organised killer who descended into lunacy, applying make-up to the later bodies before dumping them carelessly. She asks Starkman about killers whose

downward spiral was actually calculated into their grand scheme, and he replies that it is an interesting hypothesis, but there are no known cases. The camera goes close up on 'Rachael' and ominous music starts. The profile of 'Rachael' herself fills the void which she has just identified – she is given a taste for death in childhood; killing Rachael Newman was meticulously planned, as were the deaths of her rivals; the next victims are killed out of availability; and finally killing Starkman marks her as psychotic. His death means that the job that she wanted no longer exists, and so her plan is seemingly redundant – her killing has become 'disorganised', ironically as part of her greater scheme. She dresses his body after death, talks to him and cooks him dinner, and there is also a flashback of her doing the same to Rachael Newman's body. The 'controlled descent' pattern of murders is therefore built into the narrative structure of the film. This staged lapse into psychosis is all part of her grand scheme. When the film leaps into the future, she is controlled again, having killed again for a specific purpose and assumed the identity of the victim.

The key element of her planned murders is a narcissistic need for recognition. In order for the cleverness of her grand scheme to be recognised, someone has to know and write about her without her being caught: "I need for him to know. I mean what's the point of pulling off a perfect set of murders to realise my dream if there's no-one around who knows about it?". Daniels knows that the woman whose book he is signing is really the killer the book is about, but can't expose her because it will also expose his shoddy research and render his book redundant. The killer has therefore attained celebrity and mythic status without ever being caught or punished.

There is simply not enough textual material to draw any grand conclusions about

the female serial killer film¹⁶. However, the films discussed here have certain similarities in the staging of their killers. In real life, women make more successful serial killers than men, they are more skilled at concealing their murderous acts, and onscreen this is no different. Other than *Overkill* (which has no narrative licence over its ending) none of the killers at the end of these films are stopped, their threat is not diminished and they are not contained. 'Felicity' may not be 'Felicity' at all but her evil twin; 'Rachael' has a new identity; and Annie Wilkes rises from the dead in the final scene. This absolution from punishment is rare for male serial killers on screen, and like the Slasher film the serial killer ascribes a different set of narrative conditions to a female killer. In *Snapdragon* and *Overkill* the traditional gender roles of serial murder are reversed – the prostitutes kill rather than being killed, and target the men who abuse them. In *Snapdragon* and *American Psycho 2* the killer is nameless and has no fixed identity. All the fiction films here structure an identification with the killer into the text – via the cop in *Snapdragon*, and via the placing of the killer as subject in *American Psycho 2*. Peckham, 'Rachael Newman' and Annie Wilkes also all share an obsessive consumption of serial killer data, although in Annie's case it is her own press cuttings. Female identifications with violent killers therefore become narrative events in these films as well as being on offer in the spectator-screen relationship. These women all carry an active, sadistic, subjective gaze and the films actively direct the spectator to identify with these textual positions, which are not momentary but consistently inscribed throughout the films.

¹⁶ Of the films discussed here, two are TV movies (*Snapdragon* and *Overkill*) and one was straight to video (*American Psycho 2*). Women seemingly do not exist as 'traditional' serial killers in mainstream Hollywood film.

CHAPTER 4: WOMEN IN THE SLASHER FILM

Women in the Slasher film function as killers in two tropes: the heroic Final Girl and the psychotic killer. This chapter will attempt to theorise the sado-masochistic textual positions which are articulated to the female spectator by the Slasher film through the figures of the Final Girl and the female Slasher killer. Both of these figures are significant to this study, since they disrupt the assumption that the carrier of the active gaze is male, a gaze which in this context functions as both masochistic and sadistic. The emphasis of the I-camera in the Slasher text, whether aligned with the killer or the Final Girl, emphatically constructs an exchange of looks between them, based around a clear but constantly shifting pattern of active/passive, masochistic and sadistic looks, to scare or be scared. The Final Girl is a key figure within the Slasher film, and is the key focus of feminist re-readings of the Slasher text. However, like all active women the dominant response is to read her as masculine, as a sado-masochistic screen surrogate for the male spectator. These responses do not account for the place of the female spectator in these texts. My main concerns here therefore are firstly to examine critical discourse surrounding the gender and the gaze of the Final Girl and secondly to examine the figure of the female Slasher killer.

The female Slasher is a rare figure, and I am aware that here, as with the rest of this study, I am dealing with the exception rather than the rule. Because the Slasher film repeatedly sets up a very clear and fixed psychosexual dynamic between the male killer and mostly female victims, introducing a female killer disrupts this equation, as I will discuss. This chapter will examine how the female Slasher killer differs from her male counterpart and how the narrative structure, the victims, the deaths and the formal determinism of the text are altered to incorporate a female killer – and ultimately will ask: what visual pleasure does the Slasher film offer the female spectator?

GENERIC CONVENTIONS OF THE SLASHER TEXT

There is a general consensus amongst critics when it comes to defining and locating the Slasher as a subgenre of horror. Few genres/subgenres/tale types have such a fixed narrative structure, character archetypes and motifs:

Its elements are familiar: the killer is the psychotic product of a sick family, but still recognisably human; the victim is a beautiful, sexually active woman; the location is not-home, at a Terrible Place; the weapon is something other than a gun; the attack is registered from the victim's point of view, and comes with shocking suddenness (Clover: 1992:24).

A masked or hidden (largely off screen) psychotic male propelled by psychosexual fury stalks and kills a sizable number of young women and men with a high level of violence. The killer's rage derives from a traumatic childhood experience, which is recounted chronologically (e.g., *Halloween*) or in flashback (e.g., *Friday the 13th*) the killer returns to the scene of the past event to re-enact the violence. Although both men and women are killed, the stalking and killing of women is stressed. After a protracted struggle, a resourceful female usually subdues the killer, sometimes kills him and survives (Pinedo 1997:72).

It is this emphasis on point of view and the I-camera within the Slasher film which is the dominant focus of this chapter. The apparatus of spectatorship is made visible, perhaps more than in any other genre, and the exchange of looks between the two female killers – one heroic and one monstrous – dominates the structural apparatus of the films.

GENDERED SPECTATORSHIP AND THE SLASHER TEXT

Justin Nolan, in a qualitative evaluation of the Slasher film, argues that audience responses to horror are gender specific. Thirty males and thirty females were asked to describe the most memorable Slasher film they had seen and their emotional responses to them¹.

Through

¹ For the purposes of this study, Nolan uses Carol Clover's definition of the Slasher film: "the immensely generative story of a psychokiller who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived" (Clover 1992:21, cited Nolan 2000:1). This said, many of the films cited by the participant in this survey are not Slasher films (*Carrie*, *The Shining*, etc.), so the responses produced relate to horror as a whole rather than to the Slasher film specifically.

semantic network analysis of the participants' descriptions of their most memorable Slasher film and the emotional responses provoked, he argues that

Males recall a high percentage of descriptive images associated with what is called rural terror, a concept tied to fear of strangers and rural landscapes, whereas females display a greater fear of family terror, which includes themes of betrayed intimacy, stalking, and spiritual possession (2000:1 of 13).

This study identifies socialised responses to the Slasher film and Nolan argues that fear is socially constructed for males and females, based on data that reports that men are more likely to be victims of violence from strangers rather than acquaintances, and women are more likely to be attacked by acquaintances than by strangers².

One recurrent theme mentioned by both males and females was childhood and adolescence, and the most unforgettable images cited by the subjects were those in which children are either the agents or victims of violence. These results therefore seem to support the notion that horror films play predominantly on latent feelings of childhood fear or anger, which in turn justifies a psychoanalytic approach to analysis of the horror text. Interestingly, although the words 'parents' and 'father' are cited by the subjects, 'mother' is not, which would seemingly question the universal 'blame the mother' approach to the horror text.

Family horror was another recurring source of terror, and words relating to it were cited more frequently by women than men, both in relation to both parents (e.g. the sadistic mother in *The Kiss* (1988) and the psychotic father in *The Shining* (1980)), and children as agents of violence (e.g. *Carrie* (1974), *Children of the Corn* (1984), *The Omen* (1976), *The Exorcist* (1973)). Nolan suggests that women are more sensitive to images of family horror – and in particular possessed children – because women are usually more responsible for

² US bureau of Justice report 1996 (cited by Nolan (2000:2)).

maintaining family unity, and feel more threatened when this is disrupted, especially when the mother-child bond is usurped. They are also more likely to be attacked in the home or by someone they know. Brigid Cherry's study concurs with this – one participant in her survey stated that “I do not like films that make me wary about my children, films in which children are threatened or in which children are evil” (Cherry 1999:124). Men however tended to cite ‘rural horror’ and fear of the Other as a particular site of terror (examples include *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), *Deliverance* (1972), *Friday the 13th* (1980), *The Hitcher* (1986), and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978)). Men are more likely to be attacked by a stranger than an acquaintance, and therefore are more likely to identify with this scenario in the horror text.

Nolan's study is concerned with the responses of a socialised spectator rather than any textual analysis of the films. However, he admits that subjects' responses to Slasher films may be determined as much by the content/quality of the films themselves as the gender of the spectator:

Many of the females' emotion descriptions mirror [the] sense of entrapment experienced by the female protagonists in Slasher films. Words like vulnerable, trapped and alone reflect the overt terror enacted by the female characters on screen and, through projection, by the female spectators in the audience (2000:7).

Whereas women in this study identify with victimised images of themselves on screen, men seem to watch horror films in a more detached way. Men's verbal descriptions of their emotional response to Slasher films (“shocked, angry, helpless, agitated, frustrated” (Nolan 2000:7)) do not point to an identification with either the killer (carrier of the active male sadistic gaze) or the Final Girl (as hypothesised by Carol Clover), but rather as an external helpless observer. The paradigmatic Slasher film would therefore (according to this study) be more terrifying to the male spectator than the female – those films cited by women above as terrifying are not traditional Slasher films. These male responses seem to indicate

a frustration with the absence of a heroic male as a point of identification in the text – something that the Final Girl ensures is not an issue for the female spectator.

Brigid Cherry's ethnographic study of female horror film audiences (one of the few to acknowledge that this category of spectator actually exists) reveals that the Slasher film is the least liked by self-identified female horror fans of all horror subgenres, with only 25% of respondents citing Slasher films as favourites and 54% of all respondents who define themselves as horror fans actively disliking them³. The repeated motif of women as screaming victims would seem to partly account for the general dislike of the genre. However, the comments she cites from participants who like Slasher films acknowledge the treatment of women within this subgenre as sexist, and justify their enjoyment of Slasher films despite themselves:

“...there's definitely some sexist treatment of women going on but at the same time, I enjoy the films, sometimes despite the fact that I'm protesting all these naked female bodies and stupid women who can't do anything but scream” (ibid.:193).

“I tend to find that I don't mind these women being victims- they deserve to be killed off” (ibid.:193).

These horror fans were able to locate viewing pleasure for themselves in texts which they openly recognised as misogynistic, since the mechanisms of seeing, if not the overall context, locates women as active participants as well as victims. Cherry linked these responses to the female victims of the films to ambivalent attitudes towards domestic violence, that the victim ‘deserves it’⁴, and that “weak women deserve their fate” (1999:65). The main reason cited for the dislike of movies was the quality of the films themselves: “Lack of quality, defined in terms of weak or formulaic plots and stereotypical

³ In the films cited by participants in this survey, 92% liked vampire films, followed in popularity by occult/supernatural films (86%), psychological thrillers (81%), Hammer films (76%), and sci-fi (74%). After the Slasher film, the second least popular sub-genre was the serial killer film (25% actively disliking) and horror comedies (22%). However, both these categories were also liked by 53% and 59% of participants respectively. Cherry concludes that “the Slasher film seems to be unique in its low appeal to female viewers” (1993).

⁴ She cites *Women Viewing Violence* (1992, BFI London).

characters was often cited as the main reason for not liking Slasher films, which were regarded as being boring and predictable” (ibid.:195).

This seeming dislike for the Slasher and serial killer film among female horror fans seems to stem from a conscious distance created between the active spectator and an ‘unsuitable’ object of identification on screen, one that occupies a passive, masochistic, objectified position. Whilst the screaming mutilated victim may be the image which dominates women’s representation in the Slasher film, it is an identification which is actively rejected by these female spectators, who have no problem with stupid women being punished for being stupid rather than for being women. Cherry’s survey revealed that:

Though female characters who screamed or got killed in their underwear were disliked (some rather enjoyed in when the screaming girls were killed), there was an enjoyment of women defeating the monster. Images of female monsters were enjoyed because they were deemed subversive; and there was enjoyment when they killed their male victims who asked for it or wanted it (1999:71).

As Barbara Creed has argued, the horror text locates its monster as primarily feminine because it articulates fears surrounding sexual difference and castration, and addresses these fears to a male spectator⁵. The Slasher film differs in this respect from other subgenres of horror. While the Slasher victims are female, the monster of the Slasher film is universally coded as male, albeit a deficient male, or in Clover’s terms, a “gender-confused” male (1992:28). The most popular films cited by fans in Cherry’s study were vampire films, mainly because the monsters of these films are exotic and sexually alluring, and has a romantic aesthetic attached to him. The vampire has been read as a feminised figure⁶: he is the closest male archetype to the *femme fatale*, or a siren. He is dangerous

⁵ See Creed *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993a), and ‘Dark Desires: Male Masochism in the Horror Film’ (1993b) in Cohen and Hark (eds.) *Screening the Male*.

⁶ “He is linked with images of bats, spiders, rats, and the deadly *vagina dentata* – symbols usually associated with female monsters....Not only is his appearance and behaviour feminised, Dracula’s need to replace his blood at periodic intervals suggests he experiences a form of menstrual cycle” (Creed 1993:123). The

and subversive precisely because he is sexually alluring to young virgins, who willingly give themselves up rather than fight. The vampire is both an object of desire and identification for the female spectator. The killer of the Slasher film, and to a greater extent the rapist of the rape-revenge drama, are not constructed to hold the same erotic appeal to a female audience.

THE FINAL GIRL

Interestingly, there is no mention of the Final Girl in Brigid Cherry's study although she does acknowledge that overall, active identifications with strong active women are a defining feature of women's pleasure in viewing horror texts:

A number of the films most frequently selected [as favourites] have major female characters, a point many participants drew attention to when asked to explain their choice. By far the most frequently mentioned feature in the appeal of *Alien* (1979) was that the enjoyment viewers obtained from watching a strong, intelligent and resilient female was a major change from the vast majority of female roles they had previously seen...Other films with strong female leads, such as *Terminator 2* and *The Silence of the Lambs* were also often named by women as favourites (1999a:194).

Yet this pleasure in watching heroic women is absent from her discussion of the Slasher film. Although Ripley does function as a Final Girl of sorts, for some reason the figure of the Final Girl in the Slasher film does not seem to be a particularly attractive or noteworthy figure to this particular set of female horror fans.

The most substantial theoretical work on the Slasher film is Carol Clover's *Men Women and Chainsaws*, and the Final Girl is the main focus of her study. The highly repetitive nature of the Slasher film, perhaps more than any other genre, ensures a repetition of character types, particularly since they are clearly delineated into killers and

vampire myth has also been read as a rite of passage story used to explain menstruation: "Before the vampire approaches, his victims – almost always young girls – lie in bed, pale and wan... Once bitten, their blood flows freely, and in almost all vampire films, Dracula's victims rise from their beds filled with a new sexual energy which is both predatory and sexual" (ibid.1993:123).

victims. The psychosexual motive of the killer and his weapon of choice may vary from film to film, but the Final Girl remains a consistent archetype throughout.

She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise and scream again. She is abject terror personified. If her friends knew they were about to die only seconds before the event, the Final Girl lives with the knowledge for long minutes or hours. She alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength to stay with the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A), or to kill him herself (ending B) (Clover 1992:35).

Clover's study seeks to explain the investment that the male spectator has in identifying with a female victim-hero on screen, and rests on the assumption that the primary consumers of the horror film are male, and the text addresses a male spectator. Within the terms set out in Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure', the sadistic gaze of the male spectator is located via the I-camera with the castrated male monster, who punishes women for his castration by literally reconstructing them as bleeding wound, and in some instances also fetishising them. The male killer represents one of the purest and most extreme manifestations of Mulvey's model of the sadistic controlling gaze, emphasised by the use of the I-camera. Within the films discussed in this chapter, this gaze is borne by a woman.

Clover's emphasis however is on the masochistic pleasure on offer for the male spectator in identifying with the female victim rather than (or as well as) the sadistic gaze of the killer. She explains this in terms of a one-sex model of gender, rather than the binary system of sexual difference on which most models of spectatorship rest. In this structure, gender overrides anatomical sex – in other words, a textual position is masculine because it is active, or feminine because it is passive:

Sex, in this universe, proceeds from gender, not the other way round. A figure does not cry and cower because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers. And a figure is not a psychokiller because he is a man; he is a man because he is a psychokiller (1992:13).

The functions of monster and hero are far more frequently represented by males and the functions of victim far more garishly by females. The fact that female monsters and female heroes, when they do appear, are masculine in dress and behaviour (and often even name), and that male victims are shown in feminine postures at the moment of their extremity, would seem to suggest that gender inheres in the function itself – that there is something about the victim function that wants manifestation in a female, and something about the monster and hero functions that wants expression in a male (1992:13).

For Clover, placing a woman in a heroic role necessitates her masculinisation, and places her as an object of identification for the male spectator. She draws attention to the masculine name of the Final Girl (Laurie, Stretch, Stevie) and the phallic signifiers attached to her. Her virginity is important, since she is not placed in a 'feminine' position through penetration, and generally neither is she fetishised by the camera/killer to the same extent as her sexually active friends, who are typically in some state of undress when they are killed.

The Final Girl also tells an Oedipal story for the male spectator which is mapped across the narrative structure of the film:

Figuratively seen, the Final Girl is a male substitute in all things Oedipal, a homoerotic stand-in, the audience incorporate; to the extent that she means "girl" at all, it is only for the purposes of signifying male lack, and even that is nullified in the final scenes....The discourse is wholly masculine, and females figure in only insofar as they "read" some aspect of male experience (1992:53).

The tale is no less one of maleness. If the experience of childhood can be -- is perhaps ideally -- enacted in female form, the breaking away requires the assumption of the phallus. The helpless child is gendered feminine; the autonomous adult or subject is gendered masculine; the passage from childhood to adulthood entails a shift from feminine to masculine (1992:50).

The Final Girl is feminine until a certain point in the narrative. Until this pivotal episode, she is feminine because she is in the 'feminine' victim position, chased, terrorised, denied structural agency and figuratively castrated. The opposite force in this scenario is the killer, who is masculine because he is bearer of the active gaze, not because he is male. Clover points out that he is always a 'feminised' or deficient male and the weapon becomes his

substitute phallus.

This pivotal point in the narrative structure comes when the Final Girl saves herself and defeats the killer, usually in the final scene of the film. During this sequence she takes control of the active gaze and sometimes, for the first time, we see the face of the killer. She overpowers him using a phallic weapon herself, and assumes what Clover terms the 'masculine' position. In contrast the killer is now disempowered, relieved of his phallic weapon, deprived of the controlling gaze and is in contrast 'feminised'. Films vary according to how much narrative power they give to the Final Girl at the film's close. Not all films 'activate' the Final Girl to the same extent in the final sequence – as often as she saves herself she will be saved by a man, and phallic power is transferred from her assailant to her rescuer in the final sequence. Some however go beyond self rescue and actively seek out the killer. Nancy in *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) for example lays traps and lures the killer to his death. Others might mimic the behaviour of the killer, going beyond active positioning to become actively sadistic. Stretch in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre II* (1986) not only defends herself but follows her attackers back to their lair, and after she has killed them develops a Leatherface-like attachment to the chainsaw, clearly enjoying waving it around above her head and screaming, long after everyone else is dead. The active position in this film is signified via the chainsaw, a literal phallic substitute (we learn in *Texas Chainsaw III: Leatherface* (1990) that the family, including the women, are all self-castrated), transferred from the killer to the victim along with the active gaze.

This model of spectatorship marks its spectator as pangendered, but it is still grounded in a very fixed binary formulation of masculine = active and feminine = passive. Whereas a spectator of either sex can identify with any position, these positions are always gendered, and subject to a specific set of conditions. Gender in this scenario is ultimately about narrative power, which is resolutely defined as masculine in its active form. The

gender of any given character is determined by their symbolic position rather than the sex of the body that it occupies. Through identifying with the Final Girl who functions as both victim and killer, the male spectator is able to occupy both passive masochistic and active sadistic positions in relation to the text, whilst at the same time disavowing this identification on the grounds that the object on screen is female.

While this is a perfectly executed theoretical model of spectatorship, it is at the same time extremely deterministic in the way that it maintains the equation masculine = active, feminine = passive. Just as the male spectator undergoes a process of 'feminisation' in order to identify with either the Final Girl (in her passive moments) or the killer (when he is 'recastrated' in the final scene), for the female spectator to identify with the Final Girl as bearer of the active gaze, she must assume a 'masculine' position: there is no conceptual space for a woman to occupy an active position that is also feminine.

Clover's study is closely aligned with the model of female spectatorship which Laura Mulvey outlines in 'Afterthoughts' (1981), in which she argues that for a female spectator to identify with an 'active' gaze on screen, she must access her 'masculine side', a remnant of the pre-Oedipal phallic libido. As stated in Chapter 1 Freud is uncomfortable about labelling this active libido as masculine, only doing so because of an existing arbitrary structure in which activity is denoted as masculine:

There is only one libido, which serves the masculine and feminine functions. To itself we cannot assign any sex; if, following the conventional equation of activity and masculinity, we are inclined to describe it as masculine (Freud 1933:415).

The limitations of this active/male passive/female binary in terms of spectatorship is also identified by Isobel Pinedo. In *Recreational Terror* (1997), she eloquently argues that the female audience has a stake in identifying with the Final Girl, and to read this gaze as masculinised means "nothing less than the impossibility of female agency within this

formulation" (Pinedo 1997:82). Faced with a choice between killing and dying, her violence is "framed as a form of righteous slaughter" (1997:85) and this placing of the woman in danger means that she *must* fight back "by any means necessary" (ibid.:77). She argues that the Slasher film does offer sadistic viewing pleasure to female audiences by justifying the violence in a context of self defence:

The female viewer can identify with a female character who has no choice but to use extreme violence against a female killer. Both fantasies enable women to experience taboo emotions (be they rage or sexual arousal) and vicarious actions, (be they killing or fucking) without the onus of guilt. As with a rape fantasy, the female viewer is *forced* to vicariously indulge feelings and actions forbidden to her, and although she is "forced" she is in a position to stop it or leave if it does not suit her (ibid.:86).

The problem of avoiding reading the Final Girl as masculine can also be approached in terms of Barbara Creed's study of the Monstrous Feminine. In contrast to Clover's reading of the Final Girl as phallic, Barbara Creed argues that as a woman who kills men, she is another trope of the monstrous feminine, the *femme castratrice*. Referring to *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) she argues that "symbolic castration appears to be part of the ideological project of the film" (1993:126).

The Slasher film actively seeks to arouse castration anxiety in relation to whether or not women are castrated. It does this primarily by representing the woman in the *twin* roles of castrated and castrator, and it is the latter image which dominates the ending in almost all of the films (ibid.:127).

The pleasure located in the Slasher film is both sadistic and masochistic. Within Creed's reading, the male spectator consistently identifies with the killer, and the masochistic part of the story is told at the end of the film in the killer's destruction by the Final Girl, along with the repeated castration anxiety brought about by the sight of the woman as bleeding wound. Again, this analysis of the Slasher film is grounded in the assumption that the viewing pleasure/unpleasure is restricted to a male spectator. There is no acknowledgement that as bearer of the active gaze the Final Girl offers any viewing pleasure to the female spectator.

The Final Girl is sanctioned to seize control of the controlling gaze precisely because she has been pursued by it throughout the narrative. Like some women who adopt this position without being punished for it in the film's conclusion (for example the rape-revenge heroine discussed in chapter five) she is punished beforehand, and her violence is framed in the context of revenge. As Clover argues, "it seems clear on the face of it that involvement in her revenge at the end is contingent on an earlier involvement with her pain" (1992:8). It is the narrative structure of the Slasher film (and to an even greater extent the rape-revenge film) and the way that the various gazes are mapped across it which give access to a controlling sadistic female gaze. The presence of this gaze in the Classical Hollywood Narrative is usually borne by a 'bad' woman, and rarely given full narrative point of view. She is allowed to wreak havoc throughout the story, only to be punished at the film's conclusion (examples here include female psychodramas, *femme fatales*, etc.). The Final Girl however must be chased and terrorised and punished in order to go on to wreck vengeance on her attacker.

THE FEMALE SLASHER KILLER

Whereas the Final Girl and male Slasher killer have been the subject of much critical attention, a detailed examination of woman as psychokiller in the Slasher film are generally absent from these analyses. Some critical accounts do acknowledge their presence, but only in passing. Carol Clover for example notes that

Female killers are few, and their reasons for killing significantly different from men's...they show no gender confusion. Nor is their motive overtly sexual; their anger derives in most cases not from childhood experience but from specific moments in their adult lives in which they have been abandoned or cheated on by men. (*Straight Jacket* [1982], *Play Misty for Me* [1971], *Attack of the 50-Foot Woman* [1958]) (1992:29).

Female killers in the Slasher film are indeed rare, so rare that I have had to look on the

peripheries of the genre in order to find them⁷. Although they feature psychotic women, the films that Clover lists above are not strictly Slasher films according to her own terms.

Recent developments in the Slasher sub-genre have produced more female killers, and this justifies further investigation. This analysis will look at the way the staging of the female psycho killer and her gaze are mapped across the text. All of these films have a primarily female gaze which is marked as sadistic, and two of them are shot entirely from the point of view of the killer.

Having a woman as the killer disrupts the very specific gender relations between the Final Girl and the killer, and the dynamic between them is not set up in the same way. If the terms of the Slasher film were directly inverted the dynamics would operate around a masculinised female who stalks and kills men, and is killed off by a feminised male. This is, however, not the case – there is no literal equivalent in the form of Norma Bates, Michelle Myers or Frederica Kruger, and the protagonist does not become a Final Boy. The female Slashers discussed in this chapter are psychos, but their murderous sprees stem from calculated revenge rather than psychosexual fury.

Isobel Pinedo states that “to see the Slasher film as an unmitigated celebration of male on female violence is to ignore not only the surviving female, but the female psychotic” (1997:77), and reads the female psychotic as Creed does as a monstrous-feminine. Creed also notes that “there are a number of films which portray a female

⁷ *Serial Mom* is a John Waters comedy rather than a strict Slasher film, although it does stage its killer as an obsessive consumer of Slasher gore and true crime fiction, and a dialogue on films is incorporated into the narrative. *The Hole* sets up a classic Slasher scenario: a group of boarding school pupils are seemingly stalked and terrorized. It lacks the actual slashing of Slasher films, but many of the other elements are familiar.

Slasher – *Play Misty for Me*, *Hands of the Ripper*, *Friday 13th*, *Don't Look Now*, *Sisters...* the female Slasher is always represented as psychotic” (1993:126). She reads the female killer of *Friday the 13th* (1980) as a castrating mother; “her perversity is almost always grounded in possessive dominant behaviour towards her offspring, particularly the male child. *Psycho*, *Fanatic* and *Friday the 13th* represent the over-possessive mother as dangerous psychotic. In all three, the child is a son” (1993:139). Both of these readings place the female Slasher as castrating rather than phallic, and therefore locate her as specifically feminine rather than a masculinised killer.

THE MATERNAL SLASHER

To what extent does the Slasher film therefore gender its killers as ‘feminine’ and alter the terms of their representation? In *Friday the 13th*, until the final scene, we never see the killer although we share their gaze via the I-camera. There is nothing that obviously denotes this unknown killing force as female. We see a hand, and a figure in the distance driving a car, but for the majority of the film we do not see her at all (although with hindsight and a freeze frame it is fairly clear that it is a woman’s hand). Unlike *Halloween* (1978), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and countless others there are no flashing glimpses of someone who obviously looks like a deranged psychopath. There are eight deaths, and each is shot almost exclusively from the killer’s point of view. The killings are fairly standard Slasher gore, although there is no consistent weapon. Where Michael Myers always uses a big knife, Freddy has bladed fingers, and Leatherface has a chainsaw, Mrs Voorhees uses whatever is to hand: arrows, oars, tent pegs, and various other instruments of impalement. In fact none of the female Slasher killers discussed here have a singular weapon as a permanent fixture in the same way that the weapon is an extension of the male killer’s body, a compensatory phallic substitute which is always present. The female Slasher killer does not fetishise her weapon in the same way; the weapon is not a consistent part of the iconography of these films. It is not a

substitute phallus – these women are not driven by penis envy – but a means to an end. Although there is no real female equivalent of the Slasher killer propelled by pure psychosexual fury, neither is there a male equivalent of the maternal Slasher propelled by cold, hard vengeance in the classic Slasher film.

It is the reactions of the victims, rather than the staging of the killer, which denotes the killing force as female. In *Friday the 13th*, the first couple are killed while trying to have sex. They see the killer and look scared not in abject terror, but because they are caught doing something they shouldn't by someone who is in a position to disapprove. When Steve meets his death, he recognises the killer and is concerned they are out in the rain by themselves. Clover describes the typical Slasher killer as “human, but only just” (1992), but there is nothing in this killer's appearance to suggest monstrosity. Leatherface, Freddy, Jason and the masked killers of the later post-modern Slasher films are marked as killers by their scary appearance alone, and the visual motif of the killers forms a major part of the iconography of the films. Mrs Voorhees is the antithesis of what a deranged killer should look like, and all the more dangerous because of it.

After everyone else is dead Mrs Voorhees returns to kill Alice, the surviving female. She is able to get close to her by pretending she is there to help, and Alice, knowing there is a killer on the loose, lets down her guard in a way she never would with a weird looking man. The music also underscores Mrs Voorhees as an unthreatening presence the first time she appears. As Alice runs terrified from the bodies of her friends, the frantic *Psycho*-esque music stops and Alice runs into her arms. “Oh, what monster could have done this!” exclaims Mrs Voorhees as she steps over bodies and reassures Alice.

She then tells Alice that a young boy drowned at the camp before, because the camp councillors were having sex instead of looking after him. The scary music starts as she reveals herself to be the killer, and that Jason was her son and today is his birthday. She had to get the place shut down to prevent any more accidents. Her speech is intercut with shots of Jason drowning. In Clover's reading of the Slasher film, this final confrontation between the Final Girl and the killer is crucial to the way that the masculine and feminine gazes are mapped across the narrative structure of the film via the male and female characters on screen. It is the moment when the Final Girl seizes control of the active gaze, signified via a phallic exchange with the killer. When both sides of the equation are occupied by women, the terms of representation alter. The sadomasochistic binary no longer automatically assigns positions to male and female; both the active/sadistic and passive/masochistic spaces are occupied by women. Two female gazes are mapped across this film. Firstly, Alice's gaze forms a maso-sadistic trajectory across the film: in the first part of the story she is chased, terrorised and acted upon. Adopting her viewing position in the text gives the spectator masochistic pleasure – the 'recreational terror' (Pinedo 1997) of being scared. When the terms reverse during her triumphant self-rescue, she kills the monster and renders her passive. Her gaze is active and sadistic, dominant and controlling, and this textual position is on offer to the spectator via identification with this gaze. Secondly, the killer's gaze is active, sadistic and controlling until the Final Girl turns the tables, forming a sado-masochistic rather than a maso-sadistic narrative trajectory. The audience is drawn into the killer's gaze via the I-camera or point of view shot, and stalks the victim alongside the killer (it is worth remembering that the fans in Brigid Cherry's study actively enjoyed see the useless women get slaughtered (1999a:193)). This gaze is then punished and contained in the final sequence when we see the killer's face for the first time. Thus the gaze is returned, the voyeur is made visible and rendered passive. There is masochistic pleasure in being punished for the transgressive sadistic pleasure that went before. The nature of the Slasher aesthetic means that the

dominant apparatus of the film switches between these two gazes, privileging one or the other at different points across the film. What is significant in *Friday 13th* and the other films here is the fact that both of these spaces are occupied by women, thus disrupting the automatic gendering of these positions across a binary of masculine and feminine.

Scream 2 (1997) also features a maternal Slasher consumed by psychotic vengeance over the death of her son. In this case, rather than restaging a massacre on the anniversary of his death with random victims, Mrs Loomis has a specific target for her revenge – Sidney, the Final Girl who killed her son in the previous film – although part of Sidney’s punishment is to watch the bodies of her friends pile up around her. The film stages its killings and killers in an almost identical way to *Scream* (1996). The plot is also similar to the first film, in that an unknown masked killer stalks and kills students (this time on a college campus rather than a school). What differentiates the *Scream* franchise from others (*Halloween*, *Friday 13th*, *A Nightmare on Elm St*) is the presence of the original Final Girl in the sequels. Different killers continue the motif (the Scream mask) in the sequence but it is Sidney who is the common factor in the story, and whose job it is to be stalked and captured and eventually to unmask and defeat the killer.

The female killer appears in the press frenzy, posing as Debbie Salt, a local reporter covering the killings. She also has an assistant, one of Sidney’s friends, who she met on a psycho killer fan website and disposes of him (by killing him) when he is no longer useful (this link between female killers and consumption of violence is something I will discuss in more depth later). As in the first *Scream* film, the killer could be anyone: everyone is both a potential threat and a potential victim. In the final fight scene, Mrs Loomis tells Sidney that her motive is “good old fashioned revenge, you killed my son”. Like *Friday the 13th*, maternal revenge for the death of a son is the driving force behind the murderous rage of the killer.

THE 'POST-POSTMODERN' SLASHER FILM

Beginning with *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* in 1995, this sub-genre of the film took off with the release and huge box office success of *Scream* (1997), closely followed its sequels, and *Urban Legend* (2000), *Scary Movie* (2001), *Scary Movie 2* (2001), *Scary Movie 3* (2002), *Scary Movie 4* (2003), and *Shriek If You Know What I Did Last Friday 13th* (2000). Isobel Pinedo lists five characteristics of the postmodern horror text which distinguish it from the classical horror text, in which the monster is located as Other (non-human, non-American) and the threat is contained/destroyed at the end of the film:

1. Horror constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world;
2. Horror transgresses and violates boundaries;
3. Horror throws into question the validity of rationality;
4. Post-modern horror repudiates narrative closure; and
5. Horror produces a bounded experience of fear (1997:17).

The post-modern horror aesthetic she defines here is historically specific, beginning in the late 1960s with *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Central to this breed of horror film is the dislocation of the monster from Otherness, relocating the threat from an external to an internal one, the monster is no longer 'other'. I would suggest that the self-consciously postmodern Slasher subgenre discussed here has a similar set of characteristics which deliberately disrupt the rules of paradigmatic film and open up the textual space for killers to be female:

1. The killer's identity is unknown and he/she is indistinguishable from the victims. Everyone is a suspect. For this reason, s/he is usually masked. A key element of narrative closure involves revealing the killer's identity before they are killed;
2. The victims delight in the ensuing violence until it is turned on them;
3. The killer has a specific motive, usually revenge, linked to a pre-narrative event, revealed after their unmasking, immediately before their death;
4. They self-consciously both revere and deconstruct earlier horror films and rely heavily on intertextuality; and
5. The killings are cleverly set up and premeditated rather than random acts of

psychosexual fury.

These new films self-consciously disrupt the existing rules of the Slasher film. Therefore Final Girls get to have sex without dying, and there is a higher proportion of female killers. Sarah Trencansky points out that in this later wave of Slashers, the Final Girl's narrative agency is diminished: "If the 'quality of the Final Girl's fight' (from *Clover*) determines how effective she is as a transgressive character, these girls show no special skills or strengths that would typically ensure victory; they become the last survivor almost at random" (2001:13)⁸. It is true that in these later films, despite their seeming knowingness, the Final Girls are less smart and generally wimpier than their earlier counterparts. Sidney in *Scream* refers to the "stupid big breasted girls who run up the stairs when they should be running out the front door" moments before she does exactly that. They also rarely rescue themselves. In *Urban Legend* Natalie looks on helplessly as her friends are slaughtered, has to get saved twice, and when she finally gets hold of a gun, gives it to her male friend to kill the monster with, as if she can't be trusted with it herself. With this decline in the agency of the Final Girl, however, there is a more frequent placing of women as killers, and so female sadistic agency is present, but in a different form.

Urban Legend (2000) is a campus-based Slasher and the victims are picked off at random in the style of the urban legends they are studying in their folklore class. The killings take place on the anniversary of a previous massacre, which may or may not be an urban legend in itself. The film ends as it began, with a group of students sitting around telling horror stories and trying to scare each other, the preceding killings being rewritten as an urban legend, except this time we know that the killer is in their midst.

The killer and all the victims in this film are connected to the heroine, Natalie. This

⁸ She notes that in both the *Scream* franchise and *I Know What you did Last Summer*, Sidney and Julie both unwittingly hand over their weapons to the killers (2001:13 out of 17).

film fits into the pattern of the post-modern Slasher – the killer is unknown and everyone is a suspect. There is nothing about the staging of the killings which visibly denotes the killer as female. The killings are staged through voyeuristic camerawork from the point of view of the killer and the reverse shot and fleeting glimpses of a hooded figure mean the gender is unknown. It is not revealed until the final scene that the killer is Brenda, Natalie's best friend. Her motivation is not unbridled psychosexual fury but, by her own admission, she is driven by cold, hard revenge. Natalie and Michelle (the first victim) killed Brenda's fiancé during a prank when they drove his car off the road, but this connection – and motive – is not revealed until the final scene. The film also sets up an axis of conflict between Brenda and Nathalie over another man: Brenda fancies Paul, Paul fancies Natalie, and Brenda is jealous. As well as slaughtering her classmates, Brenda also cranks up the fear for those who are left. The first death is dismissed by all as an urban myth, except Brenda: "No really", she says, "that happened to a girl from my home town", and she knows since she was the one that killed her. She takes Natalie to the dorm where the original massacre took place, just to scare her and then reassure her. Throughout the film, Brenda masquerades as the caring best friend until the final stand-off when she is revealed to be, in her own words, a "loony psycho bitch".

The final scene is a fight between three women: the killer, the heroine and Reese the security guard. Reese is introduced in an earlier scene, watching *Foxy Brown*, pointing her gun and speaking the dialogue along with Pam Grier, she is established early on as heroic via this identification. Rather than stalking and killing Natalie as she has the others, Brenda masquerades as a victim in order to lure her prey. She lures Natalie to the dorm by screaming for help and Natalie, being a good friend, goes to rescue her. The scene of Brenda's final killing is elaborately staged, she has gone to a lot of trouble. The room is filled with candles and a bed is laid out in the middle, waiting for Natalie. The scene opens

with a point of view shot from the hooded killer, who walks towards the camera and we finally see it is Brenda. The camera cuts to a reverse shot of Natalie, bound and gagged, and then the screen goes black. When Natalie comes round, Brenda has set up a slide show of the newspaper reports of her boyfriend's death. Although she acts with precision and careful planning and has a clear motive for her murder spree, Brenda admits that she is enjoying herself. Killing Natalie isn't enough straight away, she goes for prolonged torture.

As she cuts open Natalie's stomach to perform the 'kidney heist', Reese bursts in. As she struggles with Brenda, her gun goes off and she is shot. Paul turns up and tries to sweet-talk Brenda into giving him the gun. Even though she is madly (literally) in love with him, she refuses telling him "You're cute, but you're not that cute". Although Brenda's erotic fixation for Paul is emphasised throughout the film, it is dismissed here as a real reason for her psychosis, and her vengeful rage against Natalie takes precedence. Paul tries to save Natalie, but fails. Male authority in this space is useless, and it is left to a woman to kill the killer: Reese comes back from the dead to shoot Brenda. Although the final right of execution is taken away from the Final Girl, it is still in the hands of another woman, the only character who made it to the sequel. Paul and Natalie drive off to get help, saying that their story will become an urban legend "except Brenda will become a guy, Paul will be a cop and Natalie will end up in an asylum". Brenda comes back from the dead to have another go, and attacks Paul from the backseat of the car. She fights with Natalie and plunges off a bridge, Paul and Natalie watch her body float down the river. Although she is temporarily defeated the killer is not contained: the film jumps to some students recounting the story as an urban legend, and final shot cuts to Brenda, again in their midst.

THE HOLE

The set-up is classic Slasher: a group of school friends skip school to camp out in a disused

bomb shelter and are stalked by someone who locks them in and torments them until only one girl is left alive. The film opens with a classic shot, a running I-camera, accompanied by heavy breathing and accompanied by the intermittent sound of flies buzzing. The camera scans past a 'Missing' poster, with four faces on it. The reverse shot reveals a girl, Liz, dishevelled and traumatised and one of the faces on the poster. The story unfolds via Liz's sessions with a psychiatrist, told in flashback chapters with her narration. Her friend Martyn showed them the Hole and promised to come back in three days to let them out. Except that he never returned, and stalked and psychologically tortured them. Frankie, Geoff, Mike and Martyn all die, and Liz is the only one to get out alive.

The story is told in flashback from Liz's point of view, accompanied by her narration. Two versions of narrative truth emerge: firstly Liz casts herself as a victim. She is traumatised, having hallucinations, nightmares and flashbacks. The shot following the opening sequence shows Liz getting an internal examination in hospital and the film switches between Liz's interview in the present and flashbacks to the Hole. At first, she is in denial and says they all got out alive. However, through Martyn's testimony to the police and Liz's eventual confession, a different picture emerges in which Liz is a psychopath who causes the deaths of her friends herself and sets Martyn up to take the blame before killing him as well. Although she is initially cast as an innocent victim, Liz is structurally staged as a killer from the opening I-camera shot.

The one constant in both versions is Liz's obsessive love for Mike, the son of a rock star. She initiates the trip so she can get Mike alone and make him fall in love with her. The trip goes wrong and Mike ignores Liz in favour of Frankie. Frankie flirts with the boys and Liz skulks in the background. When Mike tries to leave the hole in order to make up with his girlfriend, Liz locks the door and hides the key. She bleaches her hair, because his last girlfriend was blonde. Other than when she is directly relating events, all her

narration is related to Mike; she justifies all her thoughts and actions as a quest to be with him and make him fall in love with her: "Have you ever loved someone so much you don't care what happens to yourself? You just have to be with them. Have you ever craved someone so much you didn't exist anymore?". She even romanticises and fetishises his death. When they are the only ones left alive, Liz tells him no-one will ever find them and offers him a knife: "We can do it together". He begs her and tells her to keep going, telling her "I love you, I need you" because he thinks he is dying. She has achieved her aim of making him love her and so she opens the door and confesses that's she locked them so they could be together: "It was all for you because I love you". As he tries to climb out, the ladder breaks and he falls and dies. Liz reconciles the loss of her object of desire: "At least this way he never grows old, never cheats on me, never leaves. This way he just stays perfect". In death Mike remains a permanent fetish object for her.

There is an additional theme of decay and abjection running throughout the film, and Liz as an agent of their creation. The Hole itself starts to decay, maggots and flies fill the space, and the sound of flies buzzing accompanies the heavy breathing in the opening shot. Frankie moves from fetish object to abject body, she gets sick, and after death, her corpse begins to smell. Liz is indifferent to the decay around her as long as she is with Mike.

Unlike the lovestruck psychos of *Play Misty for Me* and *Fatal Attraction*, Liz gets away with it and frames someone else for the murders. She is not out of control or deranged either: her first words to the psychiatrist are "No prozac or lithium, I'm not crazy" – although she weeps and hallucinates, lies to the shrink with cold precision and covers her tracks by masquerading as a victim. In one respect, she is not an intentional killer. The aim of the exercise was to seduce Mike, and once she had done this she intended to open the door. She never got the chance because Frankie died that night.

Again, just as Liz is about to confess all to Mike and give him the key she is interrupted when Mike hears Geoff open some stashed Coke and kills him. She does however murder Martyn in cold blood, planting the key to the hole on his body and makes it look like suicide. Although she is clearly crazy, and traumatised by the experience, she is also a master criminal in the cover up of her crimes. A deleted scene on the DVD has an ominous epilogue depicting Liz sitting down in a library and introducing herself to the person sitting next to her as 'Beth'.

SERIAL MOM

Serial Mom (1994) is also a tale of vengeance of sorts, in that the killer deliberately selects her victims as punishment for their perceived crimes as well as her own entertainment. 'Serial Mom' herself is placed somewhere between Slasher killer and serial killer. The film is a John Waters parody set against a backdrop of Slasher gore rather than a straight Slasher film, and there is little distinction between serial murder, psychotic fury and mischief making. Beverly Sutphin is a domestic goddess – a model of a 1950s' housewife, described by the police as "Beaver Cleaver's mother". Her hobbies are bird-watching and killing. She swings between being "the nicest lady you could hope to meet" and a psychotic killer who murders people for having poor taste in films. Rather than punish her or condemn her in any way, the film encourages both a structural identification with Beverly (the film is told from her point of view) and a camp celebration of violent killers in general.

The film has two main narrative events – the killing spree and the subsequent trial. It opens over an idyllic suburban breakfast table, with the family chatting about the Hillside Strangler. After the kids leave for school, Beverly runs straight upstairs to make prank calls to one of the neighbours, whom she torments relentlessly. The killing spree takes places over three days. Although each of the killings is seemingly an act of petty

vengeance, Beverly revels joyously in the violence and terror she causes. Each victim is singled out for death because of something they have done to annoy Beverly: Chip's teacher says he needs therapy; Carl stands up Misty and turns up on 'their' date with another girl; her neighbours ruined her husband's day off by having toothache; one of Chip's customers refuses to rewind her videos; Scotty doesn't wear his seatbelt; and a juror is wearing white shoes after labour day. Her weapons are whatever is to hand – a car, a poker, an air conditioning unit, scissors, a leg of lamb, a lighting rig and a phone.

The bodies stack up, and her family and the police slowly begin to realise that she is a psychotic killer, and she is eventually arrested in church during a sermon on 'Capital Punishment and You'. All of the murders have witnesses and evidence, but Beverly manages to get found not guilty at her trial. The prosecution says that she is "evil to the core" and "not a woman, but a monster". Her own lawyer says she is insane, so she sacks him. She conducts her own defence and discredits the witnesses. There are gasps of horror around the courtroom when one admits she doesn't recycle, a far worse crime in their eyes of the jury than serial murder. Beverly seduces the jury with her celebrity status and by convincing them that the victims deserved it anyway. The courtroom cheers at Beverly's closing address, and she leaves the court to a movie deal.

Beverly becomes an iconic killer within the film against a background of the media celebration of serial killing, and the film mocks discourse on the link between screen violence and real violence. She becomes a celebrity before she is even arrested. She is let into a heavy metal concert because she is recognised as "the murder lady off the TV" and is helped in escaping from the police. Chip's girlfriend tells her that she is "bigger than Jason and Freddy, only real". Suzanne Somers is signed to play Serial Mom in a TV movie, and turns up at the trial to celebrate Beverly as a "feminist heroine". Even the victims' families abandon their rage and grief at the thought of who will play them in the

eventual film.

One of the key elements of *Serial Mom* is Beverly's obsessive consumption of violence. She sits down to watch Slasher gore with Chip ("can we watch that scene again, the one where he tears out her heart"), collects true crime books (*Urge to Kill, Mass Murder in Houston, Helter Skelter, Hunting Humans*), keeps a serial killer scrapbook, writes to killers on death row, has tapes sent to her by Ted Bundy and keeps a photo of Charles Manson by her bed. Beverly is not the only woman who obsessively consumes serial killer entertainment: aside from the teenage horror audience, her most of her fans are female. All the customers at Misty's Serial Mom Memorabilia stall outside the courtroom are female, and one remarks that she wished they had stuff like this at the Bundy trial, as if she was at a concert. The author of the Serial Mom book is asked to sign it "to a future Serial Mom" by one woman, and another remarks that she feels like killing few people herself. Dotty and Rosemary are seen watching Joan Rivers on TV interviewing women who marry killers on death row: "Serial Heads: Women who Love Men who Mutilate". Obviously this film is firmly tongue-in-cheek, there are constant references to women who consume violence as entertainment, particularly true crime violence and the eroticisation of serial killers.

Although *The Hole* and *Serial Mom* are not strictly classic Slasher films, they contain elements which link them with the genre – *Serial Mom* in particular is contains a discourse on women's consumption of horror. The Slasher film, particularly when the killer is a woman, offers every conceivable viewing position to the female spectator: the active sadistic controlling gaze of the killer which becomes a masochistic castrated position in the film's conclusion, or the passive masochistic position of the victim that subsequently becomes sadistic, controlling and subjective when she takes control of the active gaze and slays the Slasher. Similarly, the spectator can switch allegiance, identifying

with the killer's point of view during the first part of the story, and then the Final Girl after the pivot point in the narrative, or vice versa, to adopt a masochistic position throughout, identifying with the victims and then the killer when she becomes a victim herself. The female killer represents a further disruption of the boundaries between monster/victim, or danger/safety.

The female psycho killers who inhabit teen Slasher films are not propelled by psychosexual fury in same way as male killers. There is never a loss of control in their actions, each killing is deliberate and the victims are not selected entirely randomly. Although the killings are staged as the work of a deranged psycho, they are revealed in the end sequence to be cold blooded killers, executing meticulously planned revenge against specific targets and enjoying the bloodbath along the way. The female Slasher is cleverer and more calculated than her male counterpart. The killings are meticulously planned and executed, and apart from the incidental deaths of those who get in the way, each of the victims is explicitly punished. The pleasure for the killer seems to lie in avenging a previous crime rather than in the killing itself, to an extent. The female Slasher killer is more of an assassin with a personal grudge and a sense of humour than a sexual misfit full of psychosexual rage.

Defining the features of the female Slasher killer is not straightforward because there are so few of them and so there isn't really a paradigmatic pattern. However there are certain characteristics that they share. Whereas in the classic Slasher text (*Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, etc.) we know the killer's identity and backstory throughout the film even if we do not see their face, the female Slashers are different, and their identity is only revealed in the final confrontation with the Final Girl along with their backstory and motivation. For the avenging female Slasher it is not good enough for the final victim to die, they have to know what they are being punished for – in other words there is a purpose

beyond the killing itself.

The relationship of the killer to the victims, in particular to the Final Girl, is crucial to the way that she is singled out by the killer for personal revenge, and that she gets close to her by masquerading as a victim. The recurring motive is revenge: in the case of *Friday the 13th* and *Scream 2*, maternal revenge for the death of a son; in *Urban Legend*, the death of a boyfriend. In each of the films discussed here the female Slasher is staged as a psychopath whilst anonymous and as a calculated vengeance killer when her identity is revealed. Although *Serial Mom* never confesses, she convinces a court that the victims deserved it.

Because she is a woman, she is the last one to be suspected. The female Slasher is able to get close to her victims or pretend to be victims themselves in order to kill. Teen Slasher films with female killers create a space where male authority is redundant. Women occupy both the victim space, heroic space and the sadistic space within the text. The female action hero, Slasher killer and serial killer are all feminine versions of archetypes which were established as male. Although it is possible to read the story they tell as a masculine one, there is a gaze structured alongside it which is constituted in feminine terms. Placing a woman in this once symbolically male space alters the symbolic economy of the film in such a way that phallogentrism is no longer the only signifier of activity. Femininity is not intrinsically linked to masochism or passivity, but takes on a sadistic form, a shift which is carried through to the mechanisms of seeing within the texts.

PART III

CHAPTER 5: MAPPING THE GAZE ACROSS

THE RAPE REVENGE FILM

The rape-revenge drama, and *I Spit on your Grave* (1978) in particular, have been the subject of much critical attention, and become a site of debate in relation to male visual pleasure and the sexual politics of depicting rape on screen. The dominant emphasis of these debates has been on the male gaze, the male audience or the masculinisation of the heroine. Many critical accounts acknowledge that male visual pleasure may be masochistic as well as sadistic, but none extend the argument to examine whether visual pleasure for women in these films can function as sadistic as well as masochistic. Barbara Creed is alone in asking “to what extent might the female spectator be empowered when identifying with the female castrator? Does she derive a form of sadistic pleasure in seeing her sexual other humiliated and punished?” (1993:155). Creed’s analysis of *I Spit on your Grave* is the only one which reads the heroine of the rape revenge as figuratively female. The female gaze however is not the dominant focus of her analysis, which also concentrates on male visual pleasure in the text, and the function of the *femme castratrice* as a by-product of male castration phantasy and desire. *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993) however also specifically reads the victim-hero of the rape revenge film as female rather than masculine due to the repeated motif of castration as a response to rape.

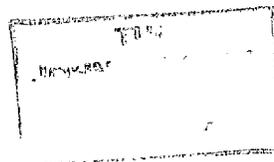
This chapter therefore picks up Creed’s passing enquiry with particular reference to woman as castrator. The emphatic emphasis on male visual pleasure and the masculinisation of the heroine within critical accounts of the rape-revenge film has meant that female agency, in particular the notion of sadistic female agency, has been all but erased from the text. Although there is little doubt that *I Spit On your Grave* is produced and directed by men and aimed a male consumer, this accusation can be levelled at pretty much any mainstream film and does not nullify an examination of what visual pleasure – if

any – this film and others like it might offer to a female audience, particularly since it seems to be of such great interest to female critics¹. This chapter specifically addresses the hypothetical or diagetic spectator rather than the socialised spectator. Although other figures discussed in this study can be addressed in terms of both hypothetical spectator positions, and audience behaviour (the *femme fatale* or the action heroine for example), Lorena Bobbitt aside there is little evidence that women who are raped turn castrator and act out these phantasies in real life. This is precisely the potential pleasure of the rape revenge text – to experience phantasies of power and vengeance which are unavailable to women in real life, where rapists do not get what they deserve. The figures are stark: in the UK, between 1977 and 1996 the percentage of reported rapes ending in a conviction fell from 36% to 10% (source: <http://www.rapecrisis.co.uk/statistics.htm>). With nine out of ten reported rapists currently walking free, the notion that rape is a low risk, high reward crime is stronger now than when *I Spit on your Grave* first came out. There is little revenge for rape in real life, thus staging of women as avenging warriors is all the more satisfying.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

I Spit on your Grave is a pure paradigmatic example of the rape revenge film: there is no overlaid system of metaphor, no sub-plots, no ambiguity: there is almost a mathematical clarity to the narrative structure. Clover states that it “reduces the genre to its essence” (1992:116). Jennifer rents a house in the countryside to write a book. She is stalked by four men who rape her and leave her for dead. She then hunts them down one by one and kills them. The film takes the form of a two act structure and devotes equal time to the rape sequence and Jennifer’s revenge.

¹ Much of the criticism levelled at the film is based around audience reactions to the film. Clover points to Ebert and Siskel as specific examples of critics who condemn the film in part because anecdotal evidence of the male audiences cheering during the rape sequences (1992:118) and a need to distance themselves from this reaction and de-implicate themselves from the gaze of the rapists. In a more recent public screening of the film however (Fab Café, Manchester, 1998) the – mostly male – audience booed the rapists and cheered Jennifer during her revenge, with the loudest cheers reserved for the castration sequence.



It is also the rape revenge film that has received the most critical attention, and this chapter is a response to the surrounding discourse as much to the film itself. I will therefore examine the staging of female phantasy across the film and the textual positions on offer to the female spectator, since the staging of sadistic female agency is perhaps the only potential gaze in this film which has yet to be examined. All of the elements of the rape revenge film that exist in more subtle forms in mainstream versions of this narrative paradigm (and indeed other genres) are exposed and laid bare in *I Spit on your Grave*. Whereas the *femme castratrice* is a figure who exists within all genres and narrative tale types, in the rape revenge film she literally castrates. Peter Lehman notes that “*I Spit On Your Grave* is an extremely disturbing movie, but like many disturbing movies in disreputable genres it is so because of the manner in which it foregrounds and intensifies many of the elements that these reviewers find acceptable in more muted versions of other films in the genre” (1993:104). A later homage, *I Spit on your Corpse, I Piss on your Grave* (2002), has slightly different textual politics and the heroine herself is not raped, but the narrative structure is the same. The heroine is captured by her ex-boyfriend who takes her to a torture chamber, where he is holding three other men whom he intends to kill alongside her. She kills her captor and rather than release the hostages kills them too, in prolonged violent sequences, as it turns out they have all mistreated her in the past.

Jacinda Read argues that rape revenge films are not bound by genre but by narrative form: “rape revenge can be seen as constituting a series of narrative events (rape, transformation, revenge) occurring in a particular order, combined with a specific set of character functions or spheres of action (victim, rapist, avenger)” (Read 2000:242). The narrative structure echoes that of the Slasher film in an extended form. The final confrontation between the Final Girl and the killer is extended to cover the entire narrative of the film in an exchange in which the female object of violence becomes an agent of

violence, and the male agent of violence becomes an object of violence. "Rather than wait ninety minutes for a single payoff, there is a pattern of repetition and variation which leads to a climax" (Lehman 1993:107). As I will argue later, the narrative structure of the film is crucial to the way Jennifer's gaze is mapped across it. This narrative pattern differs from the Slasher film in the way in which the active/passive sadistic/masochistic gazes of the heroine and the monster are staged across the text, echoing the narrative structure.

SEXUAL POLITICS AND THE RAPE REVENGE FILM

Although the focus of this chapter is specifically (hypothetical) visual pleasure for the female spectator, it is impossible to ignore debates about the politics of the film, especially since much of the surrounding discourse concerns audience reactions to and investment in the text. Two dominant areas of tension emerge relating firstly to the representation of the heroine and secondly to the representation of the rapist. The first concerns the feminist/misogynistic credentials of the rape revenge text, particularly violent 'exploitation' films such as *I Spit On your Grave*. Viridi argues that "feminist anxieties about constructing vengeful heroines in the 1980s circle around eroticizing rape scenes and perpetuating a victim syndrome while masquerading the revenge as female agency" (Viridi 1999:27). Similarly, despite feminist re-readings of the texts which play down the eroticization of rape and argue that the pleasure for male viewers is masochistic rather than sadistic, there is clearly a market for rape porn: www.rapes-revenge.com is a subscription porn site aimed at male consumers and there are countless others.

The notion of female visual pleasure in the rape revenge text also falls into the trap of positing a scenario in which women enjoy rape, a scenario which all critics are keen to distance themselves from endorsing. Secondly, critical responses (particularly those from male critics) express concern about the rapists being too 'normal' and seek ways to distance themselves, and other male spectators from identifying with their gaze. The gaze

of the rapists via the I-camera is the purest form of the Mulvian male gaze – it sadistically seeks to punish and control the woman as punishment for her castration via the recreation of the spectacle of the bleeding wound. Both approaches resolve themselves through a reading of the heroine as masculine, and by arguing that there is masochistic pleasure in the text for male spectators.

THE MASCULINISATION OF THE HEROINE

Carol Clover places the victim-hero of the rape revenge on a continuum with the heroine of the Slasher film. She reads the rape revenge film in relation to a one sex model of gender. The victim's transformation "from passive victim to aggressive avenger, from mutilatee to mutilator, can be construed as a regendering not unlike the one undergone by the Final girl of Slasher films" (1992:161). Her study of the rape revenge text also focuses on the investment for male spectators in identifying with the victim-hero rather than the rapists and the pleasures of male masochistic spectatorship

The position of the rape victim *in general* knows no sex, and a film like *I Spit on your Grave* is literally predicated on the assumption that *all* viewers, male and female alike, will take Jennifer's part and via whatever set of psychosexual translations, "feel" her violation. Without that identification, the revenge phase of the drama can make no sense (ibid.:159).

Like the Slasher film, the rape revenge film sets up the equation of a feminised male and a masculinised female. The rapist becomes a rapist because he is emasculated in some way; "it is the man who is deprived of the phallus who must live by the penis" (1992:157). Set in opposition to the feminised male on screen is the heroine who for Clover is:

A male surrogate in all things Oedipal, a homo-erotic stand-in, the audience incorporate: to the extent that she means 'girl' at all, it is only for the purposes of signifying phallic lack...The discourse is wholly masculine, and females figure in it only insofar as they 'read' some form of male experience" (Clover 1989:119).

Within this model of spectatorship, a body is gendered by the space it occupies on screen: the active sadistic space is gendered masculine and the passive masochistic space is gendered feminine. As I have argued elsewhere, while this model operates beautifully to

explain a particular audience investment in the text, it is reductive since it does not allow for the possibility of active sadistic women on screen without re-constructing them as masculine.

The visual pleasure available for male spectators is also the focus of Peter Lehman's article 'Don't Blame this on a Girl', which as the title suggests reads the heroine as Clover does as "a surrogate for male desire" (Lehman, 1993:115). In other words again she not really a 'girl' at all. *I Spit on your Grave* addresses "a male subjectivity which is both heterosexually masochistic and homosexually sadistic" (ibid.:105). The masochistic part of the story is told via identification with Jennifer during the rapes. The rapists, he argues, are "excessively characterised as evil and depraved" (ibid.:108) to allow the male spectator to distance himself from a grotesque trope of masculinity, whilst at the same time recognising that he shares a similar desire for the woman and watches that desire get punished when Jennifer kills the rapists. The expression of male masochism in the rape revenge text also represents repressed homosexuality – since Jennifer is figuratively male, her eroticised attack on the rapists is a homosexual/homophobic act (ibid.:114-6). Within this reading, not only is Jennifer a man, she is a homosexual man. Like most readings this one emphasises the male production and consumption of the text, to the extent that "such eroticised deaths [of the rapists] are male fantasies which are unlikely to be of interest to women" (ibid.:111) and denies any notion of female agency or visual pleasure within the text.

Phillip Green also privileges the problematics of viewing for male spectators both in relation of Jennifer and the rapists: "There is no way that any man, except one who fancies himself in the role of the Grim Reaper, can be interpellated as the Death Angel; she is most definitely not, as in Slasher films, a female avenger with whom males can vicariously identify" (Green 1998:190). Of *I Spit on your Grave*, he states that "among

these northern rednecks the only man capable of securing sympathetic identification is a retarded boy who is coerced into participating by the others” (ibid.:195). For male audiences, he argues, the pleasure in these films lies in the fetishisation of the woman, an ‘innocent’ identification with sadistic violence enacted by a woman, and the absolution of men from the responsibility of protecting women (ibid.:195). Green places the rape revenge cycle within a contemporary spate of films which operate around what he refers to as “gynophobia”, the masochistic pleasure derived by men from being confronted by images of powerful women. Within this formulation however these women are again not really women at all. The rape revenge film is “a simple inversion of the Death Wish saga” (ibid.:192) and “we are interpellated as *her/him* the virtuous killer; Camille Keaton as Charles Bronson” [my emphasis] (ibid.:191). Overall, “the genre’s invocation of the phallic woman in the guise of killer seems to suggest not so much a different, frightening way of being a woman, as a different, more universalised way of being a man.”(ibid.:194) Why this insistence on masculinising the rape revenge heroine? Femininity is all but eliminated in these readings, other than its function as a signifier of passivity, and female agency is eradicated in favour of reading the heroine as masculine to the extent that active female subjectivity is an impossibility within these formulations.

Locating the rape revenge heroine as an archetype of the monstrous-feminine as Barbara Creed does offers a way of reclaiming her as female and locating her as the carrier of an active female agency, overtly sadistic rather than the bearer of a sado-masochistic male gaze – or, as she puts it, “Because the heroine is represented as resourceful, intelligent, and dangerous, it does not follow that she should be a pseudo man” (Creed 1993:127). She argues that the horror text operates as a conduit for male castration anxiety via its representation of woman in the twin roles of castrated and castrator (ibid.:122). This dual representation operates across *I Spit on your Grave* in its shift from representation of woman as victim, battered until she resembles the literal bleeding wound, and via her

transition into castrating avenger. She notes that the deliberate eroticisation of the death scenes in *I Spit on your Grave* “offer the spectator the promise of an erotic pleasure associated with a desire for death and non-differentiation. In this context, the *femme castratrice* becomes an ambiguous figure. She arouses a fear of castration and death, while simultaneously playing on a desire for death, pleasure and oblivion” (ibid.:130). The spectator she refers to here is obviously male, but the heroine is quite clearly gendered female and Creed concludes that “the notion of the monstrous-feminine challenges the view that femininity, by definition, constitutes passivity” (ibid.:151).

All the critical material makes reference to the fact that these films are made by men and marketed at male consumers, which is true but does not rule out the notion that these films may be of interest to women. Nor do the previous readings examine fully the significance of the way that the revenge is executed precisely and symbolically other than to argue that it is for the visual pleasure of male spectators, which again is probably true. However, from the point of view of the female subject, the way that phantasy is staged in the rape revenge film also tells a story, and constructs a very precise form of sadistic feminine vengeance.

Jacinda Read has produced the largest study of the rape revenge film, arguing that the rape revenge text functions as a way of making sense of feminism: “The rise of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, and the concomitant emergence of the figure of the independent woman, demanded a redefinition of character functions and, by extension, a transformation in the internal dynamics of the rape-revenge structure and the stories it told” (2000: 242). She maps a historical shift in the dynamics of the films post-1970:

In the rape-revenge films of the pre-1970 period, the victim was largely defined through her relation to men as daughter, wife or fiancée, so necessitating and legitimising the presence of a male avenger of her rape. In the films of the post-1970 period, the representation of the rape victim was as an independent woman

meant that she was increasingly able to become the credible avenger of her own rape. Consequently, if the rape-revenge films of the pre-1970 period largely told masculine stories in which women were, for the most part, passive victims, in the post-1970 period, the rape-revenge film can be seen as telling increasingly feminine, and even feminist, stories (ibid.:242).

Read's study is sharply critical of both Creed and Clover's accounts of the rape revenge narrative, due to their emphasis on a psychoanalytic approach and their location of the rape revenge film within the horror genre, which she argues does not account for the historical specificity of the rape revenge cycle.

Because the rape revenge film is historically located however, this does not render a psychoanalytic or a generic approach redundant, and this would appear to be Read's main reason for dismissing Clover's arguments so vehemently. Read also highlights the fact that the eroticisation of the heroine is not a dominant feature of Clover's work, which she argues represses the heroine's erotic staging in order to support a reading of her as masculine. In other words, reading the victim-hero as the main point of identification in the text for male spectators ignores her function as an object of desire. The rape revenge text is one way of making sense of feminism, and can posit a feminist dialogue, or operate as part of a backlash against feminism. She concludes that the rape revenge cycle "might usefully be read as one of the key ways in which *Hollywood* has attempted to make sense of feminism and the changing shape of heterosexual femininity in the post-1970 period", [my emphasis] (ibid.:241). The problem with this approach is that she never really makes clear exactly *who* is making sense of feminism other than 'Hollywood', and does not indicate if or why the films discussed would be of interest to women.

If the rape revenge film is to be approached as a historical cycle, this cycle is not specific to Hollywood, and the same narrative structure and generic features cut across cultural and racial boundaries. Jytika Viridi maps a similar development of the rape revenge

narrative across Hindi cinema in which the films also operate around a process of transformation: “The 1980s rape-revenge film, fuelled by women’s rage, dramatizes a public discourse which repudiates victimisation and patriarchy and is distinct from the pre-1980s ‘inscription’ and ‘erasure’ of sexual violence” (Virdi 1999:36). She discusses a similar shift from a ‘reverent’ representation of women in the 1960s to off-screen rape in the 1970s to the rape-revenge drama of the 1980s, in which women are sanctioned to occupy active space as vengeance for rape: “within the Hindi film narrative, it takes a woman’s rape to permit revenge” (ibid.:37). The same shift occurs as in Hollywood, from men taking vengeance on behalf of women (and beyond Hollywood, in for example Bergman’s *The Virgin Spring* (1960)) to women taking revenge for themselves. Similarly, the rape revenge narrative is present in other national cinemas. The French *Baise Moi* (2002) also represent rape as a reason for, and justification of extreme violence committed against men by women. The Japanese film *Freezer* (2000) also features a woman who takes revenge on a bunch of men who rape her, this time by torturing them to death in a freezer. The rape revenge film, which Jacinda Read argues is specific to Hollywood over a specific time frame, is a universal tale type, which is present in a variety of national cinemas and not confined to a specific time period. The structural use of castration as a response to rape is common to all these films which follow a fixed narrative pattern and system of meaning. These cross-cultural similarities between rape-revenge films and their seemingly conscious engagement with feminism (or the later feminist readings of them) would suggest that the gaze carried by the heroine speaks universally to women, and is not limited by boundaries of race, class or culture. In other words the repetition of theme, politics, narrative structure and character archetypes in the rape revenge film answers much of the criticism levelled at psychoanalytic approaches. Although psychoanalysis is limited to white western culture, by staging a female gaze which constitutes the same features and is mapped across the same narrative structure regardless of the cultural origins of the text the rape revenge film provides a universal archetype.

I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE AND THE FEMALE GAZE

Reviews which reclaim the film as a feminist text tend to emphasise the way in which it is framed from beginning to end as Jennifer's story (e.g. Clover 1992), yet this is not really the case at all. It is precisely this denial of subjectivity and enforced passive positioning during the rape phase of the story, combined with the reassertion of feminine subjectivity during the revenge sequence, which is the crucial structuring device in the narrative. In this sense, *I Spit On your Grave* documents the collapse and reassertion of the female subject.

The film opens with a New York skyline, cutting to a shot of Jennifer driving on an open road (with ominous echoes of Marion Keyes leaving for the Bates motel in *Psycho* (1960)). She first meets the men when she stops for gas, and tells them (Johnny in particular) that she is staying alone in a summerhouse nearby. The next scene cuts to Jennifer stripping by the lake to go swimming. This scene is shot from two camera positions: the first from behind a bush nearby, the gap in the leaves framing her breasts; and the other situated on the opposite side of the lake, framing her in long shot. This second camera uses a fish eye lens and is rounded at the edges to look like a telescope or binoculars. This is very deliberate and voyeuristic fetishisation, and Matthew's boasting that "I saw her tits, I really did" (it is implied that it is his point of view which is represented by the camera in the bushes) indicates that Jennifer is being watched and stalked by the rapists (there are two people watching her) at a very early stage of the film. Whether they are actually watching her or not, the I-camera very emphatically adopts their point of view and fetishises Jennifer. From the second scene in the film she is therefore framed as an erotic object, which problematises readings which disagree that this is a factor in the film. The emphasis on male masochism in some of these readings denies that the first part of this film is a 'pure' example of Mulvey's sadistic, controlling male gaze described in 'Visual Pleasure' (1975).

In the next shot, she unpacks the clothes of the previous occupant and finds a gun in the drawer. She is startled by Matthew knocking at the door with her order from the grocery store, and stares longingly at the gun before she goes downstairs. They chat and she tells him that she is a writer, is alone and has no boyfriend. In the next scene, Matthew recounts the exchange to the other men in the context of a conversation that globally consists of the objectification (“all women want it”) and abjection (“all women are full of shit”) of women. These exchanges between the men provide them with a backstory and motivation, and establish the dynamics between them. We know much less about Jennifer: on a purely practical level, she has no-one to talk to other than the men, and therefore we share their story to a far greater extent than we share Jennifer’s, particularly in the first half of the film.

The first decisive narrative link to Jennifer comes in the next scene, which opens with a shot of her in the boat on the lake, and continues with a voiceover as she reads a novel which is obviously autobiographical:

“After weeks of self doubt and much deliberation, she embarked on a temporary leave of absence from everything that formed the fabric of her life, the Big City, her job, her friends...”

At this point, the narration is interrupted by the men shouting at her.

“...hectic daily schedules. Breathless days, sleepless nights...”

Again they interrupt, doing tricks in the boat for her amusement. She gets up and walks away, looking obviously annoyed. Later that night, she is writing in bed and is again interrupted by whistling and shouting outside. The narrative voiceover presents her as narrative author, as do the repeated shots of her typing, and it is an obvious device to denote point of view. The way that the rapists continually interrupt the creation of

Jennifer's narrative reflects the rape as an attack on active subjectivity. This incident highlights the way in which the narrative consistently and repeatedly demonstrates how the men invade not just her body, but also her body as the carrier of narrative agency. We can also see the gradual built-up of sexual harassment and stalking preceding the rapes. She goes outside to see who's there, sees no-one and goes back to bed, but not before staring longingly at the gun in the drawer. Apart from one other deliberately placed point of view shot this is the only part of the rape story in which the camerawork is aligned to occupy Jennifer's point of view.

The next day she is sunbathing in her boat when the men come past in their motorboat and try to knock her out. They grab hold of the boat and pull her to the shore. During this sequence, the camera is positioned between the legs of one of the men, literally phallicising the gaze of the camera. They chase her through the woods, cheering and shouting at her. The I-camera is used once during this scene, although it is not clear whose gaze it represents; otherwise the chase is shot from a detached, external angle. When they catch her, they call for Matthew: "We caught her for you". Johnny then pushes her to the ground and rapes her. The scene is shot from multiple angles in a detached way, with long shots and little editing. There is no deliberate inscription of point of view to any character. As she shouts at them ("You bastards") and crawls away, they shout encouragement to Matthew ("Come on, be a man") but he runs off. As she walks off, the camera follows her, and as she reaches a clearing in the woods, we see each of the men waiting for her at the same time she does. Johnny and Stanley hold her face down on a rock while Andy rapes her. The scene is framed from a long shot, and as the men walk away the camera stays focused on Jennifer's body lying on the rock for about fifteen seconds. The camera then cuts to a close-up of her crotch as she crawls away. The image of the literal bleeding wound is common in cinematic representations of rape, but it is conspicuously absent here. There is no blood and the film does not use this technique of literalising the woman's

castration through a visual image of the bleeding wound. *I Spit on your Grave* saves this image for the literally castrated male.

The next scene shows the men getting into their boat and then cuts to Jennifer back in the house. She reaches for the phone, dials 911, and a voice answers, but a foot kicks the phone away. Stanley beats her up and offers her to Matthew, who is drinking and past his earlier hesitation. He gets on top of her, providing the only instance in the rape phase when we get a definite point of view shot from Jennifer's perspective. Matthew gets up, saying that he "can't come with people watching, this is wrong, not like this". Stanley reads out the passage from her novel that she wrote earlier, they laugh and he rips it up. He then approaches Jennifer, who pleads with him ("I'm hurt"). He responds by beating her and raping her again with a bottle: "Total submission, that's what I like in a woman". This time the camera follows the men out of the house rather than staying with Jennifer. They discuss killing her and bully Matthew into going back and stabbing her through the heart. He does re-enter the house, but when confronted with Jennifer's body he is unable to go through with it. He wipes some blood on the knife, and tells the others that he has killed her.

Many of the accounts defending the film focus on the alignment of point of view with Jennifer rather than the rapists, particularly during the rape sequence: "Although there are a few men-only sequences, the film is framed from beginning to end as Jennifer's story" (Clover 1992:116). Although there is the odd point of view shot from Jennifer's perspective, and we share narrative knowledge with her at other points, it is not true to say that the entire story is framed from her perspective. If anything the camerawork is detached, static and observational, and the film is framed through almost a dual-focus narrative structure, which pays more attention to the rapists' story than to Jennifer's in the first act. They take up a greater proportion of screen time, we know more about them and the I-camera is aligned with their gaze more often.

ACT 1: MASOCHISTIC PHANTASY

Rape is a problematic narrative episode when it comes to the construction of an active subjectivity on the part of the victim, and to theorise a structural identification with this position in the text is inherently problematic. As the account below asserts, rape and the politics of rape in courtroom situations are about the destruction of agency:

Testimonies of rape survivors (Griffin 1979) show that the most central element of the experience is the sense of being deprived of the self; being physically penetrated without her consent, the subject feels evacuated from within. One defence against this assault on one's subjectivity is to evacuate one's own initiative; paradoxically endorsing the evacuation of subjectivity is the only way a woman can hold on to some sense of self... The very situation in the courtroom, where again, her 'no' is not believed and the displacement of her subjectivity is repeated, makes it extremely difficult to hold up a convincing testimony... Guilt (Smart and Smart 1978) is a secondary defence mechanism against the threat to the subject's sense of self. By implicating herself she can at least hold up a token of subjectivity: I am guilty (or desiring), therefore I am ('Rape: problems of intention' *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*: 368-9).

Rape in legal terms is in the eye of the rapist. The Morgan defence allows a man to claim a woman consented, even where someone else consented for her by proxy. The issue of agency is crucial here, and it is allocated firmly with the accused in rape trials: did he think she consented? Whether the victim perceives herself to have been raped or not is irrelevant. Set within these terms, the rape revenge drama represents the annihilation of the feminine subject (the rape) followed by the reconstruction of the active subject as feminine, in the revenge part of the story: In Act One the victim is acted upon, but in Act Two she has total agency and narrative control.

The process of reconstruction involving guilt results from rewriting the experience in terms of desire. Seduction is one way of re-inscribing subjectivity and agency into an experience which by its very nature (the subject is acted upon) destroys them. The absence of knowledge accorded to Jennifer's point of view in the rape story, combined with the

structural knowledge of the rapists and the voyeuristic camerawork focused on Jennifer's body, denies her subjectivity and agency which is then reconstructed in the second half of the film.

Although the sadistic positioning of the female protagonist is the main focus of this study, there is clearly a masochistic part of the story which needs to be addressed in the rape scenario. The notion that women take pleasure in the punishment of rapists must be countered with the potential pleasure offered by the phantasy of the rape scenario itself. Jami Bernard sees the rape phantasy as one which is repeatedly and pleurably played out for female audiences: "The most romantic scene ever filmed – Rhett carrying Scarlett up the staircase – is another rape" (1997:xiv). She reads *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* as a sugar-coated rape fantasy with nostalgic affection arguing that:

One of the problems with women's private rape fantasies is that they are so easily misunderstood. Men enjoy the odious interpretation that "women may as well relax and enjoy it", as if rape were a pleasurable act of sex instead of a vicious and highly personal assault. Women, who are subject to slanderous labels like "slut", enjoy the psychological aspect of the rape fantasy that relieves them of any sense of blame and responsibility (ibid.172).

Horror also consistently re-represents the visual pleasure in a rape scenario via the figure of the vampire. The most popular films cited by female horror fans in Brigid Cherry's study were vampire films, mainly because uniquely the monster of these films is exotic and sexually alluring, and has a romantic aesthetic attached to him (1999a). The vampire has been read as a feminised figure; he is the closest male archetype to the *femme fatale* or a siren, and he is dangerous precisely because he is sexually alluring to young virgins who willingly give themselves up rather than fight. The vampire is both an object of desire and identification for the female spectator as well as an object of terror. The rapist of the rape-revenge drama is not constructed to hold the same erotic appeal. The rapist is a form of male grotesque, defined by masculine excess and an abuse of phallic power. The expulsion of abject masculinity from the text is a consistent feature of the rape revenge drama. The fantasy contained here is one of sexual passivity. This is 'controlled' rape, in the same way

that men who submit to the image of the dominatrix are playing out a phantasy scenario in which they are the ones truly in control. It is their desire and their subjectivity which dictate events, even though the position they occupy is passive.

CENTRAL AXIS

What follows the rape sequence is the axis point in the narrative structure in which the terms are reversed. *I Spit on your Grave* places this axis point firmly in the centre of the film, although other examples place this axis point earlier on and focus more explicitly on the revenge. In *Thelma and Louise* (1992) for example, the rape happens off-screen as a narrative pre-event which is never shown, but nonetheless provides the avenging heroine with something to avenge.

There is of course the issue of whether it is necessary to screen the rapes, especially in such long drawn out violent detail as in *I Spit on your Grave*. In *Thelma and Louise*, Thelma is saved from rape and we never actually see Louise being raped in Texas, but this pre-narrative event contextualises and justifies their actions from then on. The excessive violence of the rape sequences, coupled with the eroticisation of the heroines are the main reasons why rape revenge films have been slated critically, since these spectacles of eroticised violence serve no narrative purpose. It was the excessiveness of the rape scenes rather than the castration which prevented *I Spit on your Grave* from getting a UK release according to the censor's report for the BBFC. However, the rapes justify the revenge, and the masochistic part of the story must be told in order to facilitate the sadistic retribution – we have to experience Jennifer's rape in order to understand why it must be so violently avenged. The same logic was applied by the BBFC to *Baise Moi* since "they [the women] kill men in ways that reflect their rapes. So if we took out the rape, the film would be

meaningless". The female censors in particular "didn't want any cuts because if this is how men treat women, then why should we hide it?"².

The revenge attacks mirror the rapes, each one tailored to suit the crime with an equivalent punishment. Clover notes that there is no discernible 'pleasure' during the revenge sequence: "Jennifer goes about the business of catching and murdering her assailants almost impassively. It is, in fact, an oddly external film" (1992:119). The revenge sequence however is staged to a much greater extent from Jennifer's point of view. This central axis alters the terms of the film, and the textual positions switch over. Where Jennifer was a passive object of exchange between the men, she now becomes an active agent of violence. If, as Barbara Creed (1993) suggests, for male spectators castration anxiety invoked by women is the central project of the horror text, something which is confronted only to be disavowed and expelled, the rape revenge film offers a similar type of demarcation ritual for female spectators.

<u>ACT 1</u>		<u>ACT 2</u>	
<u>JENNIFER</u>	<u>RAPISTS</u>	<u>JENNIFER</u>	<u>RAPISTS</u>
PASSIVE	ACTIVE	ACTIVE	PASSIVE
OBJECT	SUBJECT	SUBJECT	OBJECT
MASOCHISTIC	SADISTIC	SADISTIC	MASOCHISTIC
CASTRATED	PHALLIC	CASTRATOR	CASTRATED

In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet disputes Freud's notion that castration anxiety is present in women, arguing that it is unlikely that girls would suffer from fear of castration, since it never actually takes place. In Millet's reading, fear of hypothetical castration is translated to fear of actual rape (cited by Mitchell 1974:353). Although Mitchell is critical

² Interview with Andreas Whittam Smith, *Sunday Times* 29 July, 2001

of Millet's reading of Freud, since it rests on the reality principle and rejects irrational fears of the unconscious, the fact that rape is a real fear and a real experience for many women in a way that castration is not is relevant to reception of the rape revenge film. In Justin Nolan's audience study of the Slasher film male and female responses differed, in that viewers were more likely to be scared of scenarios on screen that reflected dangers they (as members of their sex) were more likely to face in real life. Therefore men, more likely to be attacked by strangers, felt more fear when this scenario was repeated on screen, while for women, more likely to be attacked (raped or otherwise) by someone they know or an acquaintance, were more scared by family horror in the process of spectatorship.

Set within these terms, for female spectators the rapist represents a grotesque, threatening form of sexual otherness. In the same way as the monstrous-feminine is read as an abject, excessive form of femininity, the rapist is a grotesque excess of phallic masculinity who is ultimately castrated. In this sense, *I Spit on your Grave* and other rape revenge films operates on a classic horror trajectory for female spectators – the monster wreaks havoc and is punished and expelled from the text by the triumphant heroine. This punishment is very specific and fits the crime. Although it is easy to argue that the rapists' deaths are staged as erotic spectacle because it satisfies the desires of the male gaze, *I Spit On your Grave* presents three ways of staging revenge to rape – acting out, castration, and search and destroy – within a female (feminine) discourse.

ACT II: SADISTIC PHANTASY

Jennifer recovers, and the passage of time is demonstrated by a sequence of shots of her taking a walk and looking pensive. In each shot, she is less bruised and we see her slowly rebuilding herself. She tapes her manuscript back together (if the men mocking and destroying her novel demonstrates their attack on her agency, then her reconstruction of it

signifies the shift in narrative agency towards Jennifer) and gets on with writing her book, uninterrupted by the men, since they think she is dead.

After this semi-montage sequence, the film cuts to the last scene not to be shot from Jennifer's perspective. The men are playing cards in a bar, talking about how boring their town is. They speculate why the body has not been found: "Do you now what two weeks does to a body? A stench that's a hell of a lot worse than shit". Again the abject imagery is used when referring to Jennifer's body. They send Matthew on a mission to check on Jennifer and kill her if she isn't already dead. Jennifer is writing by the lake when, Matthew, Andy and Stanley come past in the boat. They do not see her watching them, and when they realise that there is no body in the house, Matthew gets a beating. In the next shot, Jennifer gets her gun. This is the point in the film when narrative agency decisively shifts towards Jennifer, both in terms of the way the narrative is framed towards her perspective, and because she is now the active agent within the story rather than the passive recipient. She drives to church, kneels before the altar and prays for forgiveness for what she is about to do.

The first two killings are constructed as seductions, and in each of them, Jennifer is in charge throughout. The masochistic pleasure for the male spectator involved in these scenarios may dominate critical accounts of this film, but these killings are explicitly framed from the perspective of the sadistic *femme castratrice*: the spectator is explicitly directed to identify with her gaze.

MATTHEW: ACTING OUT

Jennifer drives to the garage where Johnny works, and sees him with his wife and children, framed from a long point of view shot from her perspective. As in the previous scene the camera is aligned with the point of view of Jennifer stalking her prey. She then calls in an

order to the grocery store, where Matthew reacts with horror to the knowledge that she is back. He watches the butcher sawing up a carcass, and grabs a knife before he leaves. Jennifer watches him arrive, and taunts him by stalking him through the woods and shouting. The camera adopts her position throughout the chase, and although it is Matthew with the knife who has come to kill her, she occupies the dominant position. They talk, and she seduces him. As they have sex, she slips a noose around his neck and hangs him from a tree. The film cuts to a shot of semen hitting a tree. She pushes his body into the lake, and rides off on his bike.

The Freudian scenario presented here for the male spectator is fairly blatant. Matthew manifests the masochistic death wish, and achieves orgasm only in death. His death does really function as a symbolic castration. Unlike the others, he is not mutilated. Since Matthew effectively has no phallic power, castration as a punishment does not really fit the crime. The moral ambivalence surrounding his crime and punishment is reflected in reviews which speak of 'three rapes', effectively acquitting him. Because he is mentally subnormal, he is seemingly not responsible for his actions and therefore does not deserve to die like they do. He does what he is told or forced into doing, and in this respect he has no active will. He is, on an imaginary scale, the least responsible of the men for the rapes. He is bullied into it by the others, stops because he knows it is wrong and effectively saves her life by not killing her. He is easily manipulated by Jennifer, and as much a victim of his nasty sadistic friends as she is. In so much as Pearl embodies a female dilemma in Mulvey's structure of the female gaze, Matthew embodies a male dilemma. For Peter Green, he is the male spectator on screen "the only man capable of securing a sympathetic male identification is a retarded boy who is coerced into participating by the others (1998:191)".

Peter Lehman argues that the spectators dilemma involves a negotiation between identification and distance from the rapist. The rapist is usually a brutal exaggeration of male otherness, allowing the male spectator to distance himself from the rapist whilst reconciling his own desire for the woman. Put within Mulvey's terms (1981), the male spectator is torn between the devil of identification with, and admiration for, the rapist for doing what he himself cannot achieve (i.e. having the woman), and the deep blue sea of guilt for this desire. This distance is not achievable in the case of Matthew, who is distanced from the rest of the rapists who show no response to his death other than to save their own lives. In a similar dynamic to that featured in *The Accused* (1988), Matthew demonstrates that any man, in certain circumstances, with the right encouragement, could be a potential rapist. His depiction as the simplistic everyman, childlike and easily led only emphasises this further. It is impossible not to feel sorry for Matthew, but the emphatic point of view shot as he rapes Jennifer shows that he deserves it.

The delicate negotiations involving Matthew's degree of responsibility for his actions are of course irrelevant to Jennifer. He did rape her, he knows he was wrong, he returned to kill her later and no moral ambivalence can deflect the obvious glee on his face as he is about to rape her. He may just get off in a law court on the grounds of diminished responsibility, but that is irrelevant in a filmic space which does not register external law, and in which it is Jennifer who doles out punishment. The only point of view from Jennifer's angle shot during the rapes is of Matthew, emphasising that regardless of whether Matthew is a true rapist, Jennifer was raped. The camera makes this emphatic and erases any ambiguity concerning his guilt, he is staged as a rapist via Jennifer's gaze. As Clover states, "whilst reviews may speak of "three rapes", and "three rapists", as the body count shows (four), Jennifer knows better" (1992). Clearly, staging death as seduction offers masochistic pleasure to the male subject in identifying with Matthew or a sadistic gaze if the identification lies with Jennifer – her actions are staged as a by-product of his

desire. However to read Jennifer's revenge as a by-product of male phantasy does not tell the whole story.

Acting out the rape scenario in terms of a seduction in which she is in control, and killing the rapist in the process (the fantasy of seducing and then killing the father) is a way of rewriting the experience of being raped/abused in terms of the subject being the active rather than passive agent within the exchange. The precise staging of Matthew's death acts out the original trauma, with a satisfactory conclusion to Jennifer, and she is in control throughout the whole scenario – the very opposite of rape, in which she is acted upon.

This acting out and restaging of an original trauma can also be seen in the documentary *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story* (1999) which tells the story of the star of *The World's Biggest Gang Bang* (1995) in which she had sex with 251 men over a ten hour period. She made the film in order to demonstrate a liberated form of female sexuality, and the documentary begins an intellectual rationalisation for her work – a discussion of women and pornography in one of her college seminars in which she argues that porn can be liberating to women and 'feminism is just another form of patriarchy'. However, it also draws a very explicit link to when she was gang raped (she shows the crew where it happened), again making the point fairly clearly that the making of *The World's Biggest Gang Bang* is a reworking of the scenario of gang rape but placing the woman as the active agent of desire rather than its passive object. As with *I Spit on your Grave* the rape is come to terms with via a ritualistic repetition in which the dominated subject acts out the scenario with control and a satisfactory conclusion.

JOHNNY: CASTRATION

In the next scene Jennifer drives to the garage to pick up Johnny, who willingly gets in her car ("I know you'd like it here"), believing she enjoyed the rape and wants more. When

they reach the house she pulls the gun on him and fires a warning shot. He tries to justify the rape, saying that she enticed them into doing it by flaunting herself. Rather than shoot him, she hands him the gun, telling him that “you don’t have to force me, I’ll do it voluntarily”. She leads him to the bathroom to have a bath together. The camera is in static fly-on-the-wall mode, and we watch Jennifer and Johnny chat casually about his children and his friends. During this conversation, Johnny is in the bath framed in the mirror behind Jennifer as she casually does her hair (dressing to kill). As I have argued in Chapter 2, the mirror on screen can operate as a structuring device which emphasises the woman on screen as subject. Even when she is framed as a fetish object in the mirror, it is for the consumption of her own gaze. This narratively unnecessary sequence of Jennifer gazing at herself in the mirror further emphasises her new status as active subject and its inclusion in this particular scene firmly aligns the power of looking with her.

Similarly, our gaze is aligned with Jennifer’s very precisely. She gets in the bath with Johnny and tells him that she killed Matthew. He doesn’t believe her. The next shot is a close up of Jennifer’s hand slowly reaching for a knife – we see this, and are prepared for the attack in a way that we are not when Jennifer is caught by the rapists in Act 1. In other words, we share her gaze and are privy to her knowledge. Johnny does not see the knife go into the water, he stands up screaming, literally castrated, transformed into the bleeding wound. Jennifer simply walks out of the room, locks the door and goes downstairs to listen to opera (Puccini – *Sola Perduta Abandonnato*). Later she burns his clothes and cleans up the blood, and the scene finishes with a shot of his corpse. In *I Spit on your Grave*, because Johnny is the bearer of phallic power in the group and the chief instigator of the rapes, it is he who must be castrated.

Out of all the characters it is actually Johnny who we know the most about. We know his job (pumping gas), and we even see his wife and children once as Jennifer

watches him in preparation to put her revenge into action, and again discussing where Johnny is with his friends. He is connected with everyone else who appears in the film, unlike Jennifer who has no external narrative. We know what she does for a living (writes stories for women's magazines) but she does not speak to anyone other than the rapists and she has no history.

The equation of rape and castration is a repeated narrative motif in the rape revenge film, and repeated in a symbolic context in other films. *Last House On The Left* (1972) also features a woman castrating her daughter's rapist in a sexual context, fellating him and biting off his penis.

If we wondered why she gave up the pistol, now we know: all phallic symbols are now equal, and a hands-on knifing answers a hands-on rape in a way that a shooting, even a shooting preceded by a humiliation, does not (Clover: 1992:32).

Except it is not just a knifing, in the same way that Matthew's death is not just a hanging. Men rarely function as castrators, even when they are positioned as victims in the rape revenge film – *Deliverance* (1972) for example does not draw this equation. Carol Clover reads the double axis plot in *Deliverance* as a rape for a rape. The city men rape the countryside metaphorically, the country men respond by raping them literally. The mountain men are killed with arrows in immediate self defence, rather than ritualistically slaughtered as a female victim-hero would do. Similarly, in *Sleepers* (1995) four boys who were abused as children hunt down their abusers as adults but again, castration does not function as revenge for rape, either figuratively or literally. The role of castrating avenger is a uniquely female one³.

³ Although in *Deliverance* the first threat that is made by the mountain men is castration, not rape. Before Bobby is raped the mountain man brandishes a knife at Ed: "Ever wanted to lose your balls boy?" Similarly, both rape and castration between men feature in *Oz* (TV 1998-2003), but they are not symbolically connected to each other. The castration is in response to a burning; the rape is to diminish a gang leader. When one female character is raped, her rapist is killed on her behalf with a weight to the head. Sexual violence within this dominantly male environment as a display of power the masculinised rapist and feminised victim is too simplistic an equation to apply. The man-as-rapist/woman-as-castrator dynamic is exclusive to the rape revenge film with a female victim-hero.

So why is castration consistently presented as an answer to rape for the female subject? As Clover puts it, “if maleness caused the crime, then maleness will suffer the punishment” (1992:123), in the same way that women are raped because they are women. In simple terms, since rape is a phallic act, then vengeance must come in the form of phallic diminishment. Freud writes about women’s desire to castrate in ‘The Taboo of Virginity’: “Woman is dangerous because it is her ‘wish’ to castrate man: it is the virgin’s hostility, arising from penis envy” (Creed 1993:121). He links female resentment of men to loss of virginity⁴: “the first act of intercourse activates in a woman other impulses of long standing as well as those already described and these are in complete opposition to her womanly role and function” (Freud 1913: 204). Within Freud’s formulation the desire to castrate is an inherent response to sexual injury: the woman may wish to “take vengeance for her defloration” and such desires exist even in “the mental life of civilized women” (ibid. 206). Freud’s supposition that this desire is prompted by penis envy however is not supported or borne out in *I Spit on your Grave* – although she can be read as masculine as Clover does, Jennifer is not reconstituted as phallic as a response to this ‘penis envy’. The rape revenge text therefore satisfies this specifically female desire for vengeance in the form of castration *in extremis*. Although the rape revenge text clearly functions as a site of negotiation concerning male castration anxiety, it also contains a set trajectory of desire for the female subject.

ANDY AND STANLEY: SEARCH AND DESTROY

There are two more rapists to dispose of and the staging of their deaths mirrors their earlier pursuit of Jennifer. When Andy and Stanley realise Johnny and Matthew are missing, they set off in search of Jennifer in their boat. The scene mirrors the first one where they pursue

⁴ There are many factors in this: defloration causes pain; destruction of the hymen represents narcissistic injury; loss of virginity results in a lessening of sexual value; and the husband is only a substitute for the woman’s true love object- usually her father (Creed 1993:120).

her, and the camera adopts their gaze. However here the exchange is inverted. The camera stalks them and is aligned with Jennifer's point of view. She swims under the boat and pushes them out, chasing them in the same way that they chased her. Andy gets an axe in the back, and as Stanley hangs on to the boat propeller and pleads for his life, she turns it on and speaks the same words he spoke to her: "suck it, bitch". The boat zooms off, taking the camera with it, and freeze frames on Jennifer's face.

Jennifer's powerlessness in Act 1 is underscored by the way the camera adopts the point of view of the rapists. In Act 2, the terms are reversed precisely. Again, Jennifer is not represented as phallic, she does not answer a rape for a rape and this would be the time to do it. Andy rapes her with a bottle, and she could quite easily do an eye for an eye here, but she doesn't. *I Spit on your Grave* clearly draws an equation between rape and castration: the first two deaths are symbolically staged, the last two are seeing to unfinished business.

A RAPE FOR A RAPE

In *I Spit on your Grave* rape is answered with castration, and Clover states that "although we may wish to understand these acts as symbolic rapes, the closest a penisless person can get to the real thing, the film itself draws this equation only vaguely, if at all. Nor do other rape revenge films play up the analogy" (ibid.:161). However there are recent films which do answer a rape with a rape. *I Spit on your Corpse, I Piss on your Grave* (2001) uses both. Sandy shoots one rapist in the crotch, and then anally rapes another with a broom handle. In *Baise Moi* (2002) one man is raped with a gun. This representation of women as rapists as well as castrators is a new development in the rape revenge cycle, and it is a representation which is almost exclusive to the rape revenge film. Clearly, constructing women as penetrators and men as penetrated rather than castrated underlines the reading of the rape revenge heroine as a masculinised phallic woman and presents a problem with the

argument that the rape revenge heroine is a feminine figure rather than a masculine one. Each film constructs its own internal set of dynamics, and as with the action film, there are some women who are indisputably represented in phallic/ masculine terms.

Although the female spectator has been left out of previous analyses of the rape revenge film, there is clearly a gaze which tells a feminine story within these films, as well as a masculine one. Classically, murderous women wreak havoc then are punished, but in the rape revenge film this narrative trajectory is reversed. Women are firstly punished (for being women) and in order to take vengeance for that punishment this masochistic side of the story is necessary to give the heroine something to avenge. *I Spit On Your Grave* tells a sado-masochistic story for male spectators – sadism is punished by masochism. For the feminine subject the narrative pattern is maso-sadistic – the endurance of masochistic punishment in order to take sadistic vengeance. Like the Slasher film, there are two parallel stories being told – that of the heroine and the monster – and both of these gazes function as sadistic and masochistic at various points across the film. It is, however, the sadistic woman who triumphs.

CHAPTER 6: BITCHFIGHTS – SADO-MASOCHISTIC DYNAMICS**BETWEEN WOMEN ON SCREEN**

In the majority of films in this study the gaze of the female killer is directed at a male victim. This chapter however examines the various ways in which the monstrous-feminine is framed as an object of fear for other women, the exchange of monstrous looks between women and the female spectator's gaze in relation to images of monstrosity. In the sub-horror films discussed in this chapter, there is an ambivalence about monstrosity, and the lines between 'normal' femininity and monstrous/abject femininity are less clearly drawn. The films discussed here are wide ranging but have all been selected because they depict conflict between women on screen. The *Bitches from Hell* films depict competition and discord between women over specifically female issues – generative power, control of the domestic arena and feminine identity – and offer a variety of potential viewing pleasures, both sadistic and masochistic, to the female spectator. *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* tells a sadistic oedipal story of monstrous mother/daughter relations. The witch is an ambiguous figure, being figuratively monstrous, and yet also represented as heroic. Each of these stories provides a discourse on sado-masochistic relations between women in films which operate within a feminine symbolic economy.

In Barbara Creed's study, the monstrous-feminine is monstrous for the male spectator via her relation to castration and abjection. When women are set up as objects of fear for women on screen and women in the audience, they are similarly defined in relation to castration and abject/grotesque femininity. However, when the look of both the monster and the victim/heroine are female, the terms of each gaze alter, and the traditional active/masculine, passive/feminine binary is disrupted. Both the monstrous space and the heroic space are gendered feminine and address female fears about other women. Women are

defined in relation to each other rather than in relation to masculinity, and masculine power is rendered redundant.

There are two approaches to analysing the relation of the female spectator to images of feminine abjection on screen – as an object of horror and as an object of identification. For, unlike the male spectator whose relation to the monstrous feminine functions around a primary division of sexual difference, the female spectator's identification is one of sexual sameness. Any recognition of the monster in terms of Otherness is tempered by a recognition/identification with the same. The main concerns of this chapter are therefore: How does the staging of the monstrous-feminine change when she is set up as a threat to women rather than men within the text? In these sub-horror films in which both the monsters and the victims are female, what opportunities for visual pleasure are offered to the female spectator? What feminine fears are reflected in these demarcation rituals in which women confront and disavow abject images of themselves? And is the monstrous-feminine constructed differently when the object of her sadistic gaze is another woman? This chapter will examine an eclectic mix of films which depict conflict between women, although most sit either within or around the peripheries of the horror genre.

THE BITCHES FROM HELL

In 1992, a mini-genre of films came out in which a psychotic woman invades the home and family of another woman. *Single White Female* (1992), *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992) and *Poison Ivy* (1992) followed the success of *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and are grouped together in film criticism. Deborah Jermyn labels these women the 'Bitches from Hell', taking the terminology from popular reviews of the films¹ (1996). Karen Hollinger

¹ She cites Joy Andrews' review of *Single White Female*: "SWF is the latest in a series of anti-heroine movies which are making millions. The genre is known as The Woman From Hell. They are all women who appear in normal, domestic or relationship situations and at first appear to be well adjusted. First comes the

refers to them as 'Anti- Female Friendship films' (1998:207), and Susan Faludi as examples of the 'Backlash' against feminism (1992). Each features "a woman whose violence, cunning and monstrosity are almost unparalleled in the women who form her cinematic predecessors" (Jermyn 1996:251).

These films are structured around an axis of conflict between two women over identity, a child, and a husband respectively. In each it is the good woman who expels the monstrous one who threatens her. The monstrous women are monstrous because they are pathologically feminine, driven to murderous psychosis because of a lack or excess of femininity. In *Single White Female*, Hedra's narcissistic need to re-establish her dead twin is met by masquerading as another woman and physically copying her appearance. In *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, Peyton turns monstrous because she loses her ability to reproduce and attempts to steal another woman's child. In *Fatal Attraction*, Alex's pregnancy is accompanied by pathological masochism (self-harm) and abjection (the close-up of blood which flows down her legs is reminiscent of the menstrual blood in *Carrie* (1974)). At the start of the film, Alex is witty, professional and in control, when she becomes pregnant she also becomes vengeful and murderous. Hysteria, psychosis and murderous desire are linked to the female body, either because it lacks or has femininity in excess. In each film, the monstrous woman is marked by an opposite, a woman who possesses the qualities she lacks who becomes both her victim and eventual killer. These films construct a system of meaning in which power is represented in female terms and women are set up in opposition to each other literally and figuratively. Rather than a masculine/feminine binary, the active and passive, sadistic and masochistic and subject and object textual positions are occupied by women, offering multiple possible identifications to female spectators.

Mistress From Hell (*Fatal Attraction*), next, the Nanny From Hell (*The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*), ...and the Lesbian From Hell (*Basic Instinct*), and now the Flatmate From Hell (*Single White Female*) (Andrews, *Mail on Sunday* 10.8.1992: 35).

Critical reactions tend to read these films as regressive, misogynistic and openly anti-feminist. Karen Hollinger states that "These films often rejuvenate antiquated stereotypical representations of female relationships from woman's films of the 1930s and 1940s. They represent women's friendships as being plagued by jealousy, envy and competition for men, and they teach women to beware of and fear each other" (1998:207). Hollinger's analysis is part of a study of female friendship films, and she argues that these 'anti-female friendship films' are characterised by the divide and rule of women by themselves. They parody

... the intimate connection that characterises sentimental female friendship. The manipulative female friend shows the signs of sentimental attachment without its substance. She uses her friend, controls her, and rejoices in this control. The rhetoric and gestures of sentimental female friendship are employed to manipulate the friend for selfish, twisted motives. In these films, an ambitious or socially frustrated woman turns against her female friend, and the relationship between then becomes one of predator and prey (ibid.:8).

She argues that these films are politically misogynistic in that they represent oedipal dramas or developmental scenarios which are resolved in ways that are beneficial to patriarchy (ibid.:243), and serve to maintain the divide and rule philosophy which governs male representations of women.

This critical reception of the films as misogynistic is underlined by the reception and production values of *Fatal Attraction*. Susan Faludi describes in *Backlash* how "a chorus of men chanted "Kill the Bitch" during screenings" (1992:140) and how Sherry Lansing's original adaptation of the short film *Diversion* (1979) was to contain a feminist discourse in which "I was on the single woman's side. And that's what I wanted to convey in our film. I wanted the audience to feel great empathy for the woman" (cited by Faludi 1992:147). Faludi goes on to describe the way in which sympathy shifted from the mistress

to the husband across numerous rewrites until she became a predatory psychopath (ibid.:146-152).

According to Barbara Creed, “male castration anxieties have given rise to two of the most powerful representations of the monstrous-feminine in the horror film: woman as castrator and woman as castrated” (1992:122). She reads the *Bitches from Hell* as castrated monsters:

In *Fatal Attraction*, the heroine (an unmarried career woman) is transformed into a monster because she is unable to fulfil her need for husband and family... In *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, she kills in order to possess a baby. The psychopath of *Single White Female*, who wants her room mate to take the place of her dead sister not only cannibalises her friend’s personality, appearance and mannerisms, but also tries to murder any man that stands in her way. *Poison Ivy*’s eponymous heroine sets out to eliminate a mother and daughter to possess the husband. In these films, women’s destructive urges arise from her failure to lead a ‘normal’ life in possession of friends and family. This version of the female psychopath represents a more conventional view of female monstrosity in that woman transforms into a monster when she is sexually and emotionally unfulfilled. She seeks revenge on society, particularly the heterosexual nuclear family, because of her lack, her symbolic castration (ibid:122).

In Creed’s reading, these monstrous-feminines are the product of male castration anxieties within a masculine system of meaning and destroyed as a part of a demarcation ritual for the male spectator. However what is absent from Creed’s account is the way that these films depict conflict between women, and that these castrated monsters are set up as threats and objects of fear to women not men in the text, so that it is women who are given the right of execution. Although men die, their deaths are incidental as in each case, it is the other woman who is the true target. The symbolic castration here is not a traditional ‘lack’ as constructed via sexual difference in relation to the male. Within Creed’s terms, the specific lack which makes these women monstrous is phallic lack. However they also lack some fundamental element of femininity as well as masculinity, which constructs them as other. They are not just defective men, but defective women as well. In other words, not

only is she lacking because she is a woman, she also lacks an essential element of being a woman (a womb, a husband, a twin).

These films do not encourage a structural identification with the monstrous-feminine across the narrative. The way that each of these women become psychotic slashers at the end of each film emphasises this – no matter how much an audience may sympathise/empathise with Alex in *Fatal Attraction*, everyone jumps when she comes back to life at the end. In *Single White Female*, it is Allie (the heroine) who is placed as voyeur at the beginning – watching Hedra masturbate, for example. When Hedra stabs Allie's boyfriend in the eye with a stiletto heel (marking her as castrating) the scene is framed so that the gaze is aligned with the murderous woman. By the end of the film, the gaze has shifted back to Allie as she is stalked through the basement by Hedra, thus resituating her as an object of fear. Deborah Jermyn re-reads *Fatal Attraction*, *Single White Female* and *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* and while acknowledging that they are essentially reactionary texts, their staging of the female psychopath can “also be read as offering progressive or oppositional possibilities for female spectators, for confronting dilemmas and exercising a behaviour in which they are not usually allowed to indulge” (Jermyn 1996:252). In Jermyn's reading, it is the relationship between the good woman and her monstrous other which dominates the films, and offers a model for female spectator relations with the monstrous-feminine:

Though these films frequently pit woman against woman, (thus removing the emphasis on men as the source of oppression in an act of ‘divide and rule’), the division between the women is not the simplistic battle between good woman/bad woman, virgin/whore, monster/victim that it may initially seem to be, but is in fact rather complex. The conflict between women in these films – or more fundamentally between ‘oppositional’ female functions and behaviour – can be seen as the external representation of the victim/wife's own internal struggle (Jermyn 1996:253).

Her main focus in her examination of these films is the role of the wife/good woman and her relationship to the Bitch from Hell. Jermyn argues that these women are staged as objects of fear for both the woman on screen and for the female spectator, whilst simultaneously offering a transgressive identification with her abject other. In doing so, she moves beyond dismissing these women as by-products of a misogynistic backlash against feminism towards an examination the relation between oppositional tropes of femininity.

Both the good and the bad woman are placed in both sadistic and masochistic positions at various points across the text in relation to each other. The bad woman attacks, the good woman retaliates and kills her. There is both sadistic and masochistic pleasure in both identifying with, and disavowing the monstrous woman on screen. Jermyn argues that the staging of female psychopath in opposition to a 'good' women offers an exploration of the abject:

the female psychopath is woman's abject since she crosses the borders other women are forced to maintain, lives out fantasies about escaping their place in the symbolic, and, in her defeat at the end, represents woman's necessary attempts to expel their desire for the abject. If one looks at the female psychopath as the abject of the victim/wife, then this particular monstrous woman onscreen can be seen as the embodiment of a female dilemma, an exploration and momentary enjoyment of conflicting roles and behaviour, rather than solely a reflection of male fears" (Jermyn 1996:255).

These women are clearly a reflection of male fears about women – *Fatal Attraction* in particular locates the gaze with a male protagonist. The exchange of looks on screen – the look of the good wife at the abject other who threatens her, and the look of the monstrous women – both reflect female desires and fears about other women: that they will take what they lack from women who they perceive to have it.

In Jermyn's analysis of these films, she raises a number of points which are absent from other readings, not just in relation to these films but within feminist film theory as a

whole. Firstly, she makes a link between horror and melodrama, arguing that these 'Invasion of the Home' films are "*horror for women*" (1996:253). The traditional 'women's concerns' of melodrama (relationships, the domestic, children, keeping hold of a man) are threatened, and the home becomes the arena where conflict is played out². The films begin as domestic melodramas, become psychological thrillers and work towards a slasher ending in which the monstrous woman attacks the good woman and is killed. The horror contained in the texts revolves around women's fear of the feminine, and the 'good' and 'bad' women have a symbiotic relationship often underlined by a doppelganger motif. In Jermyn's reading these films act as a space in which women either confront and disavow or identify with abject images of themselves at various points across the text.

All readings of these films emphasise the feminine nature of monstrosity. The monstrous women in these films become so because they lack some fundamental element of femininity, which prompts an excess of feminine behaviour (masquerade, psychotic hysteria) linked to the female body. Femininity is monstrous both in excess and lack, and this lack is read as a castration. There is a structural narrative difference between the castrated woman and the castrating woman³. This isolation of the castrating woman in a world of men means that she is more likely to appeal to the female spectator as a point of identification on screen than if she is presented within a spectrum of female imagery. The *femme castratrice* is often the carrier of the gaze on screen, and this is emphasised by the lack of any other females on screen for comparison. For the female spectator, there is no penis to lose, and therefore no threat literally or figuratively. The castrated woman is in contrast placed as a threat to other women and generally constructed in relation to other,

² This reading of melodrama as horror is underlined by Nolan's empirical study of horror audiences (1992), in which he argues that since women are most likely to face attack in the home, the horror texts which have the most impact on a female spectator are those which are located in the domestic sphere.

³ Although it should be noted that the castrated woman does in her own way also function as castrating for the male spectator. As Creed points out in her introduction, analysis of the horror text from a Freudian position tends to argue that woman terrifies because she is castrated rather than because she actively castrates (Creed 1993:5).

more 'complete' women, rarely being depicted as a desirable figure of identification. As Creed states, "whereas the castrated female monster is inevitably punished for her transgressions, the castrating woman – usually a sympathetic figure – is rarely punished" (1993:122). The castrated woman does not have the same narrative power and agency as her castrating counterpart and, significantly, her prey is usually female rather than male (in *Fatal Attraction*, Alex goes to the home to attack the wife, child and rabbit, not the husband).

These films therefore create a specific space in which female castration anxieties are confronted and disavowed via the destruction of the castrated woman. Most incarnations of the monstrous-feminine in Creed's study are set up against a male protagonist within a narrative system revolving around male castration anxiety and reassurance. The castration which troubles these women however is not phallic, and the films do not have a phallic system of meaning. They are not driven by penis envy but by a lack or excess of femaleness. In other words, these films construct a world in which power is something other than phallic, and women are represented via a series of active and passive, sadistic and masochistic feminine tropes. Femininity is the threat and only femininity can fight it – it the 'good' women in these films who becomes a killer. Read in these terms the 'Bitch from Hell' films operate as demarcation rituals for the female spectator in the same way that male castration anxieties are confronted and disavowed within the horror text, but with the added potential for identification with the monster.

FEMALE CASTRATION ANXIETIES

What, then, is the precise nature of female castration anxiety and what impact does it have on female spectatorship in the horror text? Freud argues that women do have a castration complex, but its context is different from that of the male and relates to recognition of lack rather than fear of lack. As for boys, the female castration complex begins with the sight of

the genitals of the opposite sex, although for girls there is no distance between seeing and knowing, just knowledge of comparative lack (of a penis):

They feel wronged, often declare that they want to 'have something like it too', and fall victim to an 'envy of the penis', which will leave ineradicable traces on their development... The girl's recognition of the fact of her being without a penis does not by any means imply that she submits to that fate easily (Freud 1933:424).

Freud argues that the castration complex in women results in penis envy. He goes on to say that

The discovery that she is castrated is a turning point in a girl's growth. Three possible lines of development start from it: one leads to sexual inhibition or to neurosis, the second to change of character in the sense of a masculinity complex, the third to normal femininity (ibid.:424).

In other words, the sexual development of women is determined by their reaction to the realisation that she is castrated: she either becomes consumed by it, resolves to overcome it, or accepts it on the path to 'normal' femininity and passivity. In Freud's scenario, penis envy is literally that, accompanied by a realisation of the higher social status accorded to males.

Karen Horney argues however that penis envy can but does not necessarily result from castration anxiety in women, but rather that in women it can result from "the unwelcome idea of being fundamentally lacking in this respect [which] gives rise to passive castration fantasies, while active fantasies spring from a vengeful attitude against the favoured male". She also argues that castration anxiety in women is not always the result of penis envy. In one female patient with castration anxiety

the source of the penis envy was on account of the child that her mother and not she, had received from the father, whereupon in a process of displacement the penis has become the object of envy instead of the child (Horney 1932: 46).

When Freud describes castration fears for the woman, this imaginary scenario takes the form of her losing loved objects, especially her children: the child is going to grow up, leave her, reject her, perhaps die. In order to delay and/or disavow this separation that she has already in a way acknowledged, the woman tends to fetishise the child: by dressing him up, by continuing to feed him no matter how old he gets, or by simply having another 'little one' (Wright 1984:31). This notion of castration anxiety being alleviated by the fetishisation of a child is played out in extremis in *Fatal Attraction* and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* – the object of exchange between the women is a child, and the castrated woman seeks to possess from another what she cannot have. Thus Alex kidnaps Beth's child, and is pregnant with her husband's baby, effectively taking two children from Beth. Peyton is metaphorically castrated during a hysterectomy in which she loses a child, so tries to steal Clare's child and usurp her role in the family. In *Single White Female*, Allie's loss of her twin is presented as a form of castration which she seeks to compensate for. The castrated woman becomes castrating, threatening to take what she lacks from another woman. In these films, it is opposing tropes of femininity which construct a binary between the two women on screen rather than a simple split between masculinity and femininity.

In the way that these films construct binaries between women on screen, the notion that the female gaze in its active form is masculinised ("the gaze is not necessarily male (literally) but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the masculine position" (Kaplan 1984:331)) is inadequate to account for the various gazes on offer to female spectators within these films that are not bound by a phallic economy. Male power is redundant in these films (husbands and boyfriends fail to protect their women from outside attack), women are both the agents and objects of violence. In the 'Bitches from Hell' films, women are both active and passive, masochistic and sadistic, voyeur and object, castrated and castrating, hysteric and

psychotic, defined in relation to either lack or excess of femininity. The feminine nature and context of the desire and fears depicted on screen in the exchange between good and bad women undermines the notion that the active spaces in these texts are figuratively masculine.

MATERNAL HORROR

Feminist accounts of conflict between women on screen tend towards a reading of the text as misogynistic – a male fantasy of women fighting over them, while downplaying genuine hostility between women. Karen Hollinger for example argues that the female screenwriter of *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (Amanda Silver) intended to write a thriller in which women were both heroic and vicious, and set women in conflict over issues which were important to women (Hollinger 1998:208-211). Hollinger argues that Silver is “deceiving herself into believing that her original idea was maintained” although the text was eventually “transformed into a full blown masterpiece of misogyny” (ibid.:211). Reading these texts in terms of how progressive or politically correct they are however tends to downplay the genuine pleasure in watching them, which according to Hollinger locates female spectators as upholders of patriarchal law “the anti-female friendship film can be a particularly effective for drawing a female audience into acceptance of a conservative social stance” (ibid.:217). Reading conflict between women on screen as a by-product of a patriarchal production system and reception and nothing else tends to overlook genuine hostility between women, on screen, in spectator-screen relations, and in psychical formulations.

Hostility between women is as naturalised as desire between women in the female spectator’s relationship with other women on screen. In Freud’s account of female oedipal development (‘Femininity’ 1933), there is a phase of hostility towards the mother, just as there is a phase of desire which precedes it, in the transference of desire from the mother to

the father. The notion that this period of desire for the mother is borne out in the female subject's future relations with other women, and relation to images of women on screen, is present in the work of Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Jackie Byars (1988) who privilege a triadic model for female relations. Jackie Stacey also argues that in female spectator's identificatory practices, identification is tempered with desire, again as a residual effect of the pre-Oedipal maternal relation.

Within film theory feminist accounts of the maternal relation, by their nature, tend to focus on the positive pleasures of desire and relations between women. For example, Karen Hollinger's reading of the maternal melodrama *Steel Magnolias* (1989) argues that the film "ultimately celebrates female bonding as an extension and support of the "natural" role of motherhood... because motherhood is presented as women's true source of fulfilment, female friendship is granted importance only as a way for women to find the support they need to fulfil their maternal role" (1998:78-9). Hollinger does argue that the tradition within the maternal melodrama which exalts motherhood and its accompanying self-sacrifice and suffering as the only 'true' ambition for women is "filtered through a male fantasy construct that envisions women as finding complete fulfilment in the traditional roles that patriarchy has assigned them" (1998:81). Although this is a critical account, it is the assimilation of the role of motherhood into a patriarchal structure which is seen as problematic rather than the maternal relation itself.

The maternal relation, whilst being a source of active desire in women, is also tempered with hostility in both Freud and Karen Horney's accounts of female Oedipal development. For Freud, on the path to 'normal' femininity the girl must give up her attachment to her mother and transfer her desire onto the father, and this is facilitated by feelings of hostility toward the mother. The girl, on realising her castration and by extension the castrated state of all women, blames her mother, since "her love was directed

towards her *phallic* mother; with the discovery that her mother is castrated, it becomes possible to drop her as an object" ('Femininity' 1933:425) and hence hostility takes over. This is compounded by feeling of jealousy and resentment towards the attention that the mother receives from the father. Horney also emphasises that rivalry for the father's affection is felt by both the child and the mother:

A certain amount of competition between mother and maturing daughter is a natural thing. But when the mother's own Oedipus situation has caused an excessive sense of rivalry, it may take grotesque forms and start early in the infancy of the daughter. Such a rivalry may show in a general intimidation of the child, efforts to ridicule and belittle her, prevent her from looking attractive or meeting boys, and so on, always with the secret aim of thwarting the daughter in her female development. Though it may be difficult to detect the jealousy behind the various forms in which it is expressed, the whole psychological mechanism is of a simple basic structure and therefore needs no detailed description. ('On the psychogenesis of the castration complex in women', 1932:179)⁴.

Hostility towards the mother therefore has two dominant origins: the realisation that she is castrated, and jealousy of the mother's relation to the father, especially if the mother is pregnant with the baby that that child craves from the father.

This rivalry/conflict between women which is grounded in a repetition of a hostile maternal relationship is a staple of filmic relationships between women. The idea that women should beware of each other is one that little girls are first introduced to in fairytales. Whereas in reality children – particularly girls – are told to beware of men within certain narratives it is women who function as monsters, and it is girls not boys who are the objects of their aggression. *Cinderella* for example is bullied and imprisoned in a

⁴ Horney also argues that women who have experienced particularly strong Oedipal developmental patterns tend to act out this Oedipal desire in relation to their male children, a relationship which "by its very nature will be a disturbed one. Not only the incestuous sexual elements are transferred from the infantile relation to the father, but also the hostile elements that necessarily were once connected to them" (178). This simultaneously sexually charged and hostile relationship between mother and son is played out in *Mother's Boys*, in which Jamie Lee Curtis is an evil mother who abandons her children and returns later to try and win back their affection. The relation with her eldest son (about 12) is particularly indicative of this, since she continually flirts with and chastises him, we see him watching her dress, and she enlists him in a scheme to oust the father's new girlfriend (his mother substitute) by getting him to torture his younger siblings and blame her. Having failed in her duty as mother by abandoning her children and being over-sexual with her son, of course she must die, and the good mother saves the children.

life of domestic drudgery by the ugly sisters, grotesque old crones, and rescue only comes in the form of a man. In *Snow White*, it is the wicked stepmother who functions as agent of evil and object of terror. *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (1997) removes the romantic trajectory at the narrative centre of the Disney version, and instead concentrates on the hostile anti-mother (Claudia) / step-daughter (Lily/Snow White) relationship, consumed with jealousy, narcissism, fear of ageing, and competition for the father's love. This is a dark film in which even the jolly dwarves are evil – when Lily is hiding in the forest, they sexually harass her, bully her and try to rape her. The film opens with the death of Lily's mother in childbirth, and then cuts to her father marrying Claudia. There is a sequence during the wedding where Lily, as a young child, watches them kiss, then retreats to look at pictures of her dead mother. The film then jumps to nine years later, and Claudia is pregnant, and taking centre stage at a ball. Lily enters wearing her dead mother's dress and upstages Claudia by dancing with her father. The trauma of seeing a younger recreation of her husband's dead wife taking her place causes Claudia to go into labour; her son is born dead and as she lies hysterical and bleeding, she is told she cannot bear another child (the same scenario which sends Peyton psycho in *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*). Her psychosis is revealed in the relationship with the mirror, her reflection tells her to kill Lily and bathe the body of her dead child in its father's blood to revive it. Claudia injures her husband and kills almost everyone else, but in her final attempt to kill Lily, Lily kills her by stabbing the mirror. The wicked stepmother is expelled, the father and daughter are reunited, and for Lily the Oedipal trajectory is realised. *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* is told mainly from the point of Snow White and tells a story of Oedipal desire in which the daughter manages to oust the rival for her father's love, and it is the evilness of the stepmother, and the fact that she is not the real mother, which makes this Elektra fantasy ideologically possible.

The screen is full of monstrous mothers, but with the emphasis on male relations with the mother (both on screen and within film theory) representations of the distorted mother-daughter relation have tended to be overlooked. It is as feasible therefore to argue that along with desire, women retain a residual hostility which is borne out in relations with the monstrous feminine as an object of fear on screen, particularly maternal horror (*Snow White: A Tale of Terror*, *Aliens* (1986)), films in which a woman's relation to the husband/father is threatened by another woman (*Fatal Attraction*, *Poison Ivy*) and threatened identity (*Single White Female*). The transition from desire to hostility and finally abandoning the mother is mapped across the narrative structure of these films via the initial friendship between women, often overtly marked by lesbian desire and/or doubling which turns sour, and the monstrous woman is expelled. The look of the good woman at her monstrous other is tempered by both desire and hostility; similarly, women are staged as monstrous because of a similar look – desiring what the other woman has and simultaneously seeking to destroy it.

ABJECTION AND THE FEMALE SPECTATOR

Barbara Creed argues that the horror text is “an illustration of abjection” in at least three ways: the repetition of visual images of bodily abjection (“blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears, and putrefying flesh”); the establishment and destruction of symbolic boundaries (human/non-human, man/beast, normal/supernatural, good/evil, normal/abnormal sexual desire and gender confusion) and the construction of the maternal figure as abject, refusing to allow the child to break away (1993:10-11). In Creed's study of the monstrous-feminine, femininity is monstrous because of its association with abjection:

definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection – particularly in relation to the following religious ‘abominations’: sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration; decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest” (ibid.).

Creed locates her study of female monsters in relation to Julia Kristeva's work on abjection, defined as that "which does not respect borders, positions, rules", that "which disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 1982:4). The horror text thus illustrates abjection firstly through depiction of images of abjection, via the corpse and bodily waste. Secondly, horror is concerned with the violation of borders: "although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same – to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability" (Creed 1993:11). Thirdly, horror constructs the maternal figure as abject. Femininity, particularly monstrous femininity, is tied up with abjection in both Kristeva's and Creed's studies, particularly to the mother figure. Kristeva links universal practices of ritual defilement to the mother, and polluting objects fall into two categories: excremental, which threatens identity from the outside; and menstrual, which threatens from within. Both relate to the mother (*ibid.*:12)⁵.

The *Alien* species are both abject (semi-human looking and covered with goo) and produce abjection (blood, corpses and decay). *Alien* (1979), argues Creed, is saturated with images of monstrous maternity: the *mis-en-scene* of the inter-uterine egg chamber, the use of male bodies to gestate fetuses, and 'Mother', the treacherous computer. The unacceptable, monstrous aspect of woman is represented in two ways: Mother as omnipresent archaic force linked to death; and Mother as cannibalistic creature represented through the alien as fetish object. In contrast Ripley's body is displayed at the end of the film to signify the 'acceptable' shape and form of femininity (*ibid.*:23): Ripley's function therefore is as a counterpoint to grotesque, abject, archaic and monstrous femininity.

⁵ Creed argues that in Kristeva's model of abjection the subject's first contact with 'authority' is maternal authority: through the mother, the child learns about its body, the shape of the body, the clean and unclean, proper and improper areas of the body. The mother also toilet trains the child, what Kristeva calls 'primal mapping of the body', through her authority the child learns what belongs in the symbolic and what does not (1993:12).

What is absent from Creed's reading of *Alien*, and what becomes more pronounced across the franchise, is the exchange of looks set up between a female protagonist and a female monster on screen. She states that "Mother Alien is primarily a terrifying figure not because she is castrated, but because she castrates" (ibid.22). The staging of Ripley as a sexualised, vulnerable fetish object at the end of the film is set up as an opposing feminine trope to the castrating threat of woman. For the female subject with no penis to lose however, the way that fear is projected onto the monster takes a different form. Similarly, in privileging the male subject, whose fears about women she argues are present in representations of the monstrous-feminine, Creed also neglects to reference the relation of the female subject to abjection, both on screen and via modes of cinematic looking, which is marked by a simultaneous recognition of the same and fear of the other. It is also a world in which the monster presides over a matriarchal power structure, and it takes another woman as head of her own social order to challenge it.

Although the alien, particularly the mother alien are staged as monstrous other – they pose the literal threat of death, but also of interspecies rape, male pregnancy and birth, a matriarchal colony, all of which threaten the symbolic order – there is also a recognition of sameness. Ripley's use of the word 'bitch' in *Aliens* (1986) to describe the alien queen underlines the fact that it is a fight between two women for the survival of their species. In the *Alien* saga, Ripley's relationship with the aliens is marked by closeness as well as otherness. From the first film when she tries to stop the alien boarding the craft, she is the only one who fully understands the threat posed and has the solution. By *Aliens*, her status is mirrored with that of the alien, two mothers fighting to protect their offspring and Ripley expels her monstrous other. In *Alien 3* (1992), Ripley becomes pregnant with an alien and kills herself rather than let it live, her hand protectively over her stomach as she plunges to her death. *Alien Resurrection* (1997) sees Ripley cloned and mixed with alien DNA to

become a heroic human-monster hybrid able to control the alien drones. Across the quartet, the distance between Ripley and her monstrous other lessens: she ultimately becomes both abject and simultaneously heroic, and the border between human and monster has broken down. She is made more powerful when she becomes abject – half human, half alien but a cloned replica rather than wholly human (and who knows what will happen if they make any more).

The female spectator's recognition of sameness in images of feminine bodily abjection on screen is crucial to the reception of the monstrous feminine. For the female spectator, the female body on screen is not entirely 'other', even when marked by signifiers of monstrosity – especially in texts in which the primary signifier of Otherness is sexual difference and the textual subject is male. In films in which both the threatened subject and the monster are female, the context of abjection changes, both on screen and in the potential viewing positions set up for the spectator within the text.

THE WITCH AS ABJECT HEROINE

The witch is an ambivalent figure and can function as either an object of horror, or a sympathetic protagonist with whom the spectator is actively encouraged to identify, or as both. Witches are abject because they destabilise boundaries, and are both monstrous and powerful because they are female. As an archetype, the witch also disrupts the boundary between horror and non-horror. Zombies, werewolves, vampires, etc. appear only in the context of the horror text. Witches however appear across a number of different genres and tale types. In *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), the witches are both good and bad, taking on the same roles in Oz as the women in Dorothy's life in Kansas, the surrogate mother and the wicked anti-mother. The Good Witch of the North and the Wicked Witch of the East represent a split between femininity and monstrous femininity. "Only bad witches are ugly", as Glinda tells Dorothy. The bad witch is not just evil, she is monstrous because she

is physically grotesque and abject. Power in this film is constituted in female terms – Dorothy is the leader of her group of male friends and the wizard's power is revealed to be an illusion. Only women can invoke mortal fear and offer the means to fight it. It is worth noting as well that Dorothy herself is a killer, beginning her journey in Oz by killing the Wicked Witch of the East and stealing her shoes.

There has been a recent resurgence of the witch on screen, and beyond the horror genre. In contemporary film, the witch is most commonly represented as a teenage girl: *Carrie* (1974), *Carrie 2: The Rage* (1999), and *The Craft* (1996) are all horror texts which adopt the typical features and social structures of an American high school film. Witchcraft is the means that gives women power rather than setting them up as objects of fear in these modern texts. Willow in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (TV 1997-2003), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), *Practical Magic* (1998) and *Bewitched* (TV 1964-72) all narratively locate the witch as heroine, encourage the spectator to identify with her point of view and do not locate the female body as a source of horror. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (TV 1996-2003) has her own magazine aimed at pre-teen girls, and even Richard and Judy had a resident witch on the daytime TV show *This Morning*, dishing out spells to solve callers' problems in much the same way as an agony aunt dispenses advice.

The witch is both a victim of patriarchy and offers a challenge to it. Women accused of being witches were often older, childless women who failed in their traditional female role and function:

Female criminals supposedly suffered from cranial depressions, deep frontal sinuses, and a heavy lower jaw. In essence, a criminal woman was described as having masculine facial features... Early scientists suggested that there was a greater incidence of front-vertical wrinkles on the faces of criminal women. It was said that wrinkled, criminal women were similar to witches of yore (Schurman-Kauflin 2000:27).

At the same time, the witch is defined as monstrous by her femininity. Creed argues that:

“Her evil powers are seen as part of her ‘feminine’ nature” (1993:76), “In some horror films, the witch’s supernatural powers are linked to the female reproductive system, particularly menstruation” (ibid.:77) and “Witches are accused among other things, of copulating with the devil, causing male impotence, causing the penis to disappear and of stealing men’s penises” (ibid.:75). This mini-genre of witch films often locate the witch as a figure of feminism rather than as a horror archetype, and she mainly inhabits teenage narratives.

Carrie (1974) is one text which demonstrates the way in which female gazes look differently upon female bodies. Creed argues that “ultimately, woman’s blood is represented in the film as an abject substance and helps to construct Carrie as monstrous” (1992:81), and it is Carrie as a “menstrual monster” (ibid.:78) which seals her abject state. Blood is a repeated motif throughout the film, signifying sin, impurity and associated with religious and social taboos about the female body. Within the context of the Judeo-Christian mythology utilised by the film, blood is Carrie’s punishment for sexual sin and the narrative trajectory takes the form of pleasure with punishment through defilement ritual, followed by symbolic purification. Menstrual blood is the ‘curse of Eve’, feared for its supernatural powers and castrating properties. Whereas the (male) blood of Christ is sacred, purifying and healing, female blood is conceived as profane, polluting and destructive. Since blood – particularly menstrual blood – violates the taboo between inside and outside the body it is also abject. It is these associations which locate Carrie herself as monstrous and aligned with witchcraft. Carrie’s status as a witch is alluded to in various ways throughout the text. The source of her supernatural power is blood, which specifically genders the witch as a feminine monster. The witches’ powers are strongest at the times when her ‘femaleness’ is most evident: during childbirth, menstruation, pregnancy and menopause.

If however Carrie is to simultaneously function as a victim as well as a monster, as Carol Clover argues (1992), then there must be an alternative source of monstrosity within the text. The mother-daughter relationship is again used to structure hostility between women on screen. Carrie's mother is simultaneously her protector (from sin) and her persecutor. It is her mother who screams "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" at Carrie when she tries to kill her. Visually, Mrs. White also fits common conceptions of a witch, dressed in long black robes. She is also an outsider, both as a religious fanatic and a lone older woman. Mrs. White is not however Carrie's only tormentor. Chris, the school bitch and chief orchestrator of Carrie's downfall, is also associated with ritualistic use of witchcraft. It is she who forms the coven of Carrie's bullies at school, and sets up the baptism of blood at the prom, having persuaded her boyfriend to slaughter a pig. It is Chris's rage against Carrie as a freaky outsider, and her perceived responsibility for Chris's absence from the prom, which propels the narrative of the film. Rather than being killed in the general carnage at the prom, Chris gets her own death scene, where Carrie burns her alive. Although it is ultimately her downfall because she picks on the wrong victim, Chris utilises abjection as a weapon, both in the grand finale to her scheme and her labelling of Carrie as abject ("You eat shit").

Creed argues that the opening shower scene frames Carrie as abject spectacle, as does the bathing in pig's blood. This is however based on a reading of the film from the perspective of male fears about the female body. The other girls as spectators to the menstrual shower scene, however, are not horrified: they do not recoil in fear and disgust, instead they laugh and pelt her with sanitary towels. This suggests the rather obvious point that for women the sight of menstrual blood is not horrific, mysterious or castrating, but something experienced by all on a monthly basis. There is horror in this scene, but it is Carrie herself who is on the receiving end rather than the onlookers. Aside from the torrent of abuse from the other girls, a distance is set up between Carrie and her own body in

relation to blood. She is horrified because she has no idea what a period is because her mother has repressed all sexual knowledge, and so she thinks she is dying. In 'Some Psychological Consequences of Anatomical Difference between the Sexes' (1925), Freud argues that male castration fear is based on sight. Lacking knowledge of sexual difference, the male child sees the penisless female body and can perceive her only as a castrated version of himself, and so lays down in his unconscious the fear that he too may be castrated. In the female child, the consequences result in penis envy: she desires something she already lacks, rather than fears the lack, and therefore fear of castration is not the primary fear expressed within 'women's horror'. The shower scene in *Carrie* however does create horror based on the distance between seeing and knowing, in relation to the subject's own body. Thus for the female spectators, both on screen and in the audience, this scene can function in much the same way that castration fears operate in the horror text for male spectators.

In *Carrie* all power is female and male authority is absent and redundant. Aside from being a horror film, *Carrie* is primarily about female sadism directed at other women. News reports of violence between women are now becoming more commonplace, although violence between women is nothing new. Girls bullying other girls at school has also hit the headlines. A story in *The Sun* described how a 15 year old girl was bullied via a website set up by her female tormentors specifically to abuse her: "This site is dedicated to a fat fucking bitch called Jodi" read the first line (*The Sun* p.36, 25/5/03). Appearing on *This Morning* the following day, poor Jodi said she had no idea they hated her so much, and they didn't pick on her directly. This story stands out for the sheer dedication and effort put into building the website, and the level of seemingly unprompted sadistic venom directed at one girl from others. Although it is easy to identify with the victim in this story, it is also easy to imagine the pleasure the bullies took in planning and executing their out their scheme. Whether it was a specific act of vengeance or the victim was picked

randomly, the girls are bonding by excluding and demonising another girl. This vicious bullying is the cause of the carnage in *Carrie*, in which Chris goes to extraordinary lengths to stage a public humiliation of her victim. Women, particularly teenage girls, can be cruel and sadistic towards each other for sheer pleasure, and reinforce their bonds by excluding other women. All forms of power in *Carrie* are constituted as feminine. The women wield power because they are women, not in spite of it. Carrie is not bullied because she is monstrous or abject, but because she is a social outsider. She utilises monstrosity to get revenge and is able to wield her power because she is abject. It is blood which condemns her and which is used as a weapon against her, both narratively and figuratively, but it is also the source of her power.

Carrie 2: The Rage (1999) as an updated version of the original lacks the religious and abject symbolism. Again, the heroine's downfall and revenge is propelled by female anger towards her. In terms of a continuation of the story, we learn that Carrie's errant father has another child, Rachel, who also has telekinetic powers. The father is therefore the carrier of the telekinetic 'gene'. The story is virtually identical: a teenage girl with telekinetic powers is victimised by her classmates, set up for ritual and public humiliation, then wreaks vengeance upon her tormentors. Rachel has even found practical uses for her telekinesis, stirring tea and rewinding videos with the power of her mind. There is no equivalent of Mrs. White, but otherwise the character archetypes are the same – the troubled heroine, the chief bitch who victimises said heroine and her hangers on, and the sympathetic, but useless man who is oblivious to the clash of power going on around him. Rachel however is less obviously 'other' than Carrie. Her mother is in an asylum (because she knows her daughter is a witch). She is a social outcast because she lives with a white trash foster family, is a bit gothy, and doesn't belong to the right clique. It is the boys who initially persecute Rachel, but again it is the other girls who plan and ruthlessly execute the ritual humiliation.

The other narrative continuation is Sue, who is now a guidance councillor at the school, and who still feels guilty about not saving Carrie. There are flashbacks to the first film of the shower scene where Carrie is bullied, and it is clear that she reaches out to Rachel to atone her guilt for being an architect in Carrie's downfall. After the prom carnage we learn that she spent time in the same psychiatric hospital as Rachel's mother. Like Miss Collins in the first film she functions as a surrogate socialised mother providing nurture. She also spots Rachel's powers, and makes the connection to Carrie by visiting her mother in the asylum. She takes Rachel to the original burnt out high school and tells her that they share the same father.

The film opens in flashback, with a visual reference to the first film. Rachel's mother is covering the living room and everything in with red paint. The room is saturated with religious icons. This is the only reference to the religious aesthetic which permeates the first film. Rachel's mother is carted off to a psychiatric unit and the child is left with nasty white trash foster parents who are looking after her for the money. The present narrative opens with a long panning shot of the various social tribes at the school: cheerleaders practising; dropouts smoking; jocks scoring girls out of 10; outcasts sitting on their own; and so on. There is more emphasis on the nuances of the social hierarchy and sexual politics than in the first film. Rachel is not initially ostracised to the extent that Carrie is. She is poor, and so excluded from the rich kids' social scene and habitus.

The event which initiates the chaos is the suicide of Rachel's best (and only) friend, who slept with a jock only to be dumped because his friends disapprove. Rachel is the only one with evidence of the relationship which she gives to the police and as a result Eric is facing a statutory rape charge. The rich clique at school close ranks against her, and she seals her fate by attracting the attention of Jesse, a popular rich boy and exclusive property

of popular rich girls. Jesse is, however, not like his friends – it is made clear from the start that he is a nice boy. Like Blaine in *Pretty in Pink* (1986), he rebels against the rules of his clique to go out with a girl from the wrong side of the tracks and challenges their behaviour towards women. He is a knight in shining armour when her dog is hit by a car, driving her to the vets and giving tea and sympathy when she talks about the suicide. Rachel is consequently punished by the other girls because Jesse fancies her. Rachel has sex with Jesse at his friend's house, and unbeknown to Jesse his friends secretly tape it. Rachel is punished for her social transgression and to her it looks like Jesse is implicated. The girls hatch their revenge by befriending Rachel and inviting her to a party and screening the tape publicly, telling her that Jesse slept with her for a bet.

Rachel's vengeance takes the same form as Carrie's. A rose tattoo covers her body, and she brings the house down on her tormentors, killing them all. Eric – the one who prompted her friend's suicide – is singled out for a special death through castration with a spear gun. Jesse arrives to discover the carnage, they reconcile, and she dies trying to save him when she realises he really loves her (on the second date!). Like Carrie, Rachel's inability to control her powers kills her in the end. She sacrifices herself because she cannot control them as her rage is too great. As in *Carrie*, Rachel returns in the final scene to scare the audience. Jesse is at college and looking after Rachel's dog, and she appears in the mirror to give him – and us – one final scare. The visual pleasure in *Carrie 2*, for me at least, lies in the knowing repetition of existing patterns which build up to her revenge. Rachel is not situated as abject and monstrous in the same way that Carrie is, but the narrative patterns and viewing positions on offer to spectators are the same. Both films follow a maso-sadistic narrative trajectory, in which the victim-hero suffers then exacts her revenge on her tormentors (as in the Slasher film and the rape revenge film).

Not only does the female gaze on screen refuse to look away from abjection, the female subject on screen often actively seeks it out. The female gaze is consciously drawn towards images of bodily abjection through the figure of the female pathologist. This is a traditionally male job which is disproportionately carried out by women both on TV and in film. The investigation and dissection of bodies is a staple of the horror genre both visually and figuratively, but this does not explain the prevalence of female pathologists. Dana Scully in *The X Files* (TV 1993-2002), Dr. Kay Scarpetta from the Patricia Cornwell novels and Sam Ryan in *Silent Witness* (TV 1998-) are the examples which stand out, as well as countless minor characters in other cop shows, the only man with his own series being *Quincey* (TV 1976-1983). As Creed states, "the ultimate form in abjection is the corpse... It signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution – the body without a soul" (1993:9-10). She also notes the recurring image of the corpse throughout horror, both via the littered bodies of the victims, and its incorporation into the monster (the zombie / 'the living corpse', the vampire / 'the body without a soul', the ghoul / 'corpse eater', and the robot or android) (1993:10).

Brigid Cherry raises the notion that women are attracted to images of horror because of their biological link with images of (feminine) abjection on screen, and hence the relationship between women and abjection is dependent on a psychical as well as psychosexual connection. She cites an interview with horror star Bela Lugosi:

It is women who love horror. Gloat over it. Feed on it. Are nourished by it. Shudder, cling and cry out – and come back for more. Women have a predestination for suffering. It is women who bear the race in bloody agony. Suffering is a kind of horror. Blood is a kind of horror therefore women are born with a predestination to horror in their bloodstream. It is a biological thing (Interview with Bela Lugosi in *Motion Picture Classic Magazine*, cited by Cherry 1999:26-27).

Women tend to be more tolerant of visceral things because they have more direct personal experience of them. They cope with periods once a month, they go through childbirth, and they are usually the ones who look after bleeding and battered limbs when the kids take a tumble (Cherry 1999:27).

Cherry goes on to argue that it is "simplistic" to assume that women enjoy horror because of this physical connection to images of feminine abjection on screen. However given the emphasis on the male castration complex as the primary determinant of their relation to the horror text, it would therefore be equally 'simplistic' to assume that a physical state (possessing a penis) is irrelevant to the psychosexual consequences of fearing its loss.

The female spectator's recognition of sameness in images of feminine bodily abjection on screen is crucial to reception of monstrous feminine. For the female spectator, the female body on screen is not entirely 'other', even when marked by signifiers of monstrosity, especially in texts in which the primary signifier of Otherness is sexual difference and the textual subject is male. In films in which both the threatened subject and the monster are female, the context of abjection changes, both on screen and in the potential viewing positions set up for the spectator within the text.

When women occupy both the monster and the victim function in the horror film, a symbolic economy is set in which the phallus is absent as a structuring signifier and male authority is redundant/absent. Sexual difference as the primary difference between the subject and the monster is absent, and within these films a series of opposing feminine tropes are set up. Women's fears about other women are expressed in terms of a confrontation and disavowal of castrated and abject versions of themselves. That which threatens femininity via either lack or excess is expelled. In all of these films, there is a symbiotic relation between victim and monster, fear of the other is always tempered by a recognition of the same. In these films, it is the good woman rather than the monstrous woman who is a killer, forced to defend that fundamental aspect of femininity which is threatened. As both the threatened subject and that which threatens it women are figuratively and narratively located as active or passive, sadistic or masochistic, good or

evil, heroic or monstrous via their relation to femininity rather than masculinity, and thus require a reading in which masculinity is not the sole carrier of activity. Femininity is the structuring signifier in these films representing both activity and passivity, sadism and masochism, rather than being the lack which is 'other' to masculinity. Both the threatened subject and the object of fear are female. As 'feminine' horror texts these films offer female spectators structures of identification which express both fear of the other and identification with the other. Both the active and passive, masochistic and sadistic spaces in the text are occupied by women and figuratively defined as feminine.

CHAPTER 7: DRESSED TO KILL – THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE *FEMME FATALE*

femme fatale, *fem fat-al*, an irresistibly attractive woman who brings difficulties or disaster on men; a siren. (*Chambers Dictionary*)

Critical discourse on the *femme fatale* often locates her as a product of male fantasy. Janey Place for example states that “*Film noir* is a male fantasy as is most of our art. The woman here as elsewhere is defined by her sexuality... women are defined *in relation to men*” (Place 1980:35). Mary Ann Doane places her as a “symptom of male fears about feminism” (Doane 1989:2-3), a model of all that is dangerous about women, set up only to be destroyed to appease the threatened male subject. The sheer volume of critical work surrounding the *femme fatale* within feminist film theory is indicative firstly of her presence as a site of transgression and secondly of the fascination she generates in women, particularly female film scholars. Yet this academic enthusiasm for the *femme fatale* is generally tempered by a consistent acknowledgement that her power is limited and her gaze is marginalised by the patriarchal discourse in which she exists:

Her power is of a peculiar sort, insofar as it is usually not subject to her conscious will, hence appearing to blur the opposition between activity and passivity. She is an ambivalent figure because she is not the subject of power but its *carrier*. Indeed if the *femme fatale* over-represents the body, it is because she is attributed a body which is itself given agency independently of consciousness. In a sense, she has power *despite herself* (Doane 1991:2).

The gaze of the *femme fatale* is marginalised by the text since the spectator experiences her through the gaze of the male hero and she has little autonomous subjectivity. She is an object of mystery, and an enigma to be unravelled then expelled. She is the bearer of meaning rather than the maker of meaning since she is staged as an erotic object. The investigative gaze is carried through the male protagonist and she is the object of investigation rather than its subject. Yvonne Tasker states that “Drawing on a tradition of

representation in which women are mysteriously seductive but evil... she is a transgressive figure who misleads the hero and is punished for her pains"(1998:120). These readings of the *femme fatale* as an object of desire/fear privilege the male spectator. The *femme fatale* in both the classic *noir* and the modern *noir* however also can function as an object of identification for female spectators and this is a neglected area of the critical discourse surrounding her. Readings of the classic *noir* text and the *femme fatale* are informed by a phallogentric discourse, and women's power and identity are limited because they are defined solely via her relations with men.

Locating the *femme fatale* exclusively as a product of the patriarchal unconscious does not however account for her popularity with female spectators, or the nature that this visual pleasure may take. Stella Bruzzi agrees that "the assumption that the *femme fatale* is a figure of male fantasy has always seemed dubious... why presume that a tempting female image is necessarily conditioned by either the narrative she inhabits or the framework of male fantasy" (Bruzzi 1997:120). Like all phallic/castrated/castrating cinematic monsters, for the female spectator the *femme fatale* does not represent danger to the extent that she does for the male. In a figurative sense, this danger to men but lack of danger to women is also underscored by the narrative patterns of the films in this chapter, in which women are no literal threat to each other, and form mutual self-serving alliances.

This chapter will firstly address the *femme fatale* as commodity fetish for the female spectator. More specifically, how the female spectator's identification with beautiful murderous women on screen is exploited to sell products to female consumers, and in turn, via a reading of the modern *noir* film, how this identification and self-commodification is pleasurable for the female viewer.

Much of the critical work on the *femme fatale* is closely linked to film *noir*, but her

iconography, narrative function and textual position has extended beyond the specific generic confine of the classic *noir* text. The narrative focus is modern representations of the *femme fatale*, in neo-*noir* which tend to give out greater agency and subjectivity and less punishment than the classic *film noir*: “In these modern *noirs*, the castrating potential of the *femme fatale* is not always nullified by the conventional narrative closure patterns of the 1940s; in both *Body Heat* [1981] and *The Last Seduction* [1993], for instance, the cool phlegmatic heroines out-smart all the men and get away with it” (Bruzzi 1997:127). Kate Stables also states that “potentially the most fascinating new feature of the *femme fatale* is her ability to *avoid textual suppression*, to win on her own terms” (1998:171)

All the murderous women in the films discussed here go unpunished: they are not killed or married off to the men, who in turn are mere cogs in their grand schemes or erotic objects for their consumption. In the films discussed here – *Black Widow* (1986), *Diabolique* (1997), *The Last Seduction* (1993) and *Femme Fatale* (2003) – far from being an unknowable enigma, the *femme fatale* becomes the protagonist and instigator of narrative action. The texts utilise every structural device to draw the spectator into her gaze. She is given full narrative agency, she is the carrier of the dominant gaze on screen, the narrative subject rather than the object of a male investigative/scoptophillic gaze. The films use structural devices such as camera positioning, the point of view shot, flashbacks, dream sequences and voiceovers to draw the spectator into her gaze, and therefore she is positioned as active subject rather than passive object of desire. She offers the pleasure of omnipotence via identification, which Mulvey describes for male spectators:

As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects 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 (Mulvey 1974:12).

This gaze is on offer to female spectators via identification with the *femme fatale* because

she occupies this textual space. Similarly, Mulvey emphasises the glamour of the male movie star: “a male movie star’s glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror” (ibid.) – in other words, the ‘glamour’ (added erotic value) of the male star does not undermine his over-riding active status due to his textual positioning as bearer of the active gaze. These modern *femmes fatales* reverse the terms of the classical Hollywood narrative which constructed a gendered system of meaning in which the male gaze is active sadistic and subjective, and directed towards a feminine object. In these films, the bearer of the active sadistic gaze is female and directed towards a male object.

The *femme fatale*’s motive for murder is nearly always financial. Although many are technically serial killers (the ‘Black Widow’ archetype), the killing functions as part of some part of a wider scheme – for example, Catherine in *Basic Instinct* (1992) and Rebecca in *Body of Evidence* (1992) are also sexual killers, taking pleasure in the act of killing their victims during sex. In *Black Widow*, *Diabolique*, *The Last Seduction* and *Femme Fatale*, the women kill their husbands for financial gain. Although in each case elements of the scheme are kept from the audience to maintain an air of suspense, for the most part the viewer is in on the plan. The *femme fatale* is a uniquely feminine archetype, and there is no significant *homme fatale* equivalent on screen. There are brief examples of men who use their seductive power to manipulate women – Brad Pitt robbing Thelma’s money in *Thelma and Louise* is one such example, in that for Thelma the seduction was worth losing the money. *The Saint* (1997) is a film about a professional high class thief whose mission is to steal a formula for nuclear fission from a the female scientist who has discovered it. Since she only has one copy of it written on a scrap of paper which she keeps in her bra (!), he must seduce her to steal it by adopting the identity he thinks she will find most attractive (a poetic artist). He can’t bring himself to take it by force because she is too

pretty, and obviously they fall in love. This reinforces the difference between the *homme fatale* and the *femme fatale* who, although she may die for her sins in the classic *noir*, would never be so unprofessional as to fall in love with her target. Throughout *The Saint* he adopts a variety of identities each involving a physical disguise, and although these transformations happen in front of camera, at no point is a mirror involved in this transformation. As discussed in chapter two, these mirror sequences are crucial to constructing subjectivity into an otherwise objectified image. This lack of inscription of subjectivity into these identities through the mirror decisively locates this *homme fatale* as the passive object of an erotic female gaze.

The *femme fatale* is instantly recognisable by her overt sexuality and the absolute power this gives her over men: she is able to control their desire, manipulate their behaviour and get close enough to kill them. Yvonne Tasker argues that the *femme fatale* is defined by four significant aspects:

Firstly, her seductive sexuality. Second, the power and strength (over men) that this sexuality generates for the *femme fatale*. Third, the deception, disguises and confusion that surrounds her, producing her as an ambiguous figure for both the audience and the hero. Fourth, as a consequence the sense of woman as 'enigma' typically located within an investigative narrative structure, which seeks to find 'truth' amid the deception (Tasker 1998:20).

It is of course possible to argue, as many have, that because her power resides in her sexuality in order to utilise it she positions herself as the sexual object of the male gaze, and thus is condemned to being a cog in the machine of patriarchal oppression. She is visual pleasure personified, in Mulvey's terms she 'holds the look, signifies and plays to male desire'. The *femme fatale* however is willing and able to manipulate the desire for her own ends, and take pleasure in doing it. In this context, being the object of the gaze can be a position of power. The classic trajectory in *noir* as Doane has pointed out takes the form of a narrative striptease, peeling away layers of 'disguise' to reveal either the 'good' or 'bad' woman. (1991:107). This peeling away of the disguise is also enacted physically to

reveal the 'pre-showgirl' moment and can also function to accommodate a female gaze of identification rather than simply positioning her as an object of desire for male spectators. The 'mirror scene' discussed in Chapter 1 is often present in the *femme fatale* film, placing her in one sense as duplicitous, but these scenes also form a crucial part of the way the female subject's gaze is mapped across the film – the subject and object of the scene become one and the same. In the films discussed in this chapter, the woman is the bearer of the gaze on screen *as well* as its erotic object, the narratives privilege femininity over phallogentrism in the set up of their power relations, and her narrative position recontextualises the position of erotic object as a passive one.

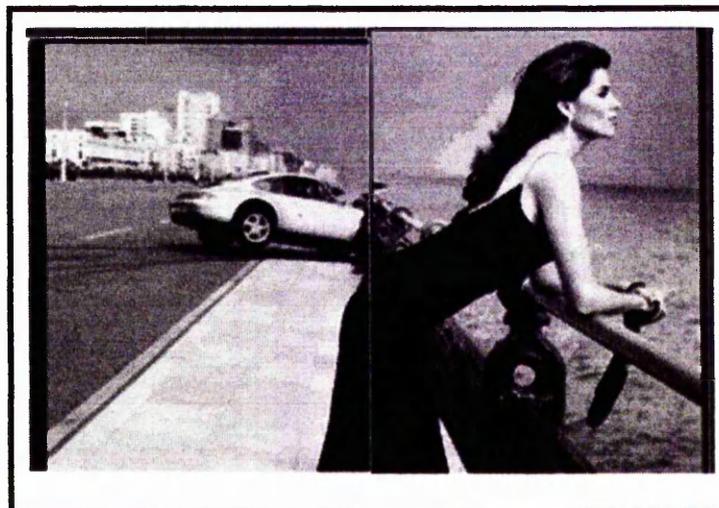
THE FEMME FATALE AS COMMODITY FETISH

Aside from her sadistic gaze, the defining feature of the *femme fatale* is her look. Stella Bruzzi states that "a standardised set of signifiers have evolved for the *femme fatale*, such as bleached hair, boldly coloured, sexual clothes, heavy make-up and cigarettes" (1997:140). *Les Diaboliques* (1955) is a black and white film, but in all the stills on the video box cover both of the women's lips are coloured red, along with the poison they use to kill their victim. Each of these symbols subtly connotes the iconic power of the *femme fatale*, and links her with danger. The iconography of the *femme fatale* is used repeatedly to market products – particularly the tools of masquerade – to female consumers. The masquerade is a key part of the power of the *femme fatale*, and her appearance provides visual shorthand to her murderous desires as well as adding glamour.

The images overleaf formed part of an advertising campaign for Wallis (a clothes shop) and utilise the visual coding of the *femme fatale* to connote power and danger. The woman is able to lure men to their deaths purely by recreating the visual spectacle of the *femme fatale*. In these scenarios, being the object of the gaze is very much a position of power, and looking leads to death. These adverts and many more like them are placed

mainly in women's magazines and targeted directly at a female consumer. The campaign relies on the assumption that being 'Dressed to Kill' is a pleasurable identification for female spectators, based on an intertextual relationship between the products and the films they so clearly reference. This use of a character archetype rather than the more common use of a female star, indicates that this identification is based on what the image of the *femme fatale* connotes rather than any specific actress playing her.

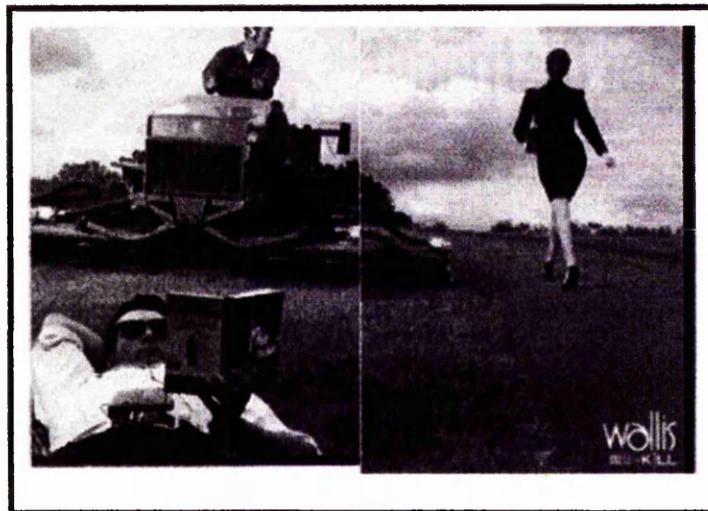
Figures 7.1 – 7.2: Adverts from Wallis 'Dress to Kill' campaign (2000)



The fact that the *femme fatale* appears so frequently in advertising aimed at women is indicative of the pleasure offered to the female spectator through this identification.

Jackie Stacey describes the pleasure which female spectators gain from 'dressing up' as their favourite film characters in *Stargazing* (1994), but the commodification of the *femme fatale* is specifically aligned with an active, sadistic gaze, and the power of the look is the power to control those looking.

Figures 7.3 – 7.4: Adverts from Wallis 'Dress to Kill' campaign (2000) cont.



The iconography of the *femme fatale* is utilised by advertisers to sell the tools of masquerade to women. The image of the *femme fatale* pops up most frequently in fashion and make-up since it is an image dependant on overt masquerade, and thus is easy to replicate. Most ranges of cosmetics have produced at least one collection called '*femme*

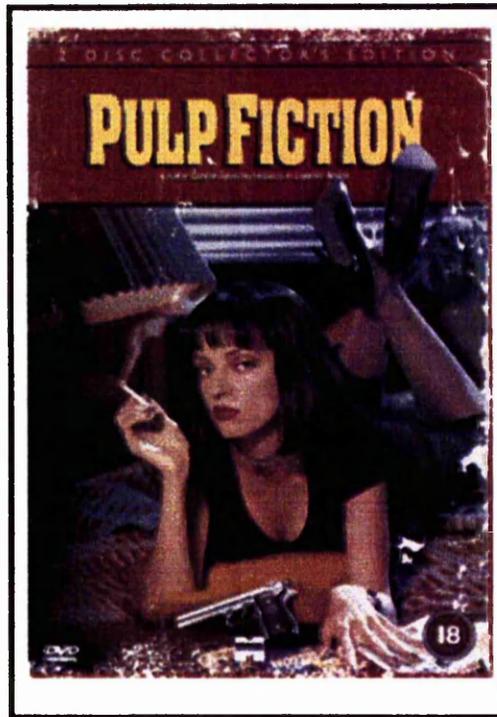
fatale' or allude to the iconography of film *noir* in the naming and marketing of their products. In their promotional material Nars for example describe the 'Lolita' lipstick in their '*Femme Fatale*' range thus: "everyone has a little bit of "bad girl" in them, bring yours out with this saucy, yet extremely wearable orange" (Fall range, 2001)¹. Most ranges contain colours which deliberately connote the imagery of the *femme fatale*, with names like Vamp, Vixen, etc., which almost always dark reds, the colour of blood. Red lipstick connotes both sexual arousal and the blood of the *vagina dentata*, simultaneously deadly and alluring – the signature of the *femme fatale*. The way in which Mia Wallace in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) is used to market products to women is a classic example of the way that cosmetic companies exploit female audiences' narcissistic identification with fabulously glamorous women on screen. Although she is not a classic *femme fatale* in terms of her character and the film she inhabits, she connotes the visual iconography of the vamp, with her black Louise Brooks bob, and red lipstick and nails. Both Chanel and L'Oreal based marketing campaigns around the image, and Chanel created *Rouge Noir* nail polish and lipstick (which is closer than any other polish to the colour of blood) especially for the character. The range sold out immediately and created waiting lists in shops, as did the Agnes B white shirt that Mia wore. Although she is a fairly minor character in the film, it was Mia's image which was used on the poster and it is the power of that image which makes her so attractive to female consumers (see Figure 7.5, over).

The *femme fatale* produces a series of visual codes which connote power. These signifiers are commoditised (in the form of lipstick, hair dye, clothing), and the semiotic codings of the *femme fatale* are written out on the body of the spectator, if she chooses to

¹ Other lipsticks in the 2001 range also exploit the connection to Hollywood glamour and refer to both the films and the stars: 'Silkwood', 'Pussy Galore', 'Harlow', 'Bewitched', 'Blonde Venus', 'Barbarella', 'Belle de jour', 'Cabaret' ("inspired by the Liza Minnelli film") 'Fire Down Below' ("named for the Rita Hayworth movie") 'Jungle Red' ("a most perfect bright red taken straight from the silver screen, Joan Crawford wore it in the 1940s") and 'Red Lizard' ("A favourite of Sharon Stone in the movie *Diabolique*"). All descriptions taken from Nars press pack, Fall 2001 collection.

actively play out this pleasurable identification. Explicit artificiality (dyed hair, heavy make-up) is part of the iconography of the *femme fatale* and thus is easy to replicate.

Figure 7.5: Promotional poster for *Pulp Fiction* (1994)



The *femme fatale* is not the only cinematic figure who is used by advertisers to sell products to women. However, the specific utilisation of the ‘bad girl’ demonstrates a desire within female consumers to identify with this figure and use the power attached to her codings – it is not just attraction to the glamour of the look which is significant, but the sadistic ego attached to it. The transient pleasure of narcissistic identification with a screen ideal is transported out of the pro-filmic event onto the body of the spectator. Like the feminised trope of the female action hero discussed in Chapter 2, the *femme fatale* film often places an emphasis on mirrors at the centre of transformation, and application of the tools of masquerade. The link between Hollywood film and consumerism is not new, but the way in which products market themselves to women using the iconography of the dangerous woman suggests that the female spectator takes pleasure in identifying with

these images, otherwise producers would not exploit their commodity value with female spectators to sell them products.

There is of course a flip side to this argument that in the commodification of femininity, even sadistic femininity, women are placed as the passive objects of a male gaze. Richard Dyer claims that such images are something of a misrepresentation of women's liberation: “[Advertising] agencies trying to accommodate new [feminist] attitudes in their campaigns often miss the point and equate ‘liberation’ with a type of aggressive sexuality and a very unliberated coy sexiness” (1982:186). Reena Mistry also sees this identification as a negative one: “Thus, all we are really left with is a woman who continues to construct herself as a spectacle and, just like the innocent maiden, is presented as a willing co-conspirator of men's sexual advances – and worse, believes she is ‘liberated’ in doing so” (2000). Any reading which emphasises women’s sexual power is subject to the same critique, namely that women are colluding in their own objectification and voluntarily placing themselves in an inherently passive position. However I am less concerned with the feminist credentials of these identifications than I am with the visual pleasure attached to them (and since the notion of what constitutes a ‘feminist’ image is so subjective, concern is to an extent redundant). It is also possible to argue that being the object of the gaze can be a position of power as Stella Bruzzi does – “Is not the gaze of the hapless men of *film noir* at least in part being mocked because they never understand the complexity of what they are looking at” (Bruzzi 1997:127) – particularly in relation to how the *femme fatale* is staged in the films in this chapter.

THE GAZE OF THE *FEMME FATALE* IN NEO-NOIR

A crucial aspect of the way in which women take pleasure in consuming and identifying with images of the *femme fatale* relates to the way that women are positioned as objects of each other’s gazes on screen, which subsequently supports this model of

spectator-screen relations. Even though her monstrous intentions are directed towards men, the *femme fatale* is traditionally defined against another woman in both the classic *noir* text and modern resurrections of the *femme fatale*. The binary pairings of Marlene Dietrich and Janet Leigh in *Touch of Evil* (1958) and saintly Mildred versus demonic Veda in *Mildred Pierce* (1945) embody the way in which female behaviour is fixed as either 'good' or 'bad' with little ambiguity. The angel/devil, madonna/whore, wife/mistress division is set up regularly, as Stella Bruzzi points out: "The most consistently employed oppositional model juxtaposes good and bad women, subsequent films echoing the mirroring of Beth (the 'good' wife) and Alex (the 'bad' mistress) in *Fatal Attraction*" (Bruzzi 1997:139). Within these films the *femme fatale* is set up as a literal threat to the marriage/family/domestic sphere of the other woman who is then granted the right of execution. "The opposition is usually enforced by the *femme fatale* who early in these films creates a conflict with the other 'innocent' women" (Bruzzi *ibid.*:139)². As I will argue however, this oppositional pairing in which the 'bad' woman is expelled from the text by the 'good' woman is largely absent from the films I discuss here, in which women are doubled rather than opposed and work together rather than being set up in conflict to each other.

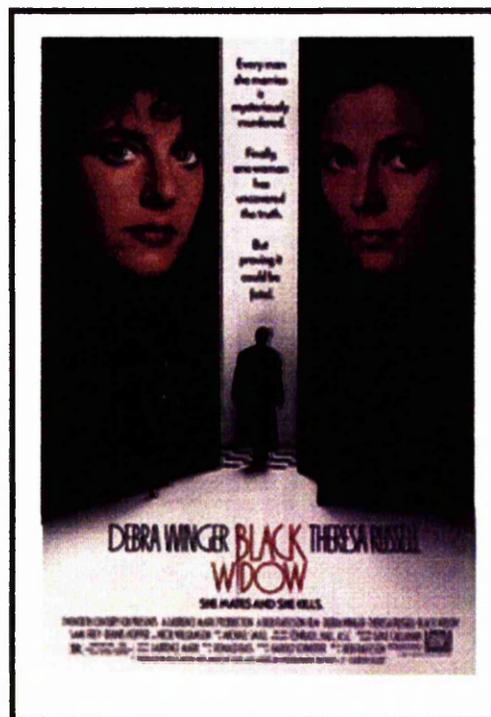
BLACK WIDOW

Black Widow (1987) sets women up in opposition to each other, yet it is not a simple division of good and evil. It conforms to many of the generic characteristics of the serial killer film, and like *Snapdragon* (1994) the binary is set up between the black widow who murders successive husbands for their money and the female cop who is trying to stop her: their roles are fixed as 'good' in the cop who represents the law, and 'bad' in the criminal women who flouts it. It is a conventional narrative in that the *femme fatale* is set up as a

² Because within this specific narrative context (also seen in *Single White Female* and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*) the monstrous woman's rage is directed towards another woman rather than a man, I will deal with them separately, since she is set up as an object of fear as well as an object of identification for the female audience.

mystery to be unravelled and a murderous force to be contained, and yet it uniquely places a woman as the agent of this investigative gaze. The relations between the two women are complex and structured around the fascination of one woman with her glamorous yet monstrous Other. The relationship between the two women as the dominant emphasis of the film is underlined by the poster, in which the two women dominate the image and the man merely appears in silhouette:

Figure 7.6: Promotional poster for Black Widow (1987)



Both the monstrous gaze and the investigative gaze on screen are therefore carried by women, who are physically doubled with each other through the emphasised use of masquerade. As in *Snapdragon*, the female cop is the only one who ‘connects’ to the female killer, and defines the monstrous woman as monstrous when none of her (male) colleagues believe her. The desire to contain and punish her however is tempered both by desire and narcissistic identification, and the film’s romantic conclusion between the cop and the hapless husband she saves means that to a certain extent she has absorbed the identity of her monstrous other and moved into the space her double once occupied. The

conclusion of *Black Widow* conforms to the narrative conventions of the patriarchal *noir* in that the *femme fatale* is destroyed and the good woman is brought back into the heterosexual fold. Roger Ebert notes in his review that this ending is unsatisfactory:

Black Widow has an ending that is so false to the emotional truth of the movie that it looks tacked on by the censors of the 1930s....Why not have Winger fall completely under the spell of the black widow and stand by while the tycoon is murdered so the two women can live happily ever after? (6/2/1987).

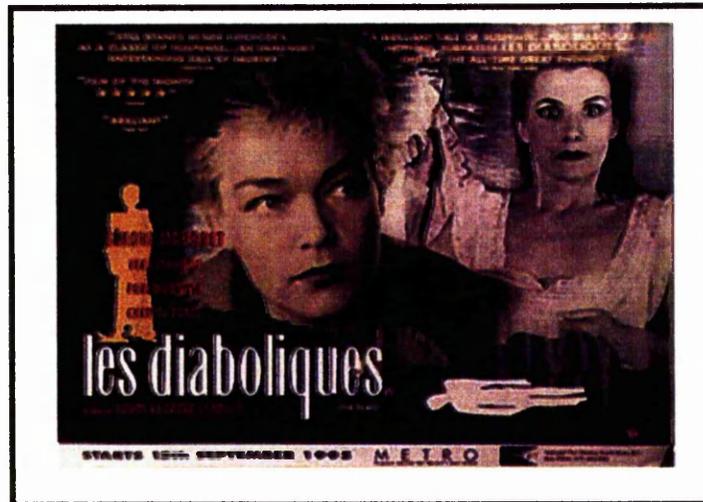
This ending is however what the modern *noir* moves towards. In the following films discussed, the women do form alliances and ride off into the sunset together. Masculinity is expelled from the text and often the connotations of the relationships between women are deliberately eroticised.

The tale of one women's identification with and desire for the *femme fatale* is played out in a narrative context in *Black Widow* and this offers a model for spectator-screen relations. The image of the *femme fatale*, and the power and desirability which it connotes, is as I have argued an identification which is consistently sold to women who willingly consume it beyond the pro-filmic event. More commonly in the modern *noir* however the *femme fatale* is not pitted against other women. Far from being merely the misogynistic product of male fantasy, in a narrative context the *femme fatale* commonly allies herself with other women and is all the more dangerous to men because of it. Both narratively and in a symbolic sense, like all women who function as agents of castration, the *femme fatale* does not pose a threat to the spectator with no penis to lose. In the remaining films discussed in this chapter the women form murderous alliances rather than attack each other. They may be deadly to men, but the modern *femme fatale* is a feminist figure, since she never stabs her sisters in the back.

DIABOLIQUE

There are two versions of *Diabolique*, which demonstrate the shift over time in the ideological representation of the *femme fatale*. *Les Diaboliques* (1955) is a radical film in that it is the mistress rather than the good wife who triumphs. Again, it is the two women who take visual and special precedence on all versions of the film posters.

Figures 7.7: Promotional poster for *Les Diaboliques* (1955)

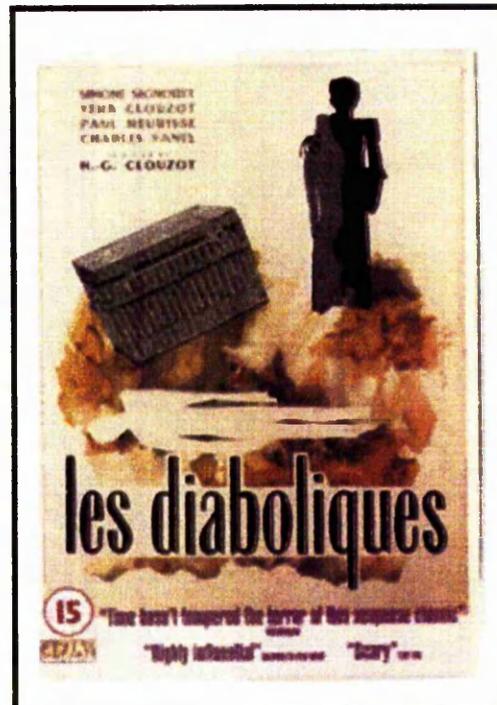
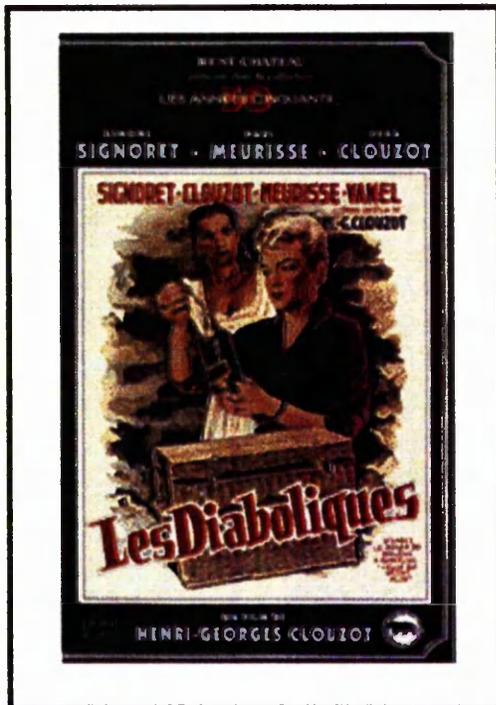


A wife (ex-nun) and mistress (*femme fatale*) join forces to kill the sadistic man they share. They drown him and hide the body in a swimming pool. When the pool is drained, the body has disappeared and it is revealed that the mistress is in league with the husband to kill the wife and steal her money. This film is unusual in that the whore triumphs over the Madonna initially, although is later arrested along with the husband.

The Hollywood remake of *Les Diaboliques* changes the ending. At the end of *Diabolique* (1997) the two women decide to join forces against the husband and kill him together because he treats them both so monstrously. They decide to work as a team and bleed him dry. The *femme fatale*'s allegiance switches from the man to the woman. Again the poster prioritises the relationship between the two women. The lining up of their lips also gives the image an erotic twist.

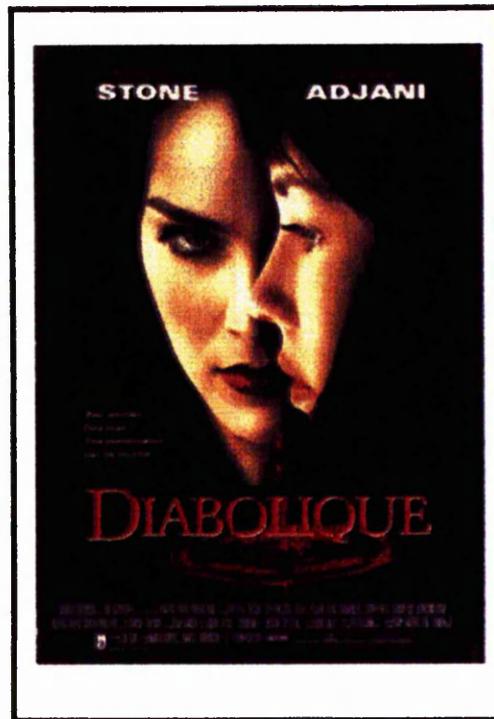


Figures 7.8-7.9: Promotional posters for *Les Diaboliques* (1955) cont.



Mia (the emotionally abused wife) lures Guy to Nicole's house (she is the battered mistress) on the premise of discussing a divorce. She gives him whiskey (poisoned by Nicole) and when he is out cold they drown him in the bath together. They dump his body in the murky school swimming pool and wait for it to be discovered, pretending therefore that he fell in while drunk while feigning concern that he is missing. Except the body never surfaces, and when the pool is drained it has vanished. The plot then takes a twist and reveals that Guy and Nicole worked together to fake his death as part of an elaborate plot to kill Mia with shock and inherit the school. Nicole then switches allegiances when he tries to kill Mia, and the women drown him together. Mia and Nicole are polar opposites, united in their inability to leave a relationship with an abusive man. The love triangle is common knowledge at the boys' school where they all work.

Figure 7.10: Promotional poster for *Diabolique* (1997)



Mia is an ex-novice who lost her faith and then became a “child bride to an abusive man”. She has a weak heart and a nervous disposition. Mia has plenty of motive for wanting her husband dead, namely that he is abusive, he degrades her in public and more practically won’t give her a divorce unless she gives him the school. She has the motive to kill him, she just needs Nicole to cajole her in the right direction because she is too weak to do it alone. After what she thinks is her husband’s murder, she becomes increasingly nervous and hysterical, underpinned by religious guilt over the mortal sin she has committed. Nicole in contrast is cool and collected, ensuring Mia doesn’t act suspiciously, and rationalising the murder – “It was self defence. You’ve been taking it for too long now, you finally said ‘Fuck off’. Good for you. Fuck him”.

Unusually it is the mistress who comes repeatedly to the aid of the abused wife. The film opens with Mia collapsed on the bathroom floor because of a heart condition. Her husband is content to let her die, but Nicole saves her. When he humiliates her in public by

forcing her to eat, it is Nicole who comes to her aid. There is the obvious implication that they are lovers, indeed a casual observer refers to them as “dykes”. This is reinforced through lingering looks, kisses and touching. Immediately after they kill Guy, they lie in bed together in post-coital pose, with Nicole smoking³. It makes narrative sense that they become lovers at some point across the film, rather than it being a pre-existing relationship. After all, Nicole’s original plan was to kill her, but she changes her mind. Her attitude and the nature of her remarks to Mia change across the film. At times she treats her with contempt but towards the end she is genuinely distressed when she thinks Mia is dead, this being the only time she displays any emotion. She then saves Mia twice when Guy tries to kill her.

It is Nicole who is at the centre of the plot, and Nicole’s gaze which stares out from the film poster, returning the look of the spectator. Unlike Mia, visually she is a classic *femme fatale* and could have walked straight out of a classic *noir* with her peroxide hair, permanent red lips and foxy outfits. We know she is bad straight away because she smokes in her classroom. She is rarely seen without a cigarette, and her smoking displays her general contempt for the world around her. When challenged by one of her fellow teachers that “passive smoking kills you know”, she retorts “not reliably” and blows smoke in his face.

The twist in the plot revolves around Nicole switching allegiance from one murderous scheme to another. She conspires with both husband and wife to kill each other, according to which death would benefit her most at the time. She does not really need to eliminate Mia to get Guy all to herself – as she says to the cop “If I couldn’t get a man to leave his wife, I wouldn’t kill him, I’d kill myself”. After he is ‘dead’ however she is given

³ The murderous lesbians plot can also be found in *Bound* (1996), where again women join forces to kill an abusive husband. See Linda Hart, *Fatal Women* (1994).

a genuine motive to kill him. When Mia asks her why, she replies “I was underestimated”. It turns out that Nicole is not Guy’s only bit on the side, and a third woman turns up demanding the money Guy promised her for an abortion. He has also stolen the money they stole from Mia together, and because the motive for Mia’s death was financial, it is this betrayal therefore which seals Guy’s fate. Hell hath no fury like a woman financially scorned.

The other significant woman in the film is the cop investigating the murder, replacing the interfering male cop in the original. She bonds with the two women by discussing the inadequacies of men – she says of her own husband that “he was too dull to kill”. She knows they killed Guy all the way through, and cheerfully offers them advice in how to get away with it. When Mia and Nicole finally drown Guy together in the school swimming pool, she emerges from the bushes and punches Nicole in the face – “this way it’ll be easier to make it look like self defence” – and rewards herself with a cigarette. The concluding message couldn’t be clearer – Guy was a pig and he deserved it. Rather than fighting over an undeserving man, women would do better to join forces and punish the bastard together.

THE LAST SEDUCTION

The Last Seduction (1994) features another überbitch who kills her husband for money. Its heroine carries the active sadistic female gaze in its purest form perhaps more than any other film in this study, within a text that challenges phallogocentrism as the structuring factor of narrative power. Power is represented as female, and the narrative sets up a dynamic in which the active subject is female and her sadistic gaze is directed at passive male objects. Female Internet fan sites on *The Last Seduction* revel in Bridget’s bitchiness and her murderous scheming. ‘The Last Seduction Club’ (www.geocities.com/rodeodrive/2188/) declares that “We believe that women should be

more like Bridget and less like helpless little fools...You can become an honorary member simply because you support your fellow sisters or simply because you can't stand men". Bridget doesn't necessarily hate men however, she just uses them for whatever purpose she requires at the time.

She may be a sexual predator, but Bridget consistently masquerades as a sexual victim. She repeatedly utilises the image of the damsel in distress as her main cover to get herself out of trouble, or to cause it. Firstly, when her husband slaps her, she uses it as an excuse to take their money and leave him to the mercy of loan sharks. When he asks her for his share, she refuses – "it's mine, you hit me". She goes into hiding and gets a job under an alias, pretending to be an abused woman on the run from a violent husband. When Mike is over familiar with her at work, she slaps him in the lobby and loudly accuses him of molesting her. She justifies it by telling him that "a woman loses fifty percent of her authority when people find out who she's sleeping with" – better to publicly humiliate him therefore than compromise herself. When Clay's first detective tracks her down, she is trapped in a car with him with a gun to her head, but this is not enough to stop Bridget. She persuades him to undo his trousers then crashes the car. As she recovers in hospital she tells the policeman that he attacked her, giving her an excuse for 'accidentally' killing him in self defence, again masquerading as an abused woman. She dispenses with the second detective by telling the police "he showed his diddly to my four year old daughter" and escapes as they swoop in to arrest him. When she kills Clay, her weapon of choice is mace, most commonly associated with self-defence rather than attack. The clearest masquerade of passivity is when she entices Mike to 'rape' her in order to frame him for Clay's murder, during which she dials 911 so that the whole thing is on tape as evidence enough to send him to the electric chair. Bridget's power stems in part from pretending she is weak. In this respect, *The Last Seduction* utilises elements of the rape revenge narrative. The urban/rural axis discussed by Clover (1992) in relation to class is

also present in this film. Bridget, as a classic *femme fatale*, is aligned with modernity and the city, a big fish in a little rural pond.

The *femme fatale* has been repeatedly read as a phallic woman within a filmic system of meaning which defines power as phallic: “The deadly *femme fatale* of *film noir*, the woman who carries the gun in her purse, is regarded as a classic example of a phallic woman” (Creed 1993:157). This is underlined through her physical appearance – her tailored suits, her smoking, and the ubiquitous stiletto heel. The male unconscious rewrites her as phallic in order to disavow the threat of castration. In films such as *The Last Seduction*, reading the power of the *femme fatale* as phallic power does not fit in with the overall symbolic economy they present.

In *The Last Seduction*, the visibility of the penis to Bridget’s gaze destroys its status as structuring symbol of phallic power. The modes of representation utilised by the film represent power in feminine rather than phallic terms. Chris Straayer argues that the visual absence of the penis from cinema has allowed the male body an independence from anatomical verification of biological sex. The male body as a whole connotes phallic power, since “male sexuality as a representational system depends on displacing the penis with the phallus” (1992:203). Mike first markets himself to Bridget on the size of his penis, claiming “I’m hung like a horse” as a chat-up line. It works, because in Bridget’s world masculinity is reduced to a commodity value of size, much in the same way that women, in a phallogentric economy, are marketed on their ‘vital statistics’. She demands to see the goods before she buys. The penis becomes a visible fetish object (to Bridget if not literally to the viewer – there are several shots of her inspecting the goods) and subsequently loses the symbolic power it represents. Mike is merely the “designated fuck” attached to it. This is not the only direct reference to Bridget’s commodification of the male body – the first shot of the inside of her apartment in New York zooms in on a pack of Big Boy condoms

beside the bed. She persuades the detective to get his out "to see if it's true what they say" (about black men) and he is only too happy to oblige, thinking that he is going to impress her. Like the rape revenge film, *The Last Seduction* sets up a similar system of meaning in which "the man who is deprived of the phallus must live by the penis" (Clover 1992:157), and the man who lives by the penis is also judged by the size of it. The phallic economy which governs cinematic systems of representation is exposed and rendered meaningless as masculinity is reduced to a commodity fetish, with female desire the active agent of consumption. This is reinforced by the consistent positioning of Bridget as voyeur, and Mike as the sexualised object of her gaze.

Her appeal to a female audience is enhanced by the fact that Bridget is never a threat to other women. Like the *femme fatale* pairings found in *Diabolique*, *Bound* and *Basic Instinct*, Bridget subtly allies herself with other women, forming a bond based around mutual destruction of various deserving men. Ultimately, Bridget pretends to exploit other women's vengeance to facilitate her own murderous schemes. The ease with which Bridget is seemingly able to persuade a wronged wife to have her cheating husband murdered suggests the willingness of other women to become just like Bridget as soon as the opportunity is offered to them. This is of course a charade for Mike's benefit, but she is able to convince him that there is money in female vengeance. It is Mike who puts the idea into her head, telling her "I spoke to a woman the other day whose husband died in a car crash. It was only a fifty grand payout, but she said if she knew it was that much she would have killed the guy herself years ago". Bridget's eyes light up with glee as she spots an opportunity. Other than the fictional woman on the phone who is only too willing to become exactly like Bridget given the opportunity, the only other woman she speaks to over the course of the entire film is the receptionist at her office. The first time she warns Bridget that there is a man looking for her, the second time when she slaps Mike for

'molesting' her and she appeals to the receptionist as a fellow witness to the bad behaviour of men.

A traditional reading of *The Last Seduction* would perhaps argue that Bridget's power is undercut by the way she is sexualised as an object of consumption for the male gaze. Stella Bruzzi answers this charge beautifully in her analysis of the scene in which Mike complains that Bridget treats him like a sex object, while she is dressed in stockings and stilettos. She argues that this scene exemplifies the way in which the sexualised image of women is not necessarily conditioned by the meaning system of patriarchal objectification.

The importance of this obvious fetishisation of the female form is that it presents an argument against a possible conventional reading of the scene which would emphasise how Bridget's legs are exposed and framed with the tireless male gaze in mind. Feminist film criticism based in psychoanalysis has wrongly prioritised modes of representation and the scopophilic, fetishistic engagement of the spectator with the classical film image over every other factor, including narrative contextualisation. *The Last Seduction...* re-contextualises eroticisation within a narrative constructed around a dynamic female subject. A knowing, walking stereotype, Bridget dares Mike, and the spectator, to desire (Bruzzi 1997: 128).

Bridget's sexual power is classically underlined by her dress. She operates a form of overtly sexual masquerade in which she is the active agent, and rather than being a passive object of the male gaze she controls the reception of her consciously styled image. "Bridget is the embodiment of the self-conscious *femme fatale* who successfully uses a conventionalised, overtly sexual image of femininity which acknowledges its cinematic antecedents and suggests a full awareness of how that image affects men" (ibid.:127). She knowingly adopts the codings of power, which in this text are expressed in feminine terms.

FEMME FATALE

Femme Fatale (2003) works as a logical conclusion to both this chapter and this study and represents a historical shift in the textual positioning from marginal to eponymous heroine.

As the title suggests, the *femme fatale* is the narrative centre of the film. Laure uses her *femme* skills professionally, to steal while seducing her victim. When her plan fails, she marries a rich man and then kills him for his money, and gets away with it all. The film has a circular prismatic structure with a complicated plot and presents two alternative realities via the inclusion of a dream sequence which takes up most of the film. The opening sequence is shot with a panning camera and for the first 40 minutes of the film there is very little dialogue. The majority of the story is told by what the camera reveals visually, and more often than not the camera is aligned with the gaze of the *femme fatale*.

The film's tone is set in the opening scene. The camera pans back from the screen to reveal a blonde lying topless on the bed watching *Double Indemnity* (1946) and settles behind her, sharing her gaze from the projector position. The opening sequence therefore shows a narrative representation of the female spectator's identification with a murderous woman on screen. The hotel room looks out over the red carpet at the Cannes film festival and the camera zooms in on a model called Veronica who is wearing a gold bra in the shape of a serpent which is studded with diamonds, and worth \$10 million. The scene is set for a sophisticated heist and the next time we see the blonde she is photographing Veronica, and although the camera – now the camera of a news crew – zooms in on her press pass with her photo and her name (Laure Ash), her face is concealed by her camera. Disguising herself as a photographer places her as voyeur rather than spectacle. Inside the theatre, Laure sidles up to Veronica and whispers something in her ear. Veronica follows to the bathroom where Laure seduces her in one of the cubicles. As she undresses her, she drops the diamond bra to the floor, where an accomplice in an adjoining cubicle replaces it with a copy. This *femme fatale* has such sexual power that she can seemingly seduce women as well as men with ease – it is a woman rather than a man who lets her guard down and allows herself to be seduced and robbed.

The robbery goes wrong however and a security guard gets shot by Laure's accomplice. He is about to shoot Veronica as the only remaining witness to the theft, but Laure kicks the gun out of his hand and saves her. It is not until this moment that we see Laure's face fully, and that is via a point of view shot from the gaze of another woman. Veronica runs out and tells her security that the jewels have been stolen. The power to the building is shut down as planned and everything plunges into darkness. Laure puts on infra-red goggles to make her escape, and we see the rest of the scene from this very deliberate I-camera, as she flees to safety.

Although in this opening sequence both Laure and Veronica are clearly situated as objects of desire for a male gaze at various points – most notably, the sex scene in the toilet cubicle, shot with voyeuristic camerawork – this is not to say that she is placed in the object position. Laure's gaze is emphasised throughout the opening sequence – she is positioned as filmic spectator, as photographer, as seductress. There is repeated use of the I-camera and the point of view shot which is situated with Laure, and although she is an object of desire, she is also very clearly situated as the dominant textual subject position and narrative power and agency are aligned with her.

The next day Laure is sitting in a café with a woman whose face we don't see – she is dressed in glamourflage hotpants and matching stiletto boots. The woman leaves to be attacked by the two men who Laure conned, and is thrown in front of a truck to her death before she can escape. In the next scene Laure is in disguise – a black wig – and as she hides in a church she is mistaken by a couple for Lily, the wife and mother of the man and child whose funeral is taking place. She is followed by the couple to a hotel room where she was due to pick up a fake passport to escape. One of her accomplices is waiting for her in the room, and demands the diamonds before throwing her off the balcony when she refuses. The couple, thinking she jumped, take 'Lily' home and put her to bed. When she

wakes up, the first shot of the scene is a point of view shot. Once they have gone, Laure looks around Lily's apartment, finds a passport and an airline ticket and sees a way to escape by masquerading as Lily. She takes a bath and falls asleep. She is woken by the real Lily's return, and watches Lily write a suicide note and play Russian Roulette with a gun. She kills herself with the second shot as Laure watches. The film then cuts to Laure on a plane masquerading as Lily, having assumed the identity of the dead woman. She gets talking (in Lily's French accent rather than her own American one) to the man sitting next to her and tells him that her husband and child are dead, and she is leaving for a new life in America.

The film then cuts to seven years later in Cannes, and again Laure (as Lily) is involved in another scam to get \$10 million. Laure has married the man she met on the plane who is now an American Ambassador in France. Her former accomplices are out of prison, and are still pursuing her because of the double cross in the opening scenes of the film. She gets involved with Nicholas, a paparazzi after her photo as the glamorous wife of a VIP. He follows her and she sets him up: her plan is to pretend that he has kidnapped her and to demand a ransom from her husband and then to fake her own death to escape. In order to suck him in, she constructs an identity as an asthmatic, suicidal, abused woman and seduces him in order to make him trust her.

As he goes to the pharmacy to get her a new inhaler, she goes to the mirror and removes her 'black eye' (which turns out to be make-up) and smiles to herself – the spectator is privileged to this transformation from one identity to another in the mirror. While Nicolas is away, she sends an e-mail from his computer, claiming to have been kidnapped and demanding a ransom. Later, she summons him to meet her, and she has reverted back to Laure: Lily's French accent has gone, and her hair is now slutty and curly rather than the groomed Grace Kelly chic that befits an Ambassador's wife. "I'm a bad

girl, Nicholas, real bad. Rotten to the core” she tells him. The resurrection of the bad girl persona is emphasised by a change in dress – as ‘Lily’, she wears white tailored chic, but Laure wears a leather mini, stockings, a lace top and stiletto boots, dressed to seduce.

Laure makes it perfectly clear to Nicolas that she is using him, telling him at one point that he is “a fucking patsy” and that the whole point of the exercise is for her to get the money, yet he still goes along with her scheme. She again uses sex to manipulate him. She takes him to a bar and teases him: “How come you’re the only man in this room who doesn’t want to fuck me?” She picks up a seemingly random man in front of him and takes him into a side room to strip for him, making sure that Nicolas follows her and watches. The whole scene is set up to make him jealous – as the man slaps her and refuses to get off her, Nicolas is forced to step in to ‘save’ her from rape. The fight scene between the two men is depicted in shadow on the wall behind Laure – we do not see the fight, just her watching it, obviously delighted. Although she is positioned as erotic object, this is an instance in which being the object of the gaze is clearly a position of power, and she can manipulate this gaze for her own amusement and personal gain. She is both spectator and spectacle. She then has sex with Nicolas again to seal his loyalty to her and he talks romantically about how they could “run away together” but she just laughs: “Without the money, are you nuts?”. They go to the bridge where she has arranged to get the money from her husband, rather than just taking the money and escaping to fake her own death, Laure shoots her both husband and Nicolas. However, she is immediately attacked by the people she double crossed in the original robbery, who throw her off the bridge.

The seeming conclusion that she almost got away with both robberies then died is then negated by a rewriting of the story: everything that has just happened is in fact part of Laure’s dream/premonition of what would happen if she watches Lily die and assumes her life. She plunges into the water under the bridge and re-surfaces back in the bath at Lily’s

apartment. This theme of water and rebirth is a repeated motif throughout the film each time Laure adopts a new identity. Just as before, Lily walks in, writes a suicide note and picks up the gun to kill herself, except that this time Laure stops her. This makes more narrative sense – one of the main characteristics of the modern *femme fatale* is her allegiances with other women. Although Laure will cheerfully kill her own husband and anyone else who gets in the way, it seems unlikely that she would watch another woman kill herself out of grief without intervening, especially her own Doppelgänger. She takes the gun off Lily – “I’m your fucking fairy godmother” – and tells her to get on the plane to start her new life in America, the life that Laure has just lived, although since Lily is not a mercenary killer like Laure her story will not end in death.

Again, the film jumps to seven years later and replays an earlier scene with a different conclusion. The two women are sat at the café together and exchange bags, again the woman in hotpants gets up to leave and is attacked by the bad guys. This time however, we see her face and it is Veronica, the woman who was wearing the diamonds stolen in the opening sequence. In a split screen flashback, we see that rather than switching the diamonds for fakes, Laure and Veronica were always in it together: she walked out in the originals and kept them safe until they could sell them. Both walk away unscathed this time.

Lily and Laure look uncannily alike (unsurprisingly since they are played by the same actress) and this is not the only Doppelgänger motif in the film. Veronica also looks very similar to Lily/Laure and the confusion is intensified since their faces are so often concealed. It is only through clothing, make-up and hair that the three women are distinguished. Laure dresses in black, either the butch femme she wears in the robbery, or black lace when she reassumes her identity as Laure. In the final scene, when Laure has lived both her life and Lily’s life, the two looks are consolidated. Laure wears a chic white

shirt and skirt, but with a black bra on display. It is via the masquerade that Laure is able to both reveal and disguise herself. It is only fitting therefore that the whole plot also revolves around the value and disguise of a piece of clothing.

The doubling of the women is also emphasised in the use of mirrors. The mirror appears three times in the film: firstly in the opening sequence as Laure is given her instructions for the robbery while looking at herself in the mirror, although the camera only reveals the back of her head; secondly, after she has convinced Nicolas that she is being beaten by her husband, it is via the mirror that the deception is revealed when she takes off the make-up; and thirdly as she tells Nicolas the plans for the money drop, she gazes at herself as she talks to him, in a reverse shot of the first mirror placing so that we see her face and are party to her plans. It appears at moments when she is at her most duplicitous in her scheme, although within the context of the way her gaze structures the film they are also moments of revelation. In the scene where Laure confronts Lily, they are never in shot together, and the camera frames each from the other point of view using a 180 degree shot-reverse-shot, creating a mirror image of the two women. Both are positioned as the object of each other's narcissistic gaze.

In terms of this study, *Femme Fatale* goes full circle and brings me back to *The Long Kiss Goodnight*. There are remarkable similarities between these two films and although they couldn't be more different generically or stylistically (neo-noir and action film), they tell very similar stories. In both films a sadistic woman, a cold blooded master criminal, uses her sexual power and skills of masquerade in order to kill. Both women find sanctuary in a domestic existence to escape their former colleagues who are trying to kill them. Both have children who they reject⁴. The active/passive sadistic/masochistic drives

⁴ Although this is never explicitly depicted in *Femme Fatale*, when Laure tells Lily about the premonition for her future it includes three children with Bruce, implying that they were part of the life she 'lived'.

are split between two personas, Laure/Lily and Charly/Sam. In both films, it is too simplistic to read the split in persona and textual positioning as a simple split between masculinity and femininity, with masculinity connoting activity and femininity connoting passivity. In both cases, the sadist (Laure/Charly) can be read – in Creed's terms – as a trope of the monstrous-feminine, and thus 'activity' has a feminine guise. In both films, the split between different tropes of femininity is connoted visually via dress, clothing and make-up. The masquerade in both films is the tool which gives the heroine her power, but the association between dressing up and the mirror sequences in the films means that the physical transformations enacted on the bodies of the women is also a vital part in establishing the characters as textual subjects. There is a makeover scene at key points in both films – Charly reclaims her physical identity from Sam via a physical transformation enacted in the mirror, and Laure steals Lily's clothes to assume her identity. The use of the mirror to structure the relations between women is also common to both films. In *Femme Fatale*, it is Laure, the sadistic side, who ultimately dominates. Lily is absent in later scenes, she is the only character not to appear in the concluding sequence and it is left to the viewer to presume that she lived happily ever after.

Death and rebirth for the women in both films is signified via falling. In *Femme Fatale*, the motif is used repeatedly – Laure is thrown from a hotel balcony and off a bridge into the Seine and after both instances she emerges to be 'reborn' in a new identity. In Laure's dream, Veronica is killed when the bad guys throw her under a truck, only to be flung past it to safety in the alternative version of reality. In *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, 'Samantha' has a flashback in which 'Charly' is thrown off a cliff into the sea to her death, only to rise to the surface in the present as 'Charly'. In both cases, the resurfacing is done via a point of view shot, drawing the spectator into gaze of the new identity.

It is *The Long Kiss Goodnight's* close affiliation with films such as *Femme Fatale*

makes it a feminine rather than a masculine story. Both women are active, sadistic subjects because they are women, not in spite of it. This repression of the sadistic drive in both films is unconscious – Laure is dreaming/having a premonition, Charly has amnesia. Both ‘true’ personae resurface after a rebirth in water. In both films, it is the ‘bad girl’ persona which dominates as main agent of the gaze on screen via the point of view positioning of the camera, inviting a narcissistic identification rather than simply positioning her as the object of a male gaze. *The Long Kiss Goodnight* ends with a heterosexual resolution and reabsorbs its heroine into marriage. *Femme Fatale* rejects this conclusion – Nicolas appears in the final scene but Laure walks away and the lesbian implications in the text also negate containing the heroine via symbolic marriage, since she also kills her husband.

As well as the visual pleasure of a narcissistic identification with Laure, she is also textually situated as an object of desire for other women in the text. As in *Basic Instinct*, the lesbian elements of the texts also explicitly invite a lesbian gaze – it is clear that Laure and Veronica are lovers working together, and that their relations with men are secondary to their relationship with each other. The *femme fatale* is rarely a threat to other women either figuratively or literally. Within these texts she is not set up as an object of fear for other women, she never attacks other women and the women in these films work together. There is an explicitly lesbian gaze on offer here as well, particularly in those films – *Femme Fatale*, *Bound*, *Basic Instinct* – in which the exchange of gazes between the women on screen blurs the lines between narcissism and anaclisis, ego and object libido and desire and identification within both the text itself and the female spectator-screen relationship. The opening of *Femme Fatale* rests on the premise that women as well as men are subject to the erotic allure of its heroine.

Jami Bernard writes of Bridget in *The Last Seduction* that “she’s so good, men will do anything to please her – even commit murder” (1997:42). These *femmes fatales* also

have this power to seduce and control other women and as a result they become more like her, either by physically doubling her or by joining the murderous scheme. The dual combination of erotic charge and narcissistic doubling in the relations between these women on screen adds an extra dimension to the fantasies of control that identification with these women clearly offers.

Jackie Stacey argues in relation to *All About Eve* (1950) and *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) that they

tempt the women spectator with the fictional fulfilment of becoming an ideal feminine other, while denying that transformation by insisting upon differences between women. The rigid distinction between *either* desire *or* identification, so characteristic of psychoanalytic film theory, fails to address the construction of desires which involve a specific interplay of both processes (Stacey 1992:256).

Even the heterosexual female gaze is tempered with lesbian desire when directed at a female object according to Byars (1988) and Chodorow (1978), since the subject retains a pre-Oedipal desire for the mother. Therefore the female spectator's desire is triadic. Since this study deals with the way that certain texts invite an identification with a female sadistic gaze on screen – the ego rather than the object libido – the homoerotic implications of this gaze have not been a priority, but that is mainly because it is not explicit in the films discussed in other chapters (*Overkill* for example represses the relationship between the two women the story is based on). Here, however, it is relevant since these films blur the lines between identification and desire and there is an explicit erotic tension between the women on screen. In the films discussed here, the *femme fatale* is offered as an object of both desire and identification to the female spectator, without punishing this gaze literally or figuratively.

The modern *femme fatale* carries the agency of the sadistic gaze throughout the film and emerges triumphant and unpunished. Although she can clearly be read as a by-

product of masculine visual pleasure – most of these films are ‘erotic thrillers’ – there is a story of female visual pleasure which sits alongside. The presentation of the *femme fatale* as an object of identification, desire and consumption for female spectators unifies the gaze in psychoanalytic theory and the socialised spectator in fantasies of power and dominance. The theme of women’s fascination with her more glamorous, more powerful other is consistently made into a narrative event in these films, via the relations between women on screen in the intertextual use of the classic *noir*. In both *Femme Fatale* and *The Last Seduction*, the heroines turn to *Double Indemnity* for inspiration, although unlike Barbara Stanwyck they kill their husbands and get away with it. The *femme fatale* is both bearer of a powerful gaze and able to control the gaze upon her. These films disrupt the traditional narrative patterns and gender rules of their genre, and also disrupt the notion that the active sadistic gaze is always constituted in masculine terms.

CONCLUSION

All of the films in this study feature women as agents of a sadistic controlling gaze, which for the most part goes unpunished or uncontained. There is no compensation for the threatened male subject in the face of these monstrous-feminines, but similarly there is no containment for the female subject who carries this gaze. Although the films in this study are generally the exception to the rule in the way that they map their various gazes across the text, they offer active, sadistic, fetishistic, voyeuristic and castrating viewing positions to female spectators, if they choose to take them up. The prevailing representation of murderous and monstrous women in Classical Hollywood Cinema – both historical and contemporary – is all about containment. Women who transgress from their traditional positioning as passive, masochistic objects are ritually punished for their crimes within a dominant ideological system that places limitations on women on screen structurally, narratively and figuratively. Within this meta-narrative however there are individual texts in which disrupt these established patterns and place women in the active space. Unlike *Thelma and Louise*, the women in these films figuratively escape to Mexico, even when they are genuinely evil rather than transgressive. This shift can be seen most clearly in comparisons between the early *femmes fatales* who inevitably die and their modern equivalents who survive triumphant. The films encourage us to cheer their victory by both aligning the audience with their gaze and presenting an ideological context which ‘justifies’ their actions, either by framing their killings as heroic victory, self defence, righteous slaughter or too glamorous to resist.

THE FEMALE KILLER IN HOLLYWOOD

The cross-generic nature of this study means that it is difficult to ‘profile’ Hollywood’s female killer since the nature and staging of these killers is so diverse, and indeed it was never my intention to do this. It is not the female killer herself so much as the nature of the

gaze she carries which has been the principal concern of this analysis. Given the wide range of texts, is it unsurprising there is no consistent motive, type of victim, weapon, modus operandi, etc. that are common to all the films. The archetypes of the female killer, and the nature of the films they occupy, that are considered in this study do however share similarities within their own generic groupings in the way their gazes are mapped across the texts.

RE-FEMINISING THE 'MASCULINE GAZE'

The action heroine, the female serial killer and female slasher killer are female archetypes of established masculine figures, but this does not necessarily mean that they are gendered masculine. The action film figuratively genders its heroine as masculine more than any of the other genres in this study, via the *mis-en-scene* and the phallic signifiers attached to her body. This does not mean, however, that they do not simultaneously present a form visual pleasure for female spectators beyond a masculine context. The similarities between *The Long Kiss Goodnight* and *Femme Fatale* underline this presence of a feminine discourse which is built into the formal determinism and apparatus of spectatorship within the text. Of all the archetypes examined in this study, the female action hero is the most commercially successful. *Nikita* (1990) exists in three forms – the original French film, its Hollywood remake as *The Assassin* (1993) and a successful TV series, *La Femme Nikita* (1997-2001). The *Charlie's Angels* film was successful enough to produce a sequel, as were *Tomb Raider*, *Resident Evil* and *Miss Congeniality*. Ripley, the mother of them all appears in three sequels to *Alien* (so far). The action heroine is the clearest form of the structurally 'active' gaze, propelling the narrative action forward and emerging victorious. The way that this gaze is aligned with the monstrous feminine opens up a space in which masculinity is not the only active form of subjectivity.

Although in reality, female serial killers kill both men and women, in Hollywood their victims are mostly male. There are very few female multiple murderers in Hollywood who are not also categorised as something else by their genre (as a *femme fatale* or Slasher killer for example) and almost nothing written about them in general. What is perhaps surprising is how many of the women get away with it, much more so than their male counterparts who often exist within narrative structures which work towards their capture. This does echo real life, in which women are far more efficient serial killers than men: they kill more victims and the time between their first killing and arrest is much longer. The structure and camera placements in the films also afford greater subjectivity and narrative agency to female serial killers than to male killers. Bar *Misery*, which frames its murderous woman as a monstrous object of horror for spectators from the point of view of one victim, the films here are framed predominantly from the point of view of the killer rather than the victims or the cops. It is the killer's gaze which dictates the form of the films, which is rare among the numerous films about male serial killers and this gaze goes unpunished and uncontained.

Like the female serial killer, the female Slasher killer is a very different specimen to her male counterpart, in motive, method and the narrative structure of the texts they inhabit. Although *Urban Legend*, *Scream 2* and *Friday 13th* follow the classic Slasher pattern of random slaughter, the true intended victim is never chosen randomly. In *Urban Legend*, the motive is revenge for the death of the killer's lover, in *Scream 2* and *Friday 13th*, the death of a son. Even *Serial Mom* - which is a Slasher/serial killer parody - selects her victims because of their perceived misdemeanours (not recycling, having bad taste in films etc.) Unlike male Slasher killers, the motivation is vengeance rather than unbridled psychosexual fury (although this does not mean that they are not also psychotic, just that this psychosis is not sexualised in the same way). They do not fetishise their weapons as a form of phallic substitute, but use whatever is to hand. Structurally, the female Slasher

killer occupies a different space to that of the male. The postmodern aesthetic in these films engineers a collapse of the boundary between killers and victims. The killers are only exposed as female at the end of the films. The killers gaze is retrospectively feminised and the killers motive is revealed at the films conclusion by the killer herself. This is one archetype of the female killer who does not get away with her crimes, and the films build to a conclusion of her righteous defeat. It is, however another woman - the object of her wrath - who brings her down. This creates in turn another female killer, and her violence is framed as righteous slaughter.

These films set up a dynamic structure in which women function as both killers and victims, agents and objects of violence. The Slasher aesthetic, with its emphasis on the I-camera, sets up an exchange of looks between women in which both are placed in the active, sadistic subject, or passive masochistic object positions at various points across the texts. Because all of these spaces are occupied by women, the delineation of these spaces within the symbolic economy of the films is more complex than a simple active, masculine / passive, feminine dynamic. Both the active and passive space in the text are represented in feminine terms.

THE MONSTROUS FEMININE AS AGENT OF THE GAZE

The rape revenge heroine and the *femme fatale* are uniquely feminine archetypes, occupying uniquely feminine spaces on screen. The rare examples of the 'rape revenge hero' (*Deliverance*) and the *homme fatal* (*The Saint*) are constructed differently to their female counterparts and men are rarely represented as literally castrating on screen. The castrating avenger of the rape-revenge film offers a 'maso-sadistic' story of fantasy, control and revenge to the female spectator. Although the rape revenge film constructs the ultimate position of feminine passivity, the mapping of this fantasy across the narrative

structure is unusual, since the woman ultimately triumphs. In other words, the film concludes with an image of feminine rage and vengeance rather than weakness.

Contemporary representations of the *femme fatale* contain perhaps the purest form of the active, sadistic female gaze. In *Basic Instinct*, *The Last Seduction*, *Diabolique* and *Femme Fatale* the women kill men they are involved with for money and get away with it. The *femme fatale* in these neo-noir films is the main narrative protagonist, she is the bearer of the active gaze rather than its passive recipient, and the films use every device to draw the spectator into this gaze, which is unpunished and uncontained.

Although one of the key features of the modern *femme fatale film* is a pleasing feminist discourse in which women work together, there is also pleasure in seeing women set against each other. What stands out about the 'Bitchfight' films is just how monstrous women can be to each other, for reasons that have nothing to do with patriarchal 'divide and rule' production values. There is a reluctance in feminist theory to acknowledge either genuine conflict between women or the pleasure in the spectacle of women fighting and being bitchy to each other. These films construct a feminine space in which both the sadistic and masochistic positions are occupied by women, thus offering multiple viewing positions to female spectators.

There are other archetypes of female killer which warrant further investigation, but which are missing from this study for reasons of space, and are integrated across the categories I have used. Most of the women here are working alone – this has a methodological origin, since the gaze is then consolidated in the figure of one female protagonist. A female killer acting in tandem with somebody else is quite common whether as a male/female coupling (eg. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967); *Natural Born Killers* (1994); *Kalifornia* (1993); *Heathers* (1989); Myra Hindley and Ian Brady; Fred and Rose West); a

lesbian couple (eg. *Bound* (1996); *Butterfly Kiss* (1995); *Heavenly Creatures* (1994)); or a pair/group of female friends (eg. *Thelma and Louise* (1992), the murderous fantasies of *Nine to Five* (1980) and the tribes of female killers in Russ Meyer films *Wild Gals of the Naked West* (1962); *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1966); *Vixen* (1968); *Beneath the Valley of the UltraVixens* (1978) etc.). The staging of these relationships and the exchange of looks between killers and at their victims is an area which requires further investigation. There are also plenty of murderous women on film who are already accomplished cold blooded killers by the time they are teenagers (eg. *American Psycho 2* (2000); *The Crush* (1993); *The Hole* (2001); *Poison Ivy* (1992)). Although some feature in this study, these fledgling killers perhaps deserve a chapter of their own. Similarly, archetypes of the monstrous-feminine who are actual monsters warrant a separate chapter: werewolves (*Gingersnaps* (2000)) zombies (*Resident Evil* (2002)), part-human (*Species* (1995)), vampires (of which there are many). Many possible films were excluded from close consideration in this study in favour of others, because although they contain a female killer / monster, she may die for her sins and thus the film punishes the spectator's identification by relocating the active woman into passivity (eg. *Body of Evidence* (1993) the *femme fatale* of the classic *noir*) or the film is shot exclusively from the point of view of a male protagonist, and therefore a feminine gaze is absent in the discourse and the structural apparatus of the film. Although the textual range of this study is generically diverse, each significant film gives access to a very specific form of active, sadistic feminine subjectivity, which disrupts textual convention, existing critical analysis of the nature of the female gaze in dominant cinema and the supporting theory upon which it rests. It is the presence of this gaze which was the main criteria for selecting the films.

EXCHANGES OF LOOKS BETWEEN WOMEN ON SCREEN

IDENTIFICATORY LOOKS

One of the ways in which the visual pleasures and unpleasures for female spectators is manifest in these texts is via the relationships between women on screen, specifically the exchanges of looks between women on screen. Active identifications between female spectators and murderous and monstrous women on screen are played out as narrative events within certain texts. *Femme Fatale* opens with Laure watching *Double Indemnity*. *The Last Seduction* is also saturated with references to *Double Indemnity*: Bridget adopts the pseudonym of Mrs Neff at one point, so she is clearly also a fan. In *The Assassin*, the heroine plans her kill while watching *Revulsion*. In *Urban Legend*, Reese watches *Foxy Brown*, learning how to look cool with a gun and Beverly in *Serial Mom* consumes a diet of Slasher gore and true crime stories. *American Psycho 2* and *Snapdragon* detail their killer's obsession with other killers, to the extent that they act out their murderous identifications. Each of these women is situated as a filmic spectator within the body of their own narrative, and play out the visual pleasure of the spectator/screen relationship on screen. Many of the films discussed here make the processes of identification on offer to female spectators in the audience into a narrative event within the text. As well as making visible the way these women identify with glamorous, violent versions of themselves before acting out that identification, it also validates the spectator's identification in taking pleasure in this gaze themselves.

MONSTROUS WOMEN AS OBJECTS OF FEAR

Although the primary focus of this study is identificatory visual pleasure, many of these women are also staged as objects of fear – in other words, they are staged as threatening to the female subject on screen, and by proxy to the female spectator. Although Alex is a sympathetic figure in *Fatal Attraction* who has been reclaimed as a misunderstood heroine by female critics, this does not preclude her making the audience jump when she returns to

life at the end, no matter how much they may empathise with her predicament. Across its narrative structure, the film encourages the audience to firstly identify with her, then fear her, and finally revel in her defeat. What is significant about the staging of women as objects of fear is the way in which it is other women who are the victims of this murderous gaze, often prompted by vengeful fury (*Fatal Attraction*, *Friday 13th*, *Scream 2*, *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, *Urban Legend*, *Carrie*). This form of sadistic femininity takes another woman to destroy it and this opposition of women sets up a symbolic economy which exists beyond the phallogentric system of meaning which dominates most Hollywood output. This nature of violent exchanges of looks between women also demonstrates that the expression of feminine fears within the horror text can be read as both similar to, and separate from, the expression of male fears. The fear of loss in domestic horror can be read as a form of castration anxiety, but it is the loss of some aspect of femaleness (motherhood, fertility, identity) rather than phallic castration which forms the axis of conflict between women.

LOOKING AT THE SELF: THE PROBLEM OF OBJECTIFICATION

Although women feature as textual subjects within the films in this study, there is always the problem of objectification and fetishisation. Being situated by the text as fetishised objects negates the formation of subjectivity in the woman on screen within feminist analysis. Many of the films discussed in this study are erotic thrillers which are saturated with displays of female flesh, and although I have argued being the object of the gaze in this sense can be a position of power within certain contexts. The way in which women are continually forced to look at objectified images of themselves however remains a problem which must be addressed.

A key exchange of looks between women on screen is that of the subject and her own image. This relationship is mediated via the mirror, which appears at some point in a

surprising amount of the films discussed in this study. Even women who are literally in the battlefield stop at some point to apply make-up or admire themselves in the mirror. Even women who are literally in the battlefield often stop at some point to apply make-up or admire themselves in the mirror. There are few significant texts in this study that do not contain some form of mirror moment for the heroine. The mirror scenes/dressing up sequences discussed in relation to action films, which could easily be read as functioning to serve the male gaze, operate in different ways for the female subject. The narrative mirror is a consistent feature of many films which operate as narratives of transformation and the physical makeover enacted in front of it frequently signifies a transformation from active to passive via the masquerade of femininity¹. Within this context, femininity functions as active whilst the female body is broken down into a series of parts. The framing of the mirror sequences, clearest in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, operate in one sense to reduce the woman to a fetish object, but can also be read as an inscription of female subjectivity into the text in that the gaze they represent is carries narcissistic and autoerotic visual pleasure. The process of physical transformation does in itself break the subject's body down into parts. All images of the self are, to an extent, framed (paintings, photographs, film) or broken down into parts via a frame (a make-up mirror). Only a full-length reflection gives the subject a view of themselves as a complete whole. The fetish shots of body parts contained in these mirror sequences - a close up of an eye while mascara is being applied, a close-up of lipstick being put onto lips, a foot going into a stocking - are, in fact, what the woman herself sees reflected in the mirror while getting dressed up. Within this context, these seemingly objectified images are a fairly accurate representation of the woman's gaze, and place her as both subject and object of her own gaze. The 'Showgirl Moment' Mulvey describes in 'Visual Pleasure' (1975) is deconstructed in these films in that we share the process of constructing the image before

¹ *The Long Kiss Goodnight, The Assassin, GI Jane, I Spit On Your Grave, Overkill, Femme Fatale, Miss Congeniality, Snapdragon, The Hole, Fatal Attraction, Single White Female, Blue Steel, Carrie, The Craft, Copycat, Nikita, The Accused, Snow White: A Tale of Terror, and True Lies* all contain a mirror moment at a key point in the narrative.

she steps on to the stage. The process of transformation is more fetishised than the finished image in these films, but it is for the visual pleasure of the subject's own gaze.

Similarly, the objectification and fetishisation of the male body specifically for a female gaze both on screen and for female audiences OFTEN places women as subjects of a controlling gaze rather than its passive object. Frequently this gaze is both sadistic and controlling, regardless of whether the woman herself is also fetishised.

MAPPING THE MONSTROUS GAZE

The nature of the gaze examined in this study transgresses the invisible binaries present in the mechanisms of spectatorship. This monstrous gaze can function as active, sadistic, voyeuristic, controlling and castrating without being figuratively rewritten as masculine. The monstrous women in this study primarily function as carriers of the dominant gaze on screen- which is unsurprising since this was part of the criteria for selecting the films. What is significant is the nature and staging of these subjectivities. Archetypes such as the *femme fatale* who exist as by products of the hero's gaze in the classic *noir* take centre stage to become the bearer rather than object of the active gaze on screen. The woman's discourse is present in the mechanisms of seeing – the camera alignment, the point of view shot, and the narrative story telling are aligned with the gaze of the woman on screen.

REDEFINING VISUAL PLEASURE

To return to the original set of binaries is clear from the textual context of the films in this study that women can function as killers and agents of violence as well as victims and objects of violence.

<u>MALE GAZE</u>	<u>FEMALE GAZE</u>
MASCULINE	FEMININE
SUBJECT	OBJECT
ACTIVE	PASSIVE
SADISTIC	MASOCHISTIC
PHALLIC	CASTRATED / CASTRATOR
VOYEUR	EXHIBITIONIST
SPECTATOR	SPECTACLE
AGENT OF VIOLENCE	OBJECT OF VIOLENCE
KILLER	VICTIM

In the films in this study, a shift from passive to active, masochist to sadist, from spectacle to spectator does not necessitate a shift from femininity to masculinity in the subject. The female killers are located as active textual subjects via the way their murderous gaze is mapped across the text into the apparatus of spectatorship. Women who usually function as objects of fear and desire within male discourse are, in the films in this study, given full narrative point of view. It is their desires which propel the narrative, their story which is told, and their gaze which forms the structural dynamics of the films. Feminine subjectivity, in the films in this study, is structured into the apparatus of spectatorship, and takes an active form. When women are fetishised in these films, it is either for the consumption for their own gaze, or to manipulate the gaze of another

Women function as active protagonists across these texts in the way they propel narrative action on screen. Even in a film such as *Basic Instinct* in which the monstrous woman is not the main protagonist, she controls every event in the film, whether she is on screen or not. Although she is not situated structurally as bearer of the dominant gaze on

screen, she functions as active with the filmic discourse. A key criteria for the selection of texts for this study is the way the narrative structure does not contain the women at the film's conclusion. The Classical Hollywood film has a fixed narrative structure of imperfect stasis – chaos – resolution. Within this structure, the monstrous woman typically fulfils the chaos function, and resolution is obtained via her ritual destruction. The *femme fatale* is perhaps the clearest example of this narrative form. Although her desires and actions may control the narrative, she is returned to passivity via marriage or expelled/killed. The film is structured around the point of view of a male protagonist, the women as objects of desire or fear do not have a subjective point of access in the text. The films examined in this study however present various narrative structures and textual placing of monstrous women which deviate from this model. Femininity does not automatically represent passivity, both active and passive textual positions can be gendered masculine and feminine.

This study has aimed to demonstrate that femininity can take a sadistic form and function and how this offers various forms of visual pleasure to female spectators. Visual pleasure in the horror text is based around sado-masochistic desire, through identification with either the victim or the monster positions, the pleasure in both being scared and seeing fear. The gaze of women within the horror text has been located with that of the passive, masochistic victim or the defeated monster. The films examined here present women as sadistic/monstrous/murderous, and invite the spectator to identify with this gaze.

Women are rarely positioned as sexual voyeurs in the same way as men. Although there are numerous examples of men being placed as the erotic object of a female gaze, this gaze is not presented as sexually sadistic in the same way the for example Norman Bates watches Marion before he slaughters her. Indeed this study has emphasised the pleasures of exhibitionism rather than voyeurism at work in these films, via the autoerotic

masquerade, but also the ways in which this functions in an auto-erotic context and contributes to the formation of subjectivity as well. The female voyeuristic gaze is most prevalent in its autoerotic form, directed at itself in the mirror.

This study has aimed to demonstrate that when women occupy space on the opposite side of this traditional binary, it does not always require masculinisation. Femininity, in the films I have examined here, is constructed as active, sadistic, castrating, voyeuristic and subjective, and the apparatus of spectatorship gives the female spectator access to these viewing positions without punishing her gaze.

HISORICAL SHIFT

Although this was never intended to be a historical study, clearly a dramatic shift has taken place in the way women are represented on screen, and the question of why needs to be addressed. Clearly there are more women working behind the scenes as producers, directors, screenwriters etc. and this has influenced production values. The development of the female action hero is a case where the progression of women on screen –from feisty sidekicks to main protagonists and chief agents of narrative action - is mirrored by the progression of women in the production process. Kathryn Bigalow, for example, specialises in action films. *Blue Steel* (1990) has a female protagonist, and although Mace in *Strange Days* (1995) is a sidekick rather than a lead role, she is by far the hardest person in the film. Likewise, *Point Break* (1991) is saturated with images of eroticised male bodies, framed as a pure spectacle of visual pleasure. The franchise for the *Charlie's Angels* films is owned by Drew Barrymore's production company. Similarly, Sigourney Weaver is now an executive producer of the *Alien* Franchise, and the later films are notable by their lack of close-ups of Ripley in her pants.

It is remarkable however, that given the nature of the gaze examined in this study, very few of the films discussed at length (or even mentioned briefly) in this study have female directors. I am cynical, as to the true extent of women's overall influence over a cultural product in an industry still overwhelmingly dominated by men. The films discussed here are a tiny sample of exceptions to rules which are still very much in place in the majority of dominant cinema. It is thus arguable that because the texts examined here are produced from within what remains a male dominated industry with a patriarchal, phallogentric agenda, they do not contain a 'pure' female gaze, but one which is mediated through a masculine production system. The look of the woman on screen and the female spectator may be read as 'feminine', but no matter how much the camera is aligned with the gaze of the woman on screen, its gaze is controlled through a male pair of eyes.

Jacinda Read (2000) argues that the emergence of the rape revenge film and other films which contain which could be read as a 'feminist discourse' are Hollywood's way of making sense of feminism to explain why this narrative tale type emerged when it did, in the form that it did. I am not convinced however, that feminist politics have had the impact she suggests on cultural product, for reasons I have already discussed in greater length in Chapter 5. My own explanation for the emergence of these texts at this particular time is perhaps more cynical, and based in economics – because Hollywood is primarily an industry selling a product. The emergence of what I would term 'women's films' which exists across genres is a response to a market. Hollywood has always treated women as consumers through the marketing of associated products, most notably the tools of masquerade used to act out their identifications and aspirations, and companies have always utilised Hollywood iconography to give added glamour to their products. The analogy of screen as shop window still bears true, except now, women have broader consumption tastes and producers have cashed in on this expanding market. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* which, like *Nikita*, were TV series which began as films "because there

were no TV shows out there pitched to young girls," according to Gail Berman, one of the executive producers of the show. She also states that Buffy "is a role model in a metaphoric way. We put her through all of the things you have to face in high school, from a date that goes wrong to a final exam that seems impossible. But she also has to save the world" from a near army of very disagreeable vampires (*Variety* 14/7/97).² In the same article, Garnett Losak, VP and director of programming for Blair Television, states that if Universal executives decided to produce a new version of its 1983-87 all-male action series "The A-Team", "they'd have to add at least one woman to the cast."³ As women's economic power as consumers grows, so will the space they occupy on screen. The use of *Double Indemnity* (1946) within the intertext of the modern *noir* clearly shows a knowing shift in the status of the *femme fatale* from ritual punishment to eponymous heroine in *Femme Fatale* (2003). This shift in cultural output clearly demands a shift within theory to take account of these changes.

The space occupied by the female spectator and the woman on screen can be active, sadistic, voyeuristic and remain coded as feminine. The films in this study disrupt the notion that femininity are intrinsically linked with passivity, masochism, objectification, by presenting an opposing form within a non-phallogocentric system of meaning. For those female audiences who cheer as the bodies pile up, the monstrous gaze is on offer if they choose to seek it.

² Similarly, the same article reveals why although there is a growing market among western women for action heroines and warrior women, the international market is always limited. Jack Fentress, VP of programming for Petry National, a rep firm that advises TV stations about what shows to buy, says, "TV viewers in foreign countries may not accept female action heroes for cultural or religious reasons." Expensive action series harvest the bulk of their profits from international sales, Fentress says, so they would have to cease production if too many of their foreign markets dried up. (*Variety* 14/7/97)

³ In the same article, he makes two further points about why studios and TV companies have been reluctant to make films/programs about female action heroes: firstly because they think in terms of global rather than Western markets, and many countries will not accept women playing these roles and secondly that the number of actresses who can convincingly play these warrior women is limited. (ibid.:97). It is an interesting point – Sigourney Weaver (Ripley), Lucy Lawless (Xena) Geena Davis (*The Long Kiss Goodnight*, *Cutthroat Island*) are all 6' tall and this instantly gives them an imposing presence on screen without relying on muscularity. Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar), however, is tiny.

THE END

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American Gigolo (1980, US) Dir. Paul Schrader.

American Psycho (2000, US) Dir. Mary Harron.

American Psycho 2 (2002, US) Dir. Morgan J. Freeman. **Mila Kunis ('Rachael Newman')**.

Assassin, The (1993, US) Dir. John Badham. **Bridget Fonda (Maggie/Claudia/Nina)**
Anne Bancroft (Amanda).

Attack of the 50 Ft Woman (1958, US) Dir. Nathan Juran.

Avengers, The (TV) (1961-69, UK) Creator: Sidney Newman. Honor Blackman (Dr. Cathy Gale), Diana Rigg (Mrs Peel), Rhonda Parker (Rhonda), Linda Thorson (Tara King), Joanna Lumley (Purdey).

Avengers, The (1998, US), Dir. Jeremiah S. Chechik. Uma Thurman (Mrs Peel).

Baise-Moi (2000, Fr) Dir. Coralee Virginie Despentes. **Karen Lancaume (Nadine)**
Raffaëla Anderson (Manu).

Basic Instinct (1992, US) Dir. Paul Verhoeven. **Sharon Stone (Catherine Tremell)**,
Jeanne Tripplehorn (Beth), **Leilani Sarelle (Roxy)**, **Dorothy Malone (Hazel)**.

Beneath the Valley of the UltraVixens (1979 US) Dir. Russ Meyer.

Bewitched (TV) (1964-72, US) Creator: Sol Sacks. Elizabeth Montgomery (Samantha).

Bionic Woman, The (TV) (1976-78 US) Lindsey Wagner (Jaime Sommers).

Black Widow (1987, US) Dir. Bob Rafelson. Deborah Winger (Alex), **Theresa Russell (Catherine)**.

Blue Steel (1990, US) Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. **Jamie Lee Curtis (Megan)**.

Breakfast Club, The (1985, US) Dir. John Hughes.

Body Heat (1981, US) Dir. Lawrence Kasdan. **Kathleen Turner (Matty)**

Body Of Evidence (1993, US) Dir. Uli Edel. **Madonna (Rebecca Carlson)**.

Bonnie and Clyde (1967, US) Dir. Arthur Penn, **Faye Dunaway (Bonnie)**.

Bound (1996, US) Dirs. Andy Wachowski, Larry Wachowski. **Jennifer Tilly (Violet), Gina Gershon (Corky)**.

Butterfly Kiss (1995, UK) Dir. Michael Winterbotton. **Amanda Plummer (Eunice), Kathy Jamieson (Wendy)**.

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Carrie, (1974, US) Dir. Brian De Palma. **Sissy Spacek (Carrie), Piper Laurie (Mrs White)**, Amy Irving (Sue), Betty Buckley (Miss Collins), Nancy Allen (Chris).

Carrie 2: The Rage (1999, US) Dir. Katt Shea. **Emily Bergl (Rachel)**.

Charlie's Angels (TV) (1976-1981, US) Kate Jackson (Sabrina Duncan (1976-1979)), Farrah Fawcett (as Farrah Fawcett-Majors, Jill Munroe (1976-1977), Jaclyn Smith (Kelly Garrett) Cheryl Ladd (Kris Munroe) (1977-1981) Shelley Hack (Tiffany Welles) (1979-1980) Tanya Roberts (Julie Rogers) (1980-1981).

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Charlie's Angels 2: Full Throttle (2003, US) Dir. Joseph Nichol. Drew Barrymore (Dylan), Cameron Diaz (Natalie), Lucy Lui (Alex), Demi Moore (Madison).

Children of the Corn (1984, US) Dir. Fritz Kiersch.

Cleopatra Jones (1973, US) Dir. Jack Starrett. Tamara Dobson (Cleopatra Jones).

Coffy (1973, US) Dir. Jack Hill. Pam Grier (Coffy).

Copycat (1995, US) Dir. Jon Amiel. Sigourney Weaver (Helen), **Holly Hunter (M.J. Monahan)**.

Craft, The (1996, US) Dir. Andrew Fleming. Fairuza Balk (Nancy), Neve Campbell (Bonnie), Rachel True (Rochelle), Robin Tunney (Sarah).

Crush, The (1993, US) Dir. Alan Shapiro. Alicia Silverstone (Adrienne).

Deception (1946, US) Dir. Irving Rapper. **Bette Davis (Christine)**.

Desparately Seeking Susan, (1985, US) Dir. Susan Seidelman. Rosanna Arquette (Roberta), Madonna (Susan).

Deliverance (1972, US) Dir. John Boorman.

Diabolique (1997, US) Dir. Jeremiah Chechik, **Sharon Stone (Mia)**, **Isobel Idjani (Nicole)**, Kathy Bates (Shirley).

Dirty Dancing (1987, US) Dir. Emile Ardolino. Jennifer Grey (Baby).

Double Indemnity (1944, US) Dir. Billy Wilder. **Barbara Stanwyck (Phyllis Dietrichson)**.

Duel in the Sun (1946, US) Dir. King Vidor. Jennifer Jones (Pearl).

Exorcist, The (1973, US) Dir. William Friedkin. **Linda Blair (Regan)**, Ellen Burstyn (Chris).

Eye of the Beholder (1999, US) Dir. Stephan Elliot, **Ashley Judd (Joanna)**.

Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill! (1966, US) Dir. Russ Meyer.

Fatal Attraction (1987, US) Dir. Adrian Lyne. **Glenn Close (Alex)**, **Anne Archer (Beth)**.

Femme Fatale (2002, US) Dir. Brian De Palma. **Rebecca Romijn-Stamos (Lily/Laure)**, **Rac Rasmussen (Veronica)**.

Frances (1982, US) Dir. Graeme Clifford. Jessica Lange (Frances).

Foxy Brown (1974, US) Dir. Jack Hill. Pam Grier (Foxy Brown).

Freezer (2000, Japan) Dir. Takashi Ishii. **Harumi Inoue (Chihiro)**.

Friday the 13th (1980, US) Dir. Sean S. Cunningham. **Betsy Palmer (Mrs Voorhees)**, **Adrienne King (Alice)**.

Full Metal Jacket (1987, US) Dir. Stanley Kubrick.

GI Jane (1997, US) Dir. Ridley Scott. **Demi Moore (Lt. Jordan O'Neill)**.

Gilda (1946, US), Dir. Charles Vidor, Rita Hayworth (Gilda).

Ginger Snaps (2000, US) Dir. John Fawcett. **Katharine Isabelle (Ginger)**.

Grease (1978, US) Dir. Randal Kaiser. Olivia Newton John (Sandy), Stockard Channing (Rizzo).

Grease 2 (1982, US) Dir. Patricia Birch. Michelle Pfeiffer (Stephanie).

Hand That Rocks the Cradle, The (1992, US) Dir. Curtis Hanson. Rebecca De Mornay (Peyton) **Annabella Sciorra (Clare)**.

Halloween (1978, US) Dir. John Carpenter. Jamie Lee Curtis (Laurie).

Heathers (1989, US) Dir. Peter Lehmann. **Winona Ryder (Veronica)**, Kim Walker (Heather no.1), Lianne Falk (Heather no.2) Shannon Docherty (Heather no.3).

Heavenly Creatures (1994, NZ) Dir. Peter Jackson. **Kate Winslet (Juliet)**, **Melanie Lynskey (Pauline)**.

Hills Have Eyes, The (1977, US) Dir. Wes Craven.

Hitcher, The (1986, US) Dir. Robert Harmon.

Hole, The (2001, UK) Dir. Nick Hamm. **Thora Birch (Liz)**, Keira Knightley (Frankie).

Hud (1963, US / UK) Dir. Martin Ritt.

Ivanhoe (1952) Dir. Richard Thorpe.

I Spit on your Grave (1978, US) Dir. Meir Zarchi. **Camille Keaton (Jennifer)**.

I Spit on your Grave, I Piss on your Corpse (2001, US) Dir. Eric Stanze. **Sandy (Emily Haack)**

Jackie Brown (1997, US) Dir. Quentin Tarantino. Pam Grier (Jackie Brown).

Kalifornia (1993, US) Dir. Dominic Sena. Juliette Lewis (Adele), Michelle Forbes (Carrie).

Kiss the Girls (1997, US) Dir. Gary Fleder.

La Femme Nikita (TV) (1997-2001, US) **Peta Wilson (Nikita)**.

Last House on the Left (1972, US) Dir. Wes Craven.

Last Seduction, The (1993, US) Dir. John Dahl. **Linda Fiorentino (Brigit)**.

Leaving Las Vegas (1995) Dir. Mike Figgis. Elizabeth Shue (Sera).

Leon (1994, US) Dir. Luc Besson. **Nathalie Portman (Mathilda)**.

Long Kiss Goodnight, The (1996, US) Dir. Renny Harlin. **Geena Davis (Sam/ Charly)**.

Mimic (1997, US) Dir. Guillermo del Toro. **Mira Sorvino (Dr. Susan Tyler)**.

Mildred Pierce (1945, US) Dir. Michael Curtiz. Joan Crawford (Mildred Pierce) Ann Blyth (Veda).

Misery, (1990, US) Dir. Rob Reiner. **Kathy Bates (Annie Wilkes)**.

- Miss Congeniality* (2000, US) Dir. Donald Petrie. Sandra Bullock (Gracie), Candice Bergen (Amanda).
- Moment by Moment* (1978, US) Dir. Jane Wagner.
- Monster* (2003, US) Dir. Patty Jenkins. **Charlize Theron (Aileen Wournos)**.
- Mother's Boys* (1994, US) Dir. Yves Simoneau. Jamie Lee Curtis (Jude) Joanne Whalley (Callie).
- Ms. 45* (1981, US) Dir Abel Ferrara. **Zoe Lund (Thana)**.
- Omen, The* (1976, US) Dir. Richard Donner.
- Natural Born Killers* (1994, US) Dir. Oliver Stone. **Juliette Lewis (Mallory)**.
- Night of the Living Dead* (1968, US) Dir. George Romaro.
- Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984, US) Dir. Wes Craven. Heather Langenkamp (Nancy).
- Nikita* (1990, France) Dir. Luc Besson. **Anne Parillaud (Nikita)**.
- Nine to Five* (1980, US) Dir. Colin Higgins. Dolly Parton (Doralee), Lily Tomlin (Violet), Jane Fonda (Judy).
- Overkill: The Aileen Wournos Story* (TV) (1992, US) Dir. Peter Levin. **Jean Smart ('Lee'/Aileen Wournos), Park Overall (Tyria)**.
- Oz* (TV) (1997-2003, US) Creator: Tom Fontana.
- Picnic* (1955, US) Dir. Joshua Logan.
- Play Misty for Me* (1971, US) Dir. Clint Eastwood.
- Poison Ivy* (1992, US) Dir. Katt Shea. Sara Gilbert (Sylvie), **Drew Barrymore (Ivy)**.
- Postman Always Rings Twice, The* (1946, US) Dir. Tay Garnett. Lana Turner (Cora).
- Postman Always Rings Twice, The* (1981, US) Dir. Bob Rafelson. Jessica Lange (Cora).
- Practical Magic* (1998, US) Dir. Griffin Dunne. **Nicole Kidman (Gillian), Sandra Bullock (Sally)**.
- Pretty in Pink* (1986, US) Dir. Howard Deutsh. Molly Ringwald (Andie)
- Pretty Woman* (1990, US) Dir. Garry Marshall. Julia Roberts (Vivien).
- Pulp Fiction* (1994, US) Dir. Quentin Tarentino. Uma Thurman (Mia Wallace).
- Psycho* (1960, US) Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Janet Leigh (Marion).
- Quincey* (TV 1976-1983, US) Creator: Glen A. Larson et al.

- Raise the Red Lantern* (US Title, 1992, China / Hong Kong / Taiwan) Dir. Yimou Zhang.
- Red Sonja* (1995, US) Dir. Richard Fleischer. **Brigitte Nielson (Red Sonja)**.
- Resident Evil* (2002, US) Dir. Paul W.S. Anderson. **Milla Jovovich (Alice)**.
- Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004, US) Dir. Alexander Witt. **Milla Jovovich (Alice)**.
- Ring, The* (2002, US) Dir. Gore Verbinski. **Daveigh Chase (Samara Morgan)**, Shannon Cochran (Anna Morgan).
- Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (TV) (US, 1996-2003) Creator: Nell Scovell. Melissa Joan Hart (Sabrina).
- Saint, The,* (1997, US) Dir. Phillip Noyce. Elizabeth Shue (Dr. Emma Russell).
- Saturday Night Fever* (1977, US), Dir. John Badham.
- Scary Movie* (2000, US) Dir. Keenan Ivory Wayans.
- Scary Movie 2* (2001, US) Dir. Keenan Ivory Wayans.
- Scary Movie 3* (2002, US) Dir. David Zucker.
- Scary Movie 4* (2003, US) Dir. David Zucker.
- Scream* (1996, US) Dir. Wes Craven. **Neve Campbell (Sidney), Courtney Cox (Gail)**.
- Scream 2* (1997, US) Dir. Wes Craven. **Neve Campbell (Sidney), Laurie Metcalf (Mrs Loomis), Courtney Cox (Gail)**.
- Scream 3* (2000, US) Dir. Wes Craven. **Neve Campbell (Sidney), Courtney Cox (Gail)**.
- Shriek If You Know What I Did Last Friday 13th* (2000, US) Dir. John Blanchard.
- Serial Mom* (1994, US) Dir. John Waters. **Kathleen Turner (Beverly Sutphin)**.
- Se7en* (1995, US) Dir. David Fincher.
- Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954, US) Dir. Stanley Donen
- Sex and the City* (TV) (1998-2004, US) Sarah Jessica Parker (Carrie), Cynthia Nixon (Miranda), Kim Cattrall (Samantha), Kristen Davis (Charlotte).
- Shining, The* (1980, US) Dir. Stanley Kubrick.
- Showgirls* (1995, US) Dir. Paul Verhoeven. Elizabeth Berkley (Nomi), Gina Gershon (Cristal).
- Sex: The Annabel Chong Story* (1999, US) Dir. Gough Lewis, Annabel Chong (Herself).
- Silence of the Lambs, The* (1991, US) Dir. Jonathan Demme. **Jodie Foster (Clarice Starling)**.

- Silent Witness* (TV) (1998-, UK) Dir. John Duthie, Jon East. Amanda Burton (Sam Ryan).
- Silkwood* (1983, US) Dir. Mike Nichols. Meryl Streep (Karen).
- Single White Female* (1992, US) Dir. Barbet Schroeder. **Bridget Fonda (Ally), Jennifer Jason Lee (Hedra).**
- Sisters* (1973, US) Dir. Brian De Palma. **Margot Kidder (Dominique and Dannielle).**
- Sleepers* (1995, US) Dir. Barry Levinson.
- Sleepless in Seattle* (1993, US) Dir. Nora Ephron. Meg Ryan (Annie), Rosie O'Donnell (Becky).
- Snapdragon* (1993, US) Dir. Worth Keeter. **Pamela Anderson (Felicity and her evil twin), Chelsea Field (Peckham).**
- Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (1997, US) Dir. Michael Cohn. **Sigourney Weaver (Claudia/Old Woman), Monica Keena (Lilli).**
- Species* (1995, US) Dir. Roger Donaldson. Natasha Henstridge (Sil).
- Steel Magnolias* (1989, US) Dir. Herbert Ross. Julia Roberts (Shelby), Sally Field (M'Lynne), Dolly Parton (Truvy), Shirley McClaine (Ouiser), Olympia Dukakis (Claree), Daryl Hannah (Annelle).
- Strange Days* (1995, US) Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. Angela Basset (Mace).
- Straight Jacket* (1982, US) Dir. Martin Green.
- Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974, US) Dir. Tobe Hooper. Marilyn Burns (Sally).
- Texas Chainsaw Massacre II* (1986, US) Dir. Tobe Hooper. **Catherine Williams (Stretch).**
- Texas Chainsaw Massacre III: Leatherface* (1990, US) Dir. Jeff Burr.
- Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991, US) Dir. James Cameron. **Linda Hamilton (Sarah Connor).**
- Thelma and Louise* (1992, US) Dir. Ridley Scott. Geena Davis (Thelma), **Susan Sarandon (Louise).**
- Tomb Raider* (2001, US) Dir. Simon West. **Angelina Jolie (Lara Croft).**
- Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997, UK/USA) Dir. Roger Spottiswood. **Michelle Yeoh (Wai Lin).**
- Touch of Evil* (1958, US) Dir. Orson Welles. Janet Leigh (Susan Vargas), Marlene Dietrich (Tanya).
- True Lies* (1994, US) Dir. James Cameron. **Jamie Lee Curtis (Helen Tasker).**

Unmarried Woman, An (1978, US) Dir. Paul Mazursky.

Urban Cowboy (1980, US) Dir. James Bridges.

Urban Legend (2000, US) Dir. Jamie Blanks. Alicia Witt (Natalie), **Rebecca Gayheart (Brenda)**, **Loretta Devine (Reese)**.

Virgin Spring, The (1960, Sweden) Dir. Ingmar Bergman

Vixen (1968, US) Dir. Russ Meyer.

Wes Craven's New Nightmare (1994, US) Dir. Wes Craven. **Heather Langencamp (Nancy/herself)**.

Wild at Heart (1990, US) Dir. David Lynch. Laura Dern (Lula), Cheryl Ladd (Marietta).

Wild Gals of the Naked West (1962, US) Dir. Russ Meyer.

Witches of Eastwick, The (1987, US) Dir. George Miller. Cher (Alex), Susan Sarandon (Jane), Michelle Pfeiffer (Sukie).

Witness (1985, US) Dir. Peter Weir.

Wizard of Oz, The (1939, US) Dir. Victor Fleming. **Judy Garland (Dorothy)**, Billie Burke (The Good Witch of the North), Margaret Hamilton (The Wicked Witch of the East).

Women, The (US Title, 1969, France / Italy) Dir. Jean Aurel.

Working Girl (1988, US) Dir. Mike Nichols. Melanie Griffith (Tess) Sigourney Weaver (Katherine).

World's Biggest Gang Bang, The (1995, US) Dir. John T. Bone. Annabel Chong (herself).

Xena: Warrior Princess (TV) (1995-2001) Creator: John Schulian. **Lucy Lawless (Xena)**, Renee O'Connor (Gabrielle).

X Files, The (TV) (1993-2002, US) Creator: Chris Carter. **Gillian Anderson (Dana Scully)**.

