

# Moving Bodies: the Affective Capacities of Contemporary Female Action Heroes

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A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Media Studies  
2024

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## **Abstract**

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Moving Bodies: the Affective Capacities of Contemporary Female Action Heroes

Thesis directed by: Associate Professor J. Richard Stevens

Using concepts of visual meaning making and corporeal affect this dissertation examines how physical strength, ability, precision, dexterity, and power are embodied in the depictions of active female bodies in the popular action film genre. A distinction from representations that deal with narrative and identity—something like what the Bechdel test would measure – this dissertation instead analyzes the affective corporeality of active female bodies. Affective corporeality meaning how the material body is articulated and, through that articulation, how audiences are encouraged to feel with and about the material body on screen. Utilizing close textual analysis and speaking into spaces of cinematic affect, genre, and representation I analyze cinematic depictions that rely on the affective qualities of the corporeal and physical ability of the female body. I will also analyze the ways specific actors utilize a range of media to curate a perception of their bodies as signifiers of physical strength, power, and corporeality within *and* outside of their filmic representations. This dissertation also illustrates how these practices function to “make their bodies real” primarily in the context of Hollywood action films but also within the social and cultural context of contemporary society. Visual media and the acts of visual meaning making have

epistemological application which underlines the impact and influence popular culture have on the social and cultural comprehension of the female body. In short, this dissertation identifies the ways these visual representations contribute to a social understanding of female embodiment.

## Acknowledgements

This project has been a journey wrought with blood, sweat, and many tears but as Dad's favorite Shakespeare quote reminds me...

"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

There is a trove of people so treasured to me I fear no matter what I say it would never accurately express my love and gratitude for those in my life and along this journey who have made this dissertation possible.

To my committee thank you so much for your patience and encouragement. Each of you have been instrumental in my education and I am so humbled and grateful that you agreed to be a part of this project.

To Rick, I very much could not have done this without you and frankly, would not have wanted to. Thank you for being a relentless cheerleader for grad students, and thank you for working entirely too much. There will just never be quite enough 'thank yous.'

To my cohort, y'all were the glue that held me together through the last 6 years. Thank you for helping me see that I did, indeed, belong here, and thank you for being the most reliable, supportive, and loving cohort most grad students will only every dream of!

And to my family, thank you for seeing this through with me. This is as much yours as it is mine you are as vital and fundamental to my success and journey as the words on these pages.

To Josh thank you for talking me down during the multiple late-night breakdowns. Thank you for staying the course and for always seeing my strength even when I wasn't able to.

To my sister, I will always be so glad you were here in CO to witness the trials and triumphs over this last year. You are my person; I carry your heart.

And to my girls...I love you one, two, three, and forever.  
Stay fierce and unapologetically you.

# Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Motivation for Research	
Research Questions	
Why Film?	
Methodology	
Chapter Breakdown	
Chapter 2: Concepts and Theory	23
Feminist Film Theory	
Cinematic Affect and Genre	
Capacity and Corporeality	
Chapter 3: History and Background of Gender in the Action Genre	44
Hardbody Films of the 80's	
The Action Body	
Action Babes of the 2000's	
Chapter 4: Categorization of Female Action Archetypes	62
Vigilantes and Avengers	
Female Warriors and Superheroes	
Secret agents and spies	
Chapter 5: Charlize Theron's Affective Capacity	77
Mad Max: Fury Road	
Atomic Blonde	
The Old Guard	
Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusions	102
Charlize Theron's Impact on the Action Genre	
The Affective Spaces of Active Black Female Bodies	
Addressing the Current State of the Action Babe	
Future Research Horizons	
Bibliography	119

## List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Poster for <i>The Adjustment Bureau</i> (2011)	11
Figure 1.2: Poster for <i>Quantum of Solace</i> (2008)	11
Figure 1.3: <i>Black Widow</i> compilation (2010-2018)	14
Figure 1.4: <i>Black Widow</i> Marvel Fans IG	14
Figure 3.1: Cover of <i>Muscle and Fitness</i> from April 1989 featuring Lou Ferrigno	46
Figure 3.2: Lars Hedlund World's Strongest Man Competition cir. 1980	46
Figure 3.3: Poster for <i>Tomb Raider: Cradle of Life</i> (2003)	57
Figure 3.4: Poster for <i>Resident Evil</i> (2002)	57
Figure 4.1: Poster for <i>Miss Meadows</i> (2014)	68
Figure 5.1: Charlize Theron and Tom Hardy fight, <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i>	86
Figure 5.2: Furiosa fighting, <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i>	88
Figure 5.3: Furiosa damaged face, <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i>	89
Figure 5.4: Charlize Theron as Lorraine Broughton, <i>Atomic Blonde</i> (2017)	91
Figure 5.5: Stairwell fight scene, <i>Atomic Blonde</i> (2017)	94
Figure 5.6: Charlize Theron as Andy, <i>The Old Guard</i> (2020)	97
Figure 6.1: J'Adore by Dior Poster feat. Charlize Theron	102
Figure 6.2: Collage: Headshot of Theron/Theron in <i>Monster/Aileen Wuornos</i>	103
Figure 6.3: Kiki Layne Instagram post	107
Figure 6.4: Movie poster for <i>Lara Croft</i> (2001)	114
Figure 6.5: Movie poster for <i>Lara Croft</i> (2018)	114
Figure 6.6: Movie poster for <i>Suicide Squad</i> (2016)	115
Figure 6.7: Movie poster for <i>Birds of Prey</i> (2020)	115

## *My Furryous Fixation*

In 2017, I completed my thesis paper on the representations of female warriors and now seven years later I am writing what I intend to be an ongoing project on the affective capacities of contemporary female characters in the action genre. There has been one constant across these two projects: the significant impact and influence *Mad Max: Fury Road* had on me both as a media scholar and cinephile. When I began my thesis just a few years after the release of *Fury Road* the driving (pun-intended) motivation for the project was to spread the word about how ground-breaking *Fury Road* was and would continue to be in the lexicon of American film. I had not previously been concerned with the action genre or what representational opportunities the genre offered female characters. I grew up watching classic westerns and followed the *Fast and Furious* franchise through high school, but that was about the extent of my action film catalog. I was not familiar with the *Mad Max* franchise prior to seeing *Fury Road* so I would say that perhaps in many ways I was the ideal viewer, given that I came into the franchise with no expectations and was, indeed, mesmerized. This film felt so different from other action films featuring female characters. Furiosa's character felt like something that would resonate with audiences well beyond the film's two-hour run time.

Since the 1980's the action genre in American cinema has been invested in presenting a specific type of idealized masculinity and which left very little room for women to enter that space in any convincing or natural way. Women in the action film were presented in hyperbolic fantasy or comedic fodder, but not generally in meaningful ways that substantially challenged the patriarchal notions of male physical superiority. Since 2015 *Fury Road* has gained even more cultural significance. With a simple scroll

through TikTok, a user can find themselves enmeshed in stories of American citizens struggling to navigate a medical system that seems to care more about controlling women's bodies than the health of women's bodies, or various accounts dedicated to the testimonies and experiences of intimate partner violence. In my ancillary research on childbirth within the American medical system, I have uncovered horrific stories of birthing people being lied to, ignored, physically restrained, drugged, and sexually violated. The #metoo movement helped to expose the misogynistic, sexually violent, and predatory behaviors that were commonplace in the veiled shadows of the mainstream film industry for over a century. Bodies have been a kind of invisible currency, but increasingly referenced.

Audiences today still walk out of movie theaters into a world of gendered violence, rape culture, reproductive injustice, impossible youth and beauty standards, all of which are, more often than not, perpetuated by the Hollywood movie industry's investment in a cisgendered, white, male-dominated worldview. It is impossible to ignore the current cultural landscape and state-of-affairs for action film audiences and the corresponding implications of these representational modes on their lived experiences. *Fury Road* tells the story of a female warrior fighting back against the toxic masculinity that has constructed a world sustained by the exploitation and imprisonment of female bodies. The film's allegorical relevance to the American experience is difficult to ignore. Therefore, it is vital to consider the potential of films such as *Fury Road* to present new and untapped avenues of female empowerment that have cultural significance beyond their box office success or entertainment value.

These films are influenced by and contribute to the larger cultural discourses of female embodied power, violence, and justice and for that reason they have resonance and resilience within a system that has historically sought to relegate them to the margins. When Yvonne Tasker began writing about women in the action film for *Spectacular Bodies* she spoke of her fear that “the figure of ‘woman’ was in the process of being eclipsed from the Hollywood cinema altogether,” but instead she expanded her project to include women which resulted in the introduction of her concept ‘musculinity.’<sup>1</sup> In 2011 Lisa Purse articulated the effects of post-feminism on the action genre as an ongoing oscillation between progressive representations of female action heroes and containment strategies imposed on female action heroes by mainstream cinema. However, Purse concludes with an optimistic tone about the future of “credibly powerful, convincingly physically potent women in action.”<sup>2</sup> What this tendency towards optimism connecting each investigation into the status of female heroes in the action genre suggests is a desire to witness change. It might, in fact, be easier to identify only the problematic components of the action genre for female action heroes, but that approach tends to ignore avenues of pleasure or catharsis for action film audiences.

Beginning from an effort to address and validate my own cathartic affective response to *Fury Road* this project attempts to address and validate the affective capacities of female bodies on screen. My intention for this project and my sincere hope is that *Moving Bodies* offers something akin to *Furiosa*’s notion of redemption. I see *Fury Road* as the beginning of mapping out a new cultural understanding of embodied

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<sup>1</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (Londres: Routledge, 1993): 3.

<sup>2</sup> Purse, Lisa. *Contemporary Action Cinema*, Pg. 91.

female physical capacity by focusing on the affective response to active female bodies and how audiences are potentially moved by them.

**Motivation for Research:**

In 1872 Leland Stanford commissioned Eadweard Muybridge to capture a horse's motion in photographic form. This commission was to settle a public debate about whether or not all four of the horse's hooves leave the ground in a single moment of "unsupported transit" movement. The ability to prove that this moment does in fact happen during a horse's trot or gallop would require the ability to capture a horse's motion of forty feet per second in a still image. The proof was achieved using 12 cameras capturing still images at an unprecedented speed. The successive images were then painted onto a glass disc that, when spinning, gave the appearance of a moving image. The debate was settled and through this technology it was revealed that indeed all four of the horse's hooves leave the ground simultaneously during a gallop. These images of the galloping horse are often referred to as some of the first iterations of motion pictures.<sup>3</sup>

Motion or movement has always been a definitive element of visual media. As evidenced by the "galloping horse" story the attempt to capture motion is historically framed as the impetus behind the earliest forms of filmic images. The interplay between stillness and movement fascinated audiences in the earliest presentations of filmic images. "Time and again, they would astonish their audiences with their special

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<sup>3</sup> Pangratos Papacosta, "Muybridge, the Galloping Horse and revealed Errors in Art, " *International Journal of Art and Art History* 6.1 (2018): 15-26.

presentation technique. Initially, the brothers Lumière presented the moving image as a projected still, before the projectionist brought the image to life by cranking up the machine.”<sup>4</sup> The attempt to reproduce the most realistic and natural movement onscreen determined the 24fps standard.<sup>5</sup> Some of the most advanced and cutting-edge technology used in the film industry is designed to capture all the nuances of human movement which is then used to animate non-human characters.<sup>6</sup> Even the labels used to describe the medium through the years such as moving picture, motion picture, and eventually the abbreviated version “movies” all foreground the incorporation of movement with images.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, within discursive spaces of visual culture, the study and consideration of contemporary visual media cannot be complete without a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the image and movement. It is the essence of this relationship which lies at the heart of my project.

In the most broad sense this project explores the way bodies are *moved* by the visual meaning making processes within popular culture. In the most finite sense this

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<sup>4</sup> Eivind Røssaak, *Between stillness and motion: Film, photography, algorithms*. Amsterdam University Press, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> David Stump, "Frame rates and aspect ratios," *Digital Cinematography* (Routledge, 2014): 127-138. In the silent film era, filmmakers tended to shoot movies between 16fps and 20fps, which was why the motion appeared fast and jerky to audiences. Filmmakers typically shoot video at a minimum of 24fps because this is believed to be the lowest frame rate required to make motion appear natural to the human eye.

<sup>6</sup> Mo-Cap involves tracking the movement of physical objects and translating them into digital data. For instance, the movements of real actors can be matched to a 3D character model to ensure lifelike animations. This technique has been extensively used in numerous films, such as *Star Wars* (1999), *Lord of the Rings* (2002), *King Kong* (2005), *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2006), *Avatar* (2009), *Pacific Rim* (2018), and many others, where live-action footage is seamlessly blended with computer-generated imagery (CGI) to create a realistic and immersive visual experience. Wibowo, Mars Caroline, Sarwo Nugroho, and Agus Wibowo. "The Use of Motion Capture Technology in 3D Animation." *International Journal of Computing and Digital Systems* 14.1 (2023): 1-13.

<sup>7</sup> 1912 (perhaps 1908), shortened form of *moving picture* in the cinematographic sense (1896). As an adjective from 1913. *Movie star* attested from 1913. Another early name for it was *photoplay*. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/movie>.

project explores the corporeal affect of active female bodies in popular culture.

MacDougall suggests, in *The Corporeal Image*, that images have the ability to make meanings which “emerge from experience prior to their separation from physical encounters.”<sup>8</sup> This suggests that physical experience is entirely entangled in visual meaning making. MacDougall speaks to the tether between the viewing body and meaning making: “When we look purposefully, and when we think, we complicate the process of seeing enormously. We invest it with desires and heightened responses. The images we make become artifacts of this. They are, in a sense, mirrors of our bodies, replicating the whole of the body’s activity, with its physical movements, its shifting attention, and its conflicting impulses toward order and disorder.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore to explore and analyze the meanings being constructed through bodies and movement on screen necessitates looking into the *affective* potential of these representations. By affective potential I mean the images’ ability to stir within audiences a physical response to their representations. I consider the representations of moving bodies not simply for what linguistic, structural, and conceptual meanings are being made, but also their potential to produce meaning for and within the corporeal sight of the viewing body.

As MacDougall further states “meaning is produced by our whole bodies, not just by conscious thought. We see with our bodies, and any image we make carries the imprint of our bodies.”<sup>10</sup> Identifying the ways we “see with our bodies” or what I refer to

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<sup>8</sup> David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Chicago, Princeton University Press, 2005): 1.

<sup>9</sup> MacDougal, *Corporeal Image*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> MacDougal, *Corporeal Image*, 13.

as the corporeal affect of visual media is the central focus of this project. By corporeal I mean, having to do specifically with the physical and material aspects of the body; the body's physical ability as well as its limitations. And finally, by corporeal affect, I mean the physical responses encouraged and evoked by visual media images.

I feel that in order to properly identify and illustrate the corporeal affect of popular culture texts, I needed to begin my analysis with a representative subject that would offer the most accessible and expressly corporeal content; the Hollywood action film. This project will also identify the ways in which the corporeal affect of embodied representations of Hollywood action stars is complicated and problematized most explicitly by the intersection of race and gender. Therefore, the subject of my analysis will be female action stars in the contemporary Hollywood action genre. Within the wake of the *#metoo* movement, the role of the media in cultural production is more prevalent than ever. The current cultural attention to and excavation of sexual assault accounts and harassment has propelled conversations about the responsibility of the media and implications of representation to the forefront of media scholarship. I believe this has drawn specific attention to the corporeal experiences of women and this dissertation is my attempt to explore this cultural moment.

This specific subject matter requires approaching this project with a few different considerations in mind. The first of these considerations, defined above, is that of the corporeal affect of moving images; to consider that, in a general sense, visual media have the ability to not only capture movement but that they have the ability to articulate physical experience which transcends the more basic act of seeing. I distinguish

between visual media that *show* bodies moving versus visual media that *move* bodies and how affect is the elemental difference between showing and moving. Showing a female body in action has representational and visibility potential but this mode of presentation is still limited in its ability to evoke bodily empathy. In comparison, when a female body in action *moves* audiences, it creates an onscreen embodiment that evokes empathy between audiences and the female bodies onscreen. Empathy in this context is a crucial tool for female empowerment within real-world industries and cultures that have an established systemic history of exploiting, violating, and policing certain bodies.

The second consideration which must be addressed is how visual meaning making does not occur as a singular instance; rather an entire discourse of cultural artifacts and mediated texts inform representations within the contemporary media environment. This means incorporating textual analysis of materials outside of individual films which feature physical female embodiment. This secondary consideration of the project will operate to describe and define the atmosphere and conditions in which depictions of physical embodiment are facilitated, reinforced, and accepted into the popular culture epoch. The acceptance or believability of representations within popular culture is of particular interest to my project. I refer to the discourses of visual culture and systems of signification used to make these embodied representations believable for audiences as bodies being “made real.”<sup>11</sup> In order to

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<sup>11</sup> Influenced both by Kristen Warner’s concept of “plastic representation” and (perhaps affectionately) by Pinocchio’s notion of becoming a real boy. I use this concept of “making bodies real” to reference the

explore the ways these bodies are “made real” within popular media requires a combined analysis of the conventions of the popular action genre, alongside the mediated representations of action stars in popular culture.

Within the American action film lexicon certain bodies have been designated as representative bodies that signify physical ability on screen. I will discuss this further in my chapter on the history of the action genre, but this can be most readily observed by the tendency to label specific Hollywood stars “action stars,” such as Keanu Reeves, Tom Cruise, Jackie Chan, Jason Statham, to name a few. A quick internet search will result in a substantial list of identifiable Hollywood actors who are associated specifically with the action film genre. This label is curated and maintained through a coordinated star persona that is articulated and emphasized through an array of visual media such as behind-the-scenes footage, social media posts, interviews, and red-carpet appearances. These secondary and tertiary materials of specific stars coalesce in establishing their onscreen affective corporeality and their status as action stars. I will explore how Charlize Theron’s star persona has been curated to establish her status as an action star and how this informs her affective corporeality, and subsequently, her ability to move audiences.

### **Research Questions**

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processes of meaning making that construct certain action narratives as realist and certain bodies within them as existing both within and outside the constructed world of the films. I will explicate this further in chapter 2 but the concept will be used to distinguish between a plastic representation which has no transitional meaning outside of the representational space in which it exists versus the affective corporeality of certain bodies as having the capacity outside of their representational spaces to physically perform the actions and stunts depicted by action film archetypes.

Drawing a connection between the environment of visual culture that produces representations of active female bodies and the visual culture of the viewing bodies of the audience is the broad goal of this project. “Visual knowledge (as well as other forms of knowledge) provides one of our primary means of comprehending the experience of other people.”<sup>12</sup> What this quote suggests within the context of this dissertation is that visual media and the acts of visual meaning making have epistemological application which underlines the impact and influence these representations have on the social and cultural comprehension of the female body. In short, this dissertation identifies the ways these visual representations contribute to a social understanding of female embodiment.

Using the concepts of visual meaning making and corporeal affect this project attempts to answer these questions: How are physical strength, ability, precision, dexterity, and power embodied in the depictions of active female bodies on screen? A distinction from representations that deal with narrative and identity—something like what the Bechdel test would measure – I will instead analyze the affective corporeality of active female bodies. By affective corporeality I mean, how the material body is articulated and, through that articulation, how audiences are encouraged to feel with and about the material body on screen. Utilizing close textual analysis and speaking into spaces of cinematic affect, genre, and representation I will analyze cinematic depictions that rely on the affective qualities of the corporeal and physical ability of the female body. I will also analyze the ways specific actors utilize a range of media to curate a

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<sup>12</sup> MacDougal, *Corporeal Image*, 5-6.

perception of their bodies as signifiers of physical strength, power, and corporeality within *and* outside of their filmic representations. I will illustrate how this functions to “make their bodies real” primarily in the context of Hollywood action films but also within the social and cultural context of contemporary society.

### **Why Film?**

As Roland Barthes states, any system of signs can be understood as a language or speech. “Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing, they call for a lexis. We shall therefore take language, discourse, speech etc., to mean any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual.”<sup>13</sup> Film can be understood as a visual unit or synthesis which then can be articulated through the language of cinema. “The semiotic notion that language and other systems of signification (e.g., visual or iconic systems) produce signs, whose meanings are established by specific codes, was quickly seen as relevant to cinema and, in particular, capable of explaining how the images of woman was constructed by the codes of cinematic representation.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, how female bodies are articulated and understood in culture is constructed and reiterated on screen and vice versa.

I look to popular film for my specific case studies for a number of reasons. My background in film studies has led me to see film as a site of normative challenges, particularly given the accessibility and status of Hollywood films, but films consist of a particular concentration of specific representations. MacDougall captures the potential

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<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1957): 95.

<sup>14</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984): 4.

films offer us: “Films allow us to go beyond the culturally prescribed limits and glimpse the possibility of being more than we are. They stretch the boundaries of our consciousness and create affinities with bodies other than our own.”<sup>15</sup> Each part of this quote illustrates the ways in which I intend to apply the results of my analysis and speaks to the larger implications of this project. For instance, the female body has a history in visual culture as being a site of violence, a site of male pleasure, and a site of reproduction and the action genre in particular has a representative history which both reinforces and contains the female body. Lisa Purse refers to this in her book *Contemporary Action Cinema* arguing that the naturalized abilities of male action heroes “reveals a willful blindness to this cinema’s most basic conventions, which seems driven by an explicitly gendered double standard according to which women can only ever be interlopers-in-action.”<sup>16</sup> However, looking to MacDougall’s description of film, do films also offer a way out of these prescribed limitations for certain female bodies? When the action film space positions female bodies as the central characters it is valid to consider the ways that these films encourage affinity for their bodies through affective corporeality.

As I will illustrate in the following chapters, the conventions and language of film does in fact encourage audiences to create affinities with bodies other than our own. However, the bodies that we are encouraged to have affinity for have a long-sustained history of being white straight male bodies which means that the processes of signification and visual meaning making are also stretched to the very limits of their

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<sup>15</sup> MacDougall, *Corporeal Image*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Purse. *Contemporary Action Cinema*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2011): 76.

potential within the Hollywood action genre. This is another reason for my choice of subject matter for this project as the Hollywood action film will reveal both the potential of these representations as well as their exact limits for certain bodies. These films illustrate the ways in which certain bodies are invited to embody physical corporeal ability or in other words *capacitated* in these spaces. In order to connect these depictions to the cultural moment in which female bodies exist in a society embattled with systemic gender violence, bio and necropolitics, I also illustrate the limitations for certain bodies within the action genre.

The action film genre itself serves as an exceptionally fertile ground for exploring the visual culture of the female body due to its investment in and reliance on the active body. “This rather emphatic mode of presenting the body in action is a staple of contemporary action cinema...the physical experiences of the hero are central to the action film’s narrative, mapped out and developed in significant part in action sequences that articulate the hero’s physical narrative of becoming.”<sup>17</sup> This body-centeredness of the action genre not only reveals the embedded gendered notions of physicality and violence but also the cultural perceptions of certain bodies as signifiers of physical embodiment.

A large majority of the scholarship centered on the action heroine or active female hero is concerned primarily with visibility and representation. While this is vital to an understanding of the hegemonic negotiations of gender, agency and the limitations

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<sup>17</sup> Purse. *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 37.

and potential for women in the action genre, I think this is equally important to consider the affective nature of these representations; especially within a genre that has a history of objectifying, containing, and sidelining female identified characters. In fact, a majority of these female action roles served as an onscreen designation for non-masculine identifiers, shoring up the traditionally masculine traits of their leading male counterparts. Consider for example, the countless distribution posters for action thrillers featuring a man in a suit with his female companion in tow wearing an evening gown and heels.



Figure 1.1 Poster for The Adjustment Bureau (2011).



Figure Error! No text of specified style in document.-

1.2 Poster for Quantum of Solace (2008).

However, representations of seemingly empowered female action heroes have seen vast changes and at increasingly encouraging rates in contemporary Hollywood cinema. White women are taking up a more prominent space in both the availability of roles for active female characters as well as considerable strides in box office significance with films like *Mad Max Fury Road* (2015), *Wonder Woman* (2017), and *Black Widow* (2021). However, these empowered characters and their blockbuster

success is still met with considerable backlash from concentrated audiences such as men's rights groups and action film fans with conservative views on gender representation. The current landscape for female action heroes, the heightened scrutiny of Hollywood and its misogynistic practices in the form of the #metoo and #askhermore campaigns, along with a more agentic representation of active female bodies requires looking beyond the representative properties of these archetypes in order to properly consider their social, political, and cultural significance. This type of consideration requires a fresh approach to female action archetypes that broaches the complex ways the films and characters are engaging audiences. In order to address the contemporary political climate, audience sensibilities, and generic modes and expectations, my analysis of these contemporary female archetypes in the action genre will focus on corporeality and affect. This approach will give me the ability to engage directly with previous research on action heroines while also considering the contemporary socio-political climate that informs the visual culture of the female body onscreen. I wish to add a layer of analysis to the existing representational model which is concerned with the affective properties of these archetypes within a cultural discourse already preoccupied with the corporeal experiences of (mostly white) female bodies.

Now, I am not the first to consider the phenomenon of bodily spectacle and affect within the context of the active female body, Lisa Purse has done extensive work on the action film genre building off of Tasker and Dyer's research in this area. While Purse had confidence in the progression of the female action hero in contemporary action films there was not an overwhelming pool of representations available in 2011. Her central case studies that consider affect and corporeality are not all specifically action

films in the generic tradition but according to Purse they offer something different in the way of violent female characters. “The active women in films like *Monster* (2003), *Hard Candy* (2005), and *The Brave One* (2007) are angry transgressors, their behaviours and actions locating them outside of dominant social norms, as well as outside mainstream codes of cinematic female representation. What is clear is that this is a contemporary moment in which conflicting representational impulses are at work. Set in opposition to dominant, “sanctioned” depictions of active femininity...are alternative images of the active woman that are developed, primarily, within films that hover on the margins of the mainstream.”<sup>18</sup> However, in the last decade these types of active women *have* moved into mainstream spaces.

In recent years due to its preoccupation with blockbuster success in the form of comic book superhero narratives Hollywood has produced some of the highest grossing, widely circulated, and recognizable representations of active female heroes than the previous century of cinema. Looking at this cycle as a microcosm of the larger representative space we can visibly see this progression away from a post-feminist tendency to objectify active female bodies. We can almost trace the recognition of what reads now as an outdated mode of representation in the circulating memes illustrating *Black Widow*’s journey to a stand-alone feature film.

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<sup>18</sup> Purse. *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 86.



Figure 1.3: Black Widow compilation (2010-2018)



Figure 1.4: Black Widow Marvel Fans IG

Also, due in part to the affordances of streaming services alongside traditional distribution practices, the number of texts featuring leading active white female bodies both in film and television is unprecedented. These more recent films and the prominence of the active female body in current trends of the action film require further consideration working within the framework of Tasker, Dyer, and Purse in order to establish any significant shifts in the genre's presentation of active female bodies. Therefore, it is worth analyzing these texts for what potential freedoms and concessions are being made within the current cycle of active female bodies. Have we successfully moved past the post-feminist action babe of the 2000s?<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Rikke Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema, 1970-2006*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).

The way I approach this material is by looking at the most recent cycle of female action films within the context of the action film genre and considering how the female body is positioned with regard to corporeal affect. While narrative representation is an important element of representational analysis it does not directly confront the genre's preoccupation with the body as spectacle nor the traditions and conventions that have rendered certain bodies as capacitated and other bodies as debilitated, either through gender, race, or ability. The action genre of the 1980's--which has been the primary template for the subsequent action films over the last few decades--cultivated a type of masculinity that was accompanied by a specific bodily presentation.

Whilst the narratives of these films, as with sub-genres such as the mythological epic, were driven by action, they also offered a set of visual pleasures focused on the display of the male body. Indeed it is the emphasis on *action* in these films which both legitimates, through the affirmation of an active understanding of masculinity, and provides a narrative justification for such physical display.<sup>20</sup>

This resulted in the association of the action film with the capacitated body and spectacle. The Hollywood action film's presentation of "action as display through the spectacular bodies of its muscular stars," was not necessarily limited to gender; however, the political and historical influences of the genre impacted women's incorporation into the genre in ways that can be directly linked to essentialist notions of masculine/feminine bodies. Therefore, when considering the impact of action films starring female characters it is crucial not only to consider their narrative, representative, and generic qualities but to consider the films' affective qualities and female action figures' presentation as affective corporeal bodies.

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<sup>20</sup> Yvonne Tasker, "Introduction: Gender and the action cinema," in Yvonne Tasker (ed.) *The Action and Adventure Cinema* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004): 2.

## Methodology

“Seeing is not understanding”<sup>21</sup> This is the role of textual analysis as a method for my research, affording me a method for *understanding* what I am seeing and also what is seen in a given culture. Textual analysis as a method when applied to certain cultural artifacts, such as film, can reveal the narrative tropes, cinematic language, and symbolic meanings that constitute how reality is shaped and stories are told within a specific culture.

Since I analyze these films through textual analysis the site of the image is incredibly relevant to this project. It is at the site of the image through the compositional modality that considerations of looking itself as a form of power, as well as *who* gets to look and *at what*, are expressed. This includes interactions with the lineage of concepts such as the male gaze more specifically, and feminist film theory more broadly. However, my intentions to study the female body as it is constructed through moving images will also be concerned with the affective experience of the spectator as it is associated with these mediated images. “It is now possible to say that these processes of visual categorisation can be both representational – by giving specific meanings to images – and non-representational – by producing particular experiences from images.”<sup>22</sup> What Rose articulates here as the intersection of perception and experience

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<sup>21</sup>Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 22.

<sup>22</sup>Gillian Rose *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE, 2007): 14.

is precisely the focus of my analysis; to consider the potential of affective corporeality expressed through mediated representations.

For all their theoretical differences, however, it could be argued that theories of both representation and affect have one thing in common: a commitment to a close engagement with specific images. Whether carefully unpacking layers of representational references, or sensitively responding to corporeal affects, all the scholars discussed so far take a very attentive stance towards their materials.<sup>23</sup>

My representational analysis also incorporates an analysis of the conditions of production as manifested in the social modality and the compositional modality of the site of production. The compositional modality of production according to Rose categorizes images based on the use of shared features and components of the image. This informs my approach to these images as belonging to a specific genre, and that they are subject to the generic conventions which shape the meanings, representations, and effects of those images. I also employ a methodological consideration of the site of the audience as the site of the affective experience of the mediated images. Utilizing theories such as affect, feminist film theory, cinematic affect, and body genres, I rely on textual analysis of the image to inform what potential affective pleasures or sensations are encouraged through the images themselves.

As a subject of analysis texts according to Stuart Hall (1975) are “literary and visual constructs, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in its widest sense.”<sup>24</sup> Textual analysis as a

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<sup>23</sup> Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage/Open University, 1997): 17.

method for film theory uses films as its texts to consider the relationships between media and the social and cultural construction of reality. “From this perspective, texts are thought to provide traces of socially constructed reality which may be understood by considering words concepts, ideas, themes and issues that reside in texts as they are considered within a particular cultural context.”<sup>25</sup> Textual analysis removes the assumed naturalness, assumed authority of images, and visual language to reposition the text as a singular iteration within a larger cultural and political structure. Textual analysis as a method also affords me the ability to deconstruct the hypermediated often overdetermined meanings, symbols, and ideological structures of cultural texts.

The social and cultural context in which an image (specifically a pop culture image) is produced becomes that much more significant when analyzing images of marginalized subjects because the construction of the social world more often reflects and reinforces dominant ideologies. Reading images for the interrogation of those social constructs is a prominent function of feminist film theory. “When we do textual analysis we evaluate the many meanings found in texts and we try to understand how written, visual and spoken language helps us to create our social realities. Rather than only judging the strengths, weaknesses, accuracy or inaccuracy of texts, qualitative researchers look at the social practices, representations, assumptions, and stories about our lives that are revealed in those texts.”<sup>26</sup> Using textual analysis as my

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<sup>25</sup> Bonnie Brennen, *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2017): 204.

<sup>26</sup> Brennen, *Qualitative Research*, 205.

methodology I examine the construction of gender relations and the resulting notions of affective corporeality and capacity for female bodies.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

Chapter two delves into the background and foundational aspects of the theories used in my approach to the case studies. The chapter begins by contextualizing the historical moments of feminist film theory that are relevant to this project, specifically identifying the significant moments in which feminist film theory called for a move beyond Mulvey's concept of the gaze towards considerations of the connections between the viewing body and the bodies on screen. This leads organically into my turn towards cinematic affect and genre theory as foundational theories for my analysis. The chapter concludes by identifying and defining the more nuanced theories and concepts used in my analysis. This section defines corporeality, plastic representation, and capacity, and then illustrates the ways these concepts are engaged in the case studies.

Chapter three gives a detailed account of the history and background of gender in the action genre. Beginning with a broad overview of the action genre, chapter three focuses on the socio-cultural moments that have established the enduring tropes and conventions of the action genre. Chapter three establishes the historical evolution of the action genre specifically as it pertains to the presentation of gendered bodies. Beginning with the standard 'hardbody films' and concluding with the 'action babe' trope, chapter three illustrates the action genre's preoccupation with the body as spectacle and how this convention has resulted in specific presentations of gendered bodies.

Chapter four is a categorical analysis of the current cycles of action films featuring female leads. Chapter 4 defines these categories and their particularities in comparison to action films writ large as well as the narrative conventions specific to the archetypes that define their designation. While I do not argue that these categories are fixed or static—in fact, many of the forms and conventions overlap a great deal – I do argue that the similarities in narrative and cinematic patterns warrants this type of categorization for a few reasons. Firstly, because it speaks to the scope of the project of women in action films and secondly, that it will facilitate a more in-depth analysis of the affective corporeal capacities within specific generic contexts. The three categories of archetypes I have identified are Female Avengers or Vigilantes, Female Agents and Assassins, and Female Warriors or Superheroes. Each of these archetypes and narrative models references the broader generic conventions of the action genre as well as the representational problematics for female bodies in mainstream cinema. The analysis in chapter 4 identifies the specific ways in which affective capacity is reinforced or limited depending on the archetype.

Chapter five is a more specific case study that combines the analysis of individual texts with the curated persona of a designated female Hollywood action star, Charlize Theron. The purpose of this chapter is to speak into the spaces that construct meaning both within representational spaces and within social and cultural spaces. Charlize Theron has been a significant icon associated with the action film genre going back to roles such as Aeon Flux (2005) and culminating in many ways in her role as Andy in Netflix's *The Old Guard* (2020) making her an ideal case study due to do her

consistency in leading roles, specifically contemporary action films, for nearly 20 years. Theron is represented in every category I have identified in the new Hollywood action cinema cycle: The Agent/Assassin in *Atomic Blonde* (2017), both The Warrior and Superhero in *The Old Guard* (2020) and *Hancock* (2008), and the Avenger/Vigilante in *Mad Max Fury Road* (2015). Therefore, this chapter focuses on three of these action films starring Theron, *Mad Max Fury Road*, *The Old Guard* and *Atomic Blonde*. In this chapter my analysis includes both the films and the secondary material circulated primarily on social media and entertainment news. Such materials include behind-the-scenes footage, box office returns, press interviews, stunt production footage, and personal training regimens. I use these materials to articulate the ways Theron's body is capacitated and 'made real' as a cultural signifier of the action star.

As a conclusion Chapter six first elucidates the analysis of the case studies from chapters four and five and considers the significance of Charlize Theron's impact on the action genre. I then identify future research spaces such as important upcoming texts within the action genre and new or as of yet unrealized archetypes within cinema. This chapter also discusses the influence of cinematic technologies on corporeal affect and details the delicate relationship between special effects and affective capacity. This chapter also discusses the significant potential of using affective corporeal analysis outside the action film genre. I explore the possibilities for expanding this approach to depictions of specifically corporeal experiences that transcend genres but are specific to certain bodies – such as rape and birth – as a way to real world experiences within representational mediums.



## Chapter 2

### Historical framing of Feminist Film Theory:

The influence of semiotics and structuralism on film determined the ways in which visual (iconic) mediums are studied.<sup>27</sup> The form or medium of the text acts as the structural system in which the text is expressing signs and language.<sup>28</sup> Therefore the parameters of the research are defined by the form in which the media text takes shape such as television, film, music video, video games etc. Even postmodernist films speak directly to the referential structure of which they are positioned against. Therefore, the meaning making, literacy, and analysis in film theory are all positioned within the system of signs and symbols of cinematic language and the subsequent practices of visual storytelling. Film theory draws on other methods and theoretical disciplines such as textual analysis, psychoanalysis, and linguistics to organize the meanings constructed within cinematic language.

Because cinematic language is colonial and patriarchal in its most fundamental sense<sup>29</sup> to study a marginalized identity would require a critical approach to the cinematic language system in order to recognize the limitations set on certain signifying practices by the system itself. This is one of the limitations of film theory that becomes evident when the analysis is reduced to what is or can be represented, versus what is not or cannot be represented because it does not consider the larger institutional investment in maintaining the dominant ideological system. This is the precise

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<sup>27</sup> Ellen Seiter, "Semiotics, Structuralism, and Television" *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism 2* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1987): 31-66.

<sup>28</sup> Arthur A. Berger, *Cultural Criticism: A Primer of Key Concepts. Foundations of Popular Culture*, Vol. 4. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1995).

<sup>29</sup> Laura Mulvey. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, In *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology* edited by Scott MacKenzie, 359-370. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

intersection in which feminist film theory enters and engages in film theory proper. Feminist film theory provides an approach and ways to articulate a critique of the cinematic language system and its subsequent representational limitations.

In the early days of cinema, feminist film theory was essentially nonexistent since this period correlates with more fundamental feminist struggles like the right to vote, access to contraceptives, enter the workforce, own property, or other First-Wave considerations. However, the period beginning around second wave feminism (the 1960s) ushered in new thought about women and media, expanding the current field of film studies into film and television studies.

As such, feminist approaches to film and television were vital to the expansion of the discipline throughout the 1970s, and multiple books, journals, conferences, and film festivals were increasingly devoted to topics exploring gender in the media. Recall that much early film theory was comprised of basic auteur and genre approaches; as such, a generation of second wave feminist film scholars began to explore gender in connection to those approaches. Pioneering female film directors like Lois Weber, Alice Guy-Blaché, Dorothy Arzner, and Ida Lupino were rescued from the dustbin of (male-written) film history, as feminist film theorists began to ask questions like “What does it mean to be a female auteur?”<sup>30</sup>

As the scholarship around film and television grew, feminist film scholars began to look for marginalized voices within the representations onscreen as well as within the industries of film and television. Other film and television scholars turned their attention to representation within genre, identifying the ways that certain genres shore up patriarchal values and dominant narratives about gender. These analyses resulted in critical contributions to film theory in that they identified patterns in the signification

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<sup>30</sup> Harry Benshoff, *Film and Television Analysis: An Introduction to Methods, Theories, and Approaches* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015): 151.

practices of Hollywood cinema which was in many ways very restrictive for representations of women. For example:

... women's stereotyped roles in Hollywood film can often be easily described in terms of the virgin/whore dichotomy ... this split is central to Western culture and Christianity in general; it tends to reduce a woman's subjectivity onto a singular aspect of her being – her sexuality. As this virgin/whore discourse frames and shapes femininity, women are either “good girls” who abstain from sex (the virgin, the Madonna, or the Mother whose sexuality is contained and controlled by patriarchal structures like the church and the family), or they are the “bad girls” who are sexually active (the whore, the femme fatale, the “tragic mulatto”). In Hollywood genre filmmaking, virgins range from the sheriff's wife or farmer's daughter in the western to the just-married heroine of the classical horror film. The whores in both of those genres, respectively, are the saloon keeper with a heart of gold (a Hollywood euphemism for prostitute), or else countless sexualized monsters like those found in *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) or *Species* (1995)” (Benshoff, p.152). This type of analysis which looks at the patterns of gender (and other) stereotypes resulted in a new tradition of analysis referred to as ‘image analysis’ which was then applied to media more broadly. Image analysis is a type of structuralist content analysis “designed to reveal persistent patterns and character motifs within Hollywood filmmaking.”<sup>31</sup>

General film theory would approach the subject of female embodiment in action film through image analysis looking at female embodiment as expressed in the action film genre and how it speaks to other expressions of embodiment within that same genre. Once the structures that define the genre are identified they are laid on top of the representational analysis to tease out where the rules for the genre are constricting for certain representations and where they offer potential freedoms. Female embodiment is then defined and assessed as it appears in the genre. The goal of the research is to analyze the expression of female embodiment for the genre writ large in order to speak into those generic spaces and identify shifts or modes within the genre which can then

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<sup>31</sup> Benshoff, *Film and Television Analysis*, 153.

be traced through the genre like a map of the hegemonic negotiations which have defined action cinema.

Feminist film theory expands the film theory approach by implementing a consideration of spectatorship in relation to female embodiment. Drawing on theorists such as Mary Ann Doane and Judith Mayne, feminist film theory considers the complications within female spectatorship and subjectivity. These practices of looking for female spectators examine the impossible position of the female spectator in reference to the iconic system of signs used to signify female subjectivity (or the absence of such). "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."<sup>32</sup> However, the analysis of the interaction of female spectatorship still centers the film text and the codified system of signification in cinematic language.

Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in 1975 initiated a critical turn in the notion of spectatorship within feminist film theory. Subsequently, came a collection of theories and theorists focused on the experiential connection between the viewers' bodies and the bodies on-screen. The first substantial iteration of this phenomenon is Linda Williams' *Film Bodies*.<sup>33</sup> In this essay Williams identifies first the connection between the mass element of film and the association of specific genres as

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<sup>32</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator." *Screen* 23.3-4 (1982): 78.

<sup>33</sup> Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44(4), (Summer, 1991): 2-13.

representative of that “low” art perception residing in the more traditional approaches to mass and popular cultures. She asserts that certain genres get labeled as “low” forms of the art of film such as the horror film, melodrama and pornography. The melodrama being directly associated with women through both spectatorship and content definitely resonates with the previously mentioned association of ‘mass’ and ‘masses’ to low *and* to woman. This is still relevant in contemporary cinema when considering how certain genres in mainstream film industry are marketed, evidenced by monikers such as: “chick flicks,” “rom com,” and “scream queens.” Williams’ essay also argues that these three genres in particular – horror, melodrama and pornography – encourage a bodily response or reaction to the films they produce.

Alone or in combination, heavy doses of sex, violence, and emotion are dismissed by one faction or another as having no logic or reason beyond their power to excite. Gratuitous sex, gratuitous violence and terror, gratuitous emotion are frequent epithets hurled at the phenomenon of the “sensational” in pornography, horror, and melodrama...there may be some value in thinking about the form, function, and system of seemingly gratuitous excesses in these three genres. For if, as it seems, sex violence and emotion are fundamental elements of the sensational effects of these three types of films, the designation “gratuitous” is itself gratuitous...By thinking comparatively about all three “gross” and sensational film body genres we might be able to get beyond the mere fact of sensation to explore its system and structure as well as its effects on the bodies of spectators.<sup>34</sup>

Williams’ analysis of these genres’ connection to a bodily response in the act of viewing has a substantial influence on future analysis of corporeal experiences as they are depicted within a genre already imbued with this type of affective quality such as birth and rape in the horror film, or sex in the contemporary melodrama. The affective quality of the action genre organically positions action film as a body genre in accordance with

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<sup>34</sup> Williams, “Film Bodies,” 3.

Williams's definition. This will be explored in detail in the Action Genre section of this dissertation which illustrates action film's inclusion in body genres using Williams' distinctions of form, function, and system as a body genre. This is followed by an analysis of the affective potential for the female action hero archetypes within a genre categorized as masculine and featuring a transcendental signified male point of view.

Following, 'Body Genres,'<sup>35</sup> Carol Clover's essay on the narrative and function of female bodies in the horror film further expanded the feminist film theory scope of genre, ways of seeing, and identification with onscreen subjectivities.

Needless to say, horror movies spend a lot of time looking at women, and in first-person ways that do indeed seem well described by Mulvey's "sadistic-voyeuristic" gaze. But the story does not end there. A standard horror format calls for a variety of positions and character sympathies in the early phases of the story, but, as the plot goes on, a consolidation at both levels (story and cinematography), and in the final phase a fairly tight organization around the functions of victim and hero (which may be collapsed into one figure or, alternatively, split into many).<sup>36</sup>

Clover's assessment of the gender dimensions of narrative in genre functions as a framework informing analytical patterns and motifs present when a woman is the central character in an action genre film. She suggests that the generic conventions are not only recognizable and categorical but that they are continuously recycled.

The very fact that the cinematic conventions of horror are so easily and so often parodied would seem to suggest that, individual variation notwithstanding, its basic structures of apperception are fixed and fundamental. The same is true of the stories they tell. Students of folklore or early literature recognize in horror the hallmarks of oral narrative: the free exchange of themes and motifs, the archetypal characters and situations, the accumulation of sequels, remakes, imitations. This is a field in which there is in some sense no original, no real or right text, but only variants; a world in which, therefore, the meaning of the individual example lies outside itself. The "art" of the horror film, like the "art" of

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<sup>35</sup> Williams, "Film Bodies."

<sup>36</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (London: BR, 1992): 8.

pornography, is to a very large extent the art of rendition or performance, and it is understood as such by the competent audience.<sup>37</sup>

This is also the case for action films and their formulaic genre elements in accordance with their impact on female action archetypes.

Clover's work on horror unpacks how audiences are inclined to identify with these characters which functions to inform how that manifests in the context of a female hero in an action film. "So too horror's cast of characters—or, more properly, its cast of functions or subject positions. Like the low-mythic tradition of which it is a part, horror is organized around functions that are understood to preexist and constitute character."<sup>38</sup> Clover's specific attention to the female body and identification within the horror film genre informs analyses of sex, rape, and birth as well as this dissertation's focus on female bodies in action genres. Specifically, for action films, the ways in which the conventions of the action genre encourage identification with the central action heroes and if or how those conventions shift when the central character is a female. This following section will discuss the contributions to feminist film theory pertaining specifically to affect.

### **Cinematic Affect and Genre:**

Affect in its most basic understanding can be described as a visceral, pre-subjective charge, force, or vibration that precedes emotional states.<sup>39</sup> As for a definition, affect can be defined as the social forces we might encounter that trigger

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<sup>37</sup> Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, 10-11.

<sup>38</sup> Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, 12.

<sup>39</sup> M.A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams, "Social cognition and attitudes." *Psychology* (Essex, UK: Pearson Education, 2004): 646-677.

certain bodies to respond in a certain way; an unconscious experience of intensity. As a theory, affect is an attempt to consider or represent that which is structurally unrepresentable. It is also an attention to the material aspects of our bodies and the world around us within contexts such as human nature and social institutions. All of these aspects of affect inform how it can be taken up as an analytical tool for addressing embodied responses to specific embodied representations in media.

The Affective Turn came in the mid 90s largely from philosophers Brian Masumi and Eve Sedgwick. Affect Theory can in part be seen as a move away from the linguistic turn of the mid 20th century, linguistics being the idea that language was the primary way we understand the world and so an engagement with how language is constructed, used, and changes should be fundamental to theories about human nature or social institutions. Affect Theory can be seen as bringing biology, the material world, and the body back into the picture and uniting science, culture, and philosophy.

In Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual*, a central text to the affective turn, Massumi views the body and media such as television, film, and the Internet, as cultural formations that operate on multiple registers of sensation beyond the reach of the reading techniques founded on the standard rhetorical and semiotic models of the linguistic turn. Sedgwick, however, thinks of affect theory as overcoming the dualistic divide between mind and body but starts by looking at how we're affected by language, Sedgwick begins with a discussion on performative utterances which argues that language does not just describe the world but also creates the world. To illustrate this phenomenon Sedgwick points to the distinctions between phrases like "the chair is red"

to utterances like “I promise,” “I name,” or “I give to you.” The latter have an affective quality on the world. They actually *do* something, suggesting that language itself has an affect on the world it creates. Sedgwick’s book also considers affect in the context of sexuality, as in, is sexuality a drive or an affect.

Within the context of film theory, affect has previously been a lens through which film theorists address the sensational bodily responses to specific genres. Williams, for example, suggests that the preoccupation with bodily affective properties of certain genres is the reason why those genres are classified as “low” or as she terms “gross” while others are considered classical or realist style Hollywood narratives. According to Williams these genres associated with the spectacle of the body encourage spectators to experience the sensational bodily expressions through a mimicry of the on-screen bodies e.g., crying along with actors during intense emotional performances, an elevated heartbeat when a terrified character walks into a dark house, or wincing in pain when a character is injured on-screen. Affect in this same application, can be used to address the affective powers of the body as expressed through corporeality—in this case, the embodied female action hero as expressed through acts of violence, physical mastery and physical spectacle.

Active female bodies within the conventions of the action genre’s preoccupation with spectacle are situated within a precarious system of signification. In order to consider these representations beyond their semiological meaning the concept of cinematic corporeal affect analyzes the presentation of physical embodiment. The

affective properties of these images alongside their representational properties intersects the visual pleasures of these images with their cultural significance.

Expanding on the functional application of affect, Elena del Rio recounts the need to move beyond the basic representational model in feminist film theory in her book *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection*.

But the representational model proved either unwilling or insufficient to address the way in which the experience of the moving image can at times escape binary determinations and established signifying codes. Driven by notions of representation, semiotic, psychoanalytic, and ideological analyses unwittingly furthered oppositional binaries that the cinema itself has consistently proven quite capable of undoing, binaries such as reality/illusion, subject/object, thought/emotion, activity/passivity, and so on. The imposition of a totalizing picture of reality as structured meaning carried out by the representational approach left little, if anything, to the unstructured sensations that are likewise set in motion in the film-viewing experience.<sup>40</sup>

Film's unique ability to undo these binaries and tap into unstructured spaces is essential to any analysis of contemporary representations of women in the action genre. Many film and visual culture scholars have explored the capacities of cinematic affect such as Vivian Sobchack, Teresa Rizzo, Laura Marks, Martine Beugnet, Elena del Rio, and through this scholarship cinematic affect provides the perfect lens with which to examine the affective quality of female action heroes. This body of work contends that any experience of cinematic spectatorship is an embodied experience. For Vivian Sobchack the affective experience of the spectator is a way to break from the tradition

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<sup>40</sup> Elena del Río, "Cinema and the Affective-Performative," *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh, 2008), 2.

of reading representation for sexual objectification and also brings into the fold the materiality of the filmic apparatus.

Thinking about film through such notions as the lived-body (applied to both film and spectator), the embodied and synesthetic nature of perception, the reversibility of perception and expression, and the material and sensuous operations of the technological film apparatus, *The Address of the Eye* sought to overcome, on the one hand, the sexual objectification performed by psychoanalytic film theory and, on the other hand, the reifying approach to existence practiced within the Marxist model<sup>41</sup>

In her book *Deleuze and Film: A Feminist Introduction* Teresa Rizzo also discusses how feminist scholars have taken up Deleuze's work and how "it goes beyond questions of representation in order to explore the ways in which sexuality, the body, identity and subjectivity are decomposed and recomposed with different encounters and according to different kinds of connections."<sup>42</sup> Rizzo's main argument is that the body of the film viewer is affectively connected to the bodies on-screen and this affective quality is amplified in the context of Williams' body genres; horror, melodrama and, as Rizzo determines, science-fiction. Expanding on this categorization, action films are inherently situated within body genres due to their reliance on display, spectacle, and affect, especially when constructing images of the action star as a corporeal body on-screen.

Jennifer Barker's *The Tactile Eye: Touch and The Cinematic Experience*, is foundational in any analysis of the ways in which the spectator's body is affectively

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<sup>41</sup> del Rio, "Cinema and the Affective-Performative," 3.

<sup>42</sup> Teresa Rizzo, *Deleuze and Film: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 2012): 3.

activated by the movements and actions of the bodies on-screen.<sup>43</sup> Barker applies a phenomenological approach to the relationship between the body of the viewer and the film. In her book, Barker outlines three locations within the body (which she also applies to the cinematic apparatus) that are engaged during the viewing experience of cinematic images. The three locations she identifies are skin, muscle, and viscera, skin being the initial bodily reaction on the surface of the body, muscle being the next layer engaging with movements of the body, and viscera being the deepest layer having to do with breathing, pulse, and bodily fluids. She concludes by introducing a concept that incorporates all three – inspiration.

According to Steen Christiansen, “Expression and perception converge in affect,”<sup>44</sup> therefore, the affective quality of these archetypes is tethered to the perception of female physical power and mastery. For instance, do audiences perceive these representations as affective, or in other words, are audiences encouraged through the cinematic presentation of action films to feel that these characters are able to perform the physical exertions displayed in these films? How is affect determined both by gender and genre in a visual culture sense and by institutions of domination and power in a cultural sense? Just as science-fiction and action genres were not initially explored by Linda Williams as body genres but have very obvious ties to the material world and corporeal expression, the connections between the screen body and the body of the

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<sup>43</sup> Jennifer L. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Steen Ledet Christiansen, “Mediating Potency and Fear: Action Movies’ Affect.” *Cultural Studies* 32:1 (2018): 43-62.

spectator naturally reveal themselves in the depictions of contemporary female action heroes due to their corporeality and affective potential. The current research on cinematic affect will assist in the identification of potential affective qualities of contemporary female action archetypes.

### **Capacity & Corporeality**

Capacity is utilized as a measure of the affective ability of the body. The body's potential, in action cinema spaces, to signify and express force, dexterity, control, command, and power. If we maintain that Foucault's notion of biopower has a material dimension, then capacity can function as a measure of that materiality in mediated depictions of active bodies. Capacity can be defined in this context as an invitation to embodiment. Which bodies are invited to embody strength, power, and physical ability and to what extent is that invitation sustained through the narrative and generic notions of gender and physical ability. In this aspect capacity will also help to define the function of whiteness and how the assemblages of hegemony, race, power, and ability are entangled in institutions of signification which designate certain bodies as de-capacitated and other bodies as capacitated within those systems of power. In these spaces and for these archetypes capacity speaks into the binary and racialized construction of dis/ability which consequently manifests in the western visual culture of meaning making through the construction of images on-screen, resulting in a primarily white female presentation of bodily capacity.

Capacity in the context of female embodiment onscreen being: are we encouraged to believe that her body is capable of physical expressions of power, strength and violence, and if so, how are the larger structures of gender, race and ability informing those notions of capability? Capacity functions as a measure of how the text encourages or discourages female physical embodiment through narrative and cinematic devices. Capacity operates as a way to read these bodies as being invited to take up space in the action genre in ways that embody physical power and control within an industry context as well as a cinematic, visual, and cultural context. Therefore, capacity becomes an essential analytical factor when considering the film industry's deeply ingrained history of misogynistic treatment towards women, both on and off screen. My use of the term capacity as an invitation to embodiment within patriarchal structures of power was inspired by Jasbir Puar's definition of capacity in her book *The Right To Maim*. Puar utilizes the term capacity as a way to describe how structures of power designate certain bodies as disposable and others as mobilized.

I situate disability in relation to concepts such as neoliberal and affective capacitation, debilitation, and slow death... Second, I want to explore the potential of affective tendencies to inform these assemblages of debility, capacity, and disability, noting that capacity is a key word of affective theorizing that can be generative when situated within the political economies of control societies.<sup>45</sup>

It is Puar's mobilization of the term capacity in the context of affective theorizing that is of particular interest to me. The trajectory of the white female body on-screen from a passive Grace Kelly explored Mulvey's *Visual Culture* essay to the active female bodies

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<sup>45</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Duke University Press, 2017), 2.

of contemporary mainstream cinema calls for, as Puar states, attention to the generative nature of capacity within political economies of controlled societies. In an allegorical sense, mainstream cinema can be seen as a 'control society' referential of the larger control society of which it is a part. The patriarchal history of the Hollywood studio system meant that for women Hollywood functions as a control society and therefore, women's bodies are dominated by men. Hollywood's male dominated environment determined how women are treated both on and off camera as well as how women's bodies are seen in a mass media context. The resulting gender discrimination of Hollywood cinema is reinforced in every aspect of the assemblage of representation. Women in Hollywood consistently struggle for fair and equal treatment, visibility, creative control, pay, attribution, production control, and notoriety. In reference to this history and the socio-cultural timeliness of the #metoo movement we can then consider how certain bodies having capacity within the mainstream Hollywood system pushes back against misogynistic notions which perpetuate a gender essentialist construction of masculinity's association with strength and power and femininity's association with weakness and vulnerability.

Some of Puar's guiding questions are which bodies are made to pay for progress? In other words which bodies have the capacity to assimilate into the neoliberal ideal of ability. "The political mandate behind such conceptualizations of disability – not what disability is but what it does and how it is used to simultaneously capacitate and debilitate – is to put the disabled/non-disabled binary in dialogue with

assemblages of disability, capacity, and debility.”<sup>46</sup> Puar’s expansion of the preexisting approaches to analyzing the social, political, and cultural effects of disability through the concepts of debility and capacity is crucial to understanding how the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship are affected within control societies. Her concept of assemblage is also a helpful concept to frame the significance of visibility in this context. For instance, the representational assemblage of the corporeal, political, and socio-cultural presentation of female physical power and embodiment within a social system that is actively revoking women’s rights,<sup>47</sup> has the potential to shift perceptions of power and present alternative schemas for cultural understandings of gender.

Expanding further on capacity as an initial invitation to embodiment, black and brown bodies have a complex history with capacity within the context of the action genre. In the hands of black filmmakers, black female bodies are capacitated, in that they take up space and embody physical power narratively and behind the camera. However, because their embodiment is being articulated within the mainstream Hollywood system which has perpetuated racial hierarchies, this often results in a neoliberal representation of affective corporeality for black and brown bodies. Therefore, capacity only ever defines the initial invitation to embodiment, not the affective quality of the embodiment. Capacity cannot fully account for the corporeal affect of depictions of

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<sup>46</sup> Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Supreme Court overturns *Roe v. Wade*, ending right to abortion upheld for decades. (2022). *All Things Considered* (NPR).

active female bodies which is why capacity only accounts for one aspect of representational assemblage. Essentially this means that a body can be capacitated and yet still lack affective corporeality.

One of the most prevalent cycles of film that illustrates this distinction between capacity and affect in the context of the action genre is the cycle of blaxploitation films. These were films made by black directors, starring black actors and actresses, and made for black audiences. As exploitation films they primarily existed outside of the high-budget, glossy blockbuster Hollywood genres however, their focus on excess and spectacle as expressed through capable black bodies resulted in the *first* depictions of narratively capacitated female bodies on-screen. Characters like *Coffy* (1973), *Foxy Brown* (1974) and *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) expressed physicality and violence – a key element of every film. However, since these films were made outside of the mainstream Hollywood studio system, they were made mostly by young novice filmmakers with shoestring budgets. This meant truncated shooting schedules, limited rehearsal time and only small-scale stunts or action sequences. The resulting effect is that depictions of action and violence in these films have more narrative levity than affective quality. While blaxploitation films achieved an unprecedented narrative capacity for female bodies, they do not offer much in the context of affective corporeality. The blaxploitation film genre only lasted about 10 years and died out in the 1980's but the historical significance and influence of these films considerably outweighs their production quality.

The full circle effect of the blaxploitation cycle on the action genre along with the neoliberal underpinnings of mainstream Hollywood are films like *Mad Max: Fury Road*

(2015) which hails a heavy-handed feminist agenda, features a highly capacitated white female body, but is written, directed and produced by white men. *Fury Road* and other action films featuring white female archetypes relegate black bodies to the margins as invisible, or significantly in-capable (as is the case for the majority of *Fury Road*).

Because the black female body poses such a threat to the white patriarchal system, it has been rendered invisible, for fear that the visibility of a sexually desirable woman would disrupt the accepted constructions of whiteness as beautiful, as the norm. Ironically, this invisibility began in Western culture with the hypervisibility of the black female body: in particular, in the display of the black woman as slave on the American auction block and as Venus figure in European sideshow exhibitions.<sup>48</sup>

Hobson's assessment of the disruptive potential of black bodies on-screen has proved especially so in the context of *active* or violent female bodies. The female action hero archetype is habitually white with subgenres ranging from superheroes such as Diana (*Wonder Woman*, 2017) and Carol Danvers (*Capitan Marvel*, 2019) to secret agents such as Jane Smith (*Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, 2005) and Bridget von Hammersmark, (*Inglourious Basterds*, 2009) as well as female assassins such as, *Hanna, Anna, Ava, Eve, Morgan*, and *Kate*. And while the potential for actresses such as Pam Grier within the context of blaxploitation films was unprecedented, the exploitative genre and phallic presentation of her eroticized body invokes a "Black Venus" as well as the historical sexualization and exploitative violence against the black female body<sup>49</sup>. Within the mainstream Hollywood system violent or active female bodies have a substantial history of being either marginalized, oversexualized and phallic, or

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<sup>48</sup>Janell Hobson, "Viewing in the Dark: Toward a Black Feminist Approach to Film." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30(1/2) (2002): 52.

<sup>49</sup>Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18:1 (2016): 166-173.

heteronormatively domesticated so as to restore the dominant hegemonic order by the conclusion of the film and alleviate any disruptive threat. Therefore, an analysis of this genre and its accompanying archetype must incorporate an analysis of the structures of power and access that govern the entire culture of film.

If capacity can be seen in the context of female representation in action films as an 'invitation' to corporeal embodiment, then it is an invitation that is primarily extended to black bodies only in very specific contexts such as exploitation cinema as mentioned above, as side characters (*X-Men* 2000), or characters whose violence is tied to criminality (*Colombiana* 2011). Rarely, if ever, are black and brown bodies invited to step into the central female action archetype unless the world which they are fighting on behalf of is entirely black such is the case with *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022) and *The Woman King* (2022). The following section outlines 'plastic representation,' a concept that addresses the necessity of reading representations of black and brown bodies for quality and depth, rather than visibility alone— an especially significant consideration when looking at archetypes within a genre that presents such narrow visibility for black and brown bodies.

### **Plastic Representation and Making Bodies Real**

Kristen Warner's concept of 'plastic representation' is essential when evaluating the identificatory structure within an industry marked by marginalization of black, brown, and female bodies. She postulates that within the context of a representation-matters media landscape visibility becomes the only bar, often resulting in very thin, short-lived representational significance. She refers to the tendency, within institutional structures

of media production, to fulfill representational expectations for popular media with zero regard for, or attention to, the substantive aspects of representation.

Plastic representation uses the wonder that comes from seeing characters on-screen who serve as visual identifiers for specific demographics in order to flatten the expectation to desire anything more.” She then suggests that this practice results in an artificial type of representation that is hollow and synthetic rather than representational in a meaningful way; what she refers to as ‘plastic representation.’ “Their artificiality connects to a condition that could be termed “plastic representation. Plastic is an ever-shifting artificial material whose purpose is shaped by its essence. There is no great depth in plastic, nor is there anything organic.<sup>50</sup>

Warner’s concept of plastic representation offers an analysis that considers not simply the quantitative elements of female action heroes such as, the number of action films featuring female leads, or collective screen time in blockbuster action ensembles. Whether a representation can be classified as ‘plastic’ or not demands a qualitative approach. Warner constructs a process of analysis that considers the audience identification of specific characters and how those identification processes can be expanded, in certain contexts, to facilitate the cultural experiences of the bodies on-screen. “I believe the desire should be expanded, not only to see a version of oneself on-screen but for that identification to resonate and connect with the histories and experiences of the culture that the character’s body inhabits.<sup>51</sup>”

Warner’s concept and definition of plastic representation provides an essential schematic for analysis, especially when the subject of analysis is marginalized bodies

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<sup>50</sup> Kristen J. Warner, “In the Time of Plastic Representation,” *Film Quarterly* 71(2) (Winter 2017), 35.

<sup>51</sup> Warner, “In the Time of Plastic,” 36-37.

within oppressive systems and structures of representation such as the female body in the action genre.

An operational definition of plastic representation can be understood as a combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery, but which can only approximate depth and substance because ultimately it is hollow and cannot survive close scrutiny. Plastic representation uses the wonder that comes from seeing characters on-screen who serve as visual identifiers for specific demographics in order to flatten the expectation to desire anything more.<sup>52</sup>

The generic conventions and attention to bodily spectacle within the action film genre has the potential to authenticate certain bodies utilizing identification processes through cinematic affect, corporeality, and capacity. This analytical consideration provides a final layer of analysis to determine not only how these depictions of female action heroes are being articulated as corporeal, affected, and capacitated, but also whether or not these characters are 'plastic' in their representation. Referential to the aforementioned concept of assemblage, when all three of these representational modes successfully converge the bodies on-screen move beyond being simple visual identifiers, or synthetic representations; they break through the plastic and become *real*.

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<sup>52</sup> Warner, "In the Time of Plastic," 35.

### Chapter 3: History and Background of Gender in the Action Genre

Will the "real world" ever be ready for that seemingly unimaginable creature: a woman who can be nurturing, loving, sexual, vulnerable, and feminine, but also "kick-ass," able to overpower and kill the "bad guys," and save the world (or universe) – all at the same time?<sup>53</sup>

“All at the same time,” the last part of this question reveals the specific challenges for female action heroes in contemporary Hollywood action films. For the majority of the genre’s history female characters were one or the other, they were either nurturing, sexual, and feminine or they shed all of those qualities in order to adopt the violence, power, and strength needed to “save the world.” The history of the action genre reveals this trend over and over again through its evolution and the integration of more prominent female characters. “In contrast to the serial queens of the silent era, women in adventure films may be feisty, even rebellious, but their capacity for violence or action is significantly curtailed and is largely subsumed into their romantic function for the hero.”<sup>54</sup> Female action heroes have had to break through the limiting and oppressive representations within the genre in ways that the male action hero never has. Therefore, it is essential to take a look at the genre’s history and conventions in order to properly illustrate the context and stakes for the contemporary female action hero as this opening quote so aptly articulates. Until a female character can stand in as the fully realized hero in the tradition of the American monomyth, women within patriarchal structures will continue to be positioned as the subordinate sex. Therefore, looking at

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<sup>53</sup> Diana Dominguez, “It’s Not So Easy Being Cast Iron Bitch’: Sexual Difference and the Female Action Her,” *Reconstruction* 5(4), 2005: 21-22.

<sup>54</sup> Yvonne Tasker. *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 2015).

the history of the action film genre, its 1980's blockbuster formula, its presentation of 'the action body' and its prioritization of spectacle over narrative offers an unprecedented insight into the broad cultural rhetoric of gender.

### **Hardbody Films of the 1980's**

“Deemed noisy and brash, judged empty at best and politically reactionary at worst, action films have consistently failed to meet the markers of aesthetic and cultural value typically applied within contemporary film culture.”<sup>55</sup> The action film genre has had many monikers over its nearly 100-year history such as adventure cinema, the action-adventure film, war epic, historical action film, historical adventure etc. Regardless of the generic identifiers the action genre has not been considered a culturally significant space outside of its popularity and economic appeal. “As Welsh implies, there is a relationship between the popularity of action films and their low status: they exemplify the exaggerated economics of mainstream film production, ‘mass culture at its most crudely capitalistic.’”<sup>56</sup> This being said, one cannot ignore that the genre has been responsible for some of the most widely consumed visual media in the history of cinema, hence its blockbuster formula and status. “Since the late 1970s, action and adventure has become synonymous with some of the costliest, highly promoted and profitable Hollywood films and franchises.”<sup>57</sup> This blockbuster formula has determined how these films have been produced, marketed, distributed, and consumed over the last 5 decades. These films became marketed as prioritizing the spectacle of action

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<sup>55</sup> Yvonne Tasker (ed.) *The Action and Adventure Cinema* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> Tasker, *Action*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Tasker, *Hollywood Action*, 40.

rather than any element of narrative pleasure or performance. “Action became a widely used term in promotion and reviewing to signal films as generic, rather than describing one element of a film’s repertoire of pleasures or a type of sequence. Violent, cynical though tempered by an admittedly bleak humor, the 1980s saw the appearance of high profile and hugely successful action franchises.”<sup>58</sup>

The action films’ attention to spectacle, violence, and action subsequently foregrounded the body of the action star as a vehicle of spectacle, violence, and action in which certain bodies became associated. This association of specific bodies with the action genre was at its zenith in the 1980’s. Socially and culturally there was burgeoning attention on body augmentation and enhancement, this was evidenced through the rise in plastic surgery, body-building culture, physique magazines, and strong-man competitions.

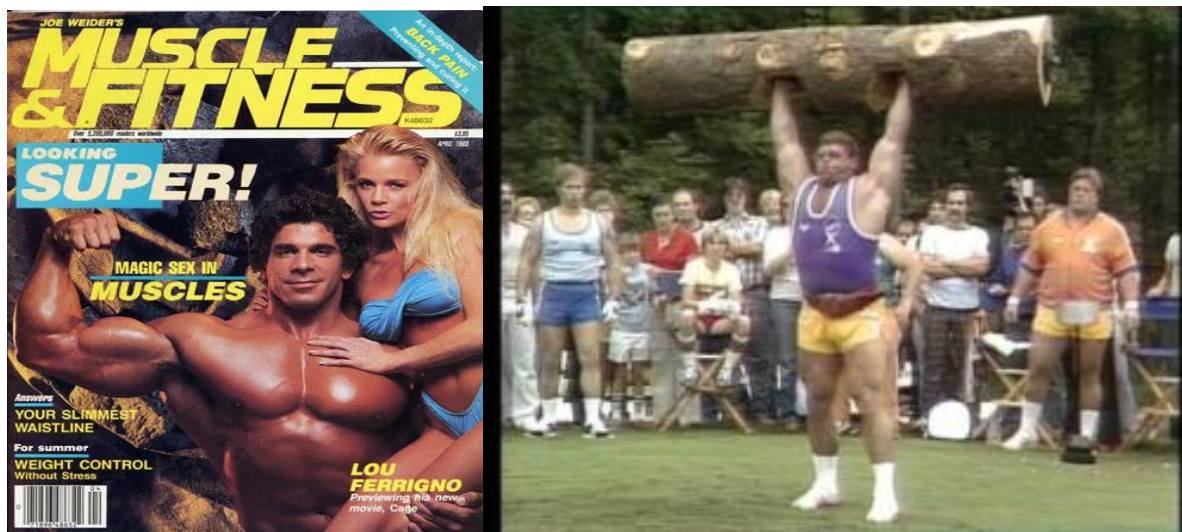


Figure 3.1 Cover of *Muscle and Fitness* from April 1989      3.2 Lars Hedlund World’s Strongest Man Competition cir. 1980.

Bodies in the 1980’s had new affective qualities associated with a specific

<sup>58</sup> Tasker, *Hollywood Action*, 42.

construction of masculinity, strength, and power, which were parlayed into the central production components of the 1980's action films. The 1980's action film solidified much of the genre's conventions around the action hero and the action hero's body. Tasker discusses this trend and its implications in the introduction of her seminal work on the action genre *Spectacular Bodies*. "These two stars [Stallone and Schwarzenegger] provided the most publicised, most visible image of the figure of the muscular male hero who had come to dominate the American action cinema of the 1980s ... the box-office appeal of the male bodybuilder provided a resonant image for the mid-1980s."<sup>59</sup> This cycle of films would eventually attract significant study and criticism mostly focused on the type of masculinity the films are representing, but also their attention to the hyper-muscular male figure as a central narrative device. "Whilst the narratives of these films, as with sub-genres such as the mythological epic, were driven by action, they also offered a set of visual pleasures focused on the display of the male body"<sup>60</sup> This formula and cycle of films would be analyzed as a culturally contingent subgenre of the action film and labeled 'hardbody' films by Susan Jeffords in 1994. Drew Ayers goes on to identify the specific parameters of the hardbody genre in his essay *Bodies Bullets and Bad Guy: Elements of the Hardbody Film* (2008). "Ruled by bodybuilder-actors, these hardbody films showcase hypermasculine characters engaged in various feats of heroism. While they fit firmly within the traditional Hollywood action/adventure genre, the hardbody films are notable for their insistence on depicting the unclothed male form. The films are also notable for their excessive violence and hyperbolic action sequences, and the hardbodied protagonists dominating these films perpetrate both the violence

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<sup>59</sup> Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 149.

and action of the narratives with superheroic glee.”<sup>61</sup>

From the 1980’s to late 90’s Stallone and Schwarzenegger’s success in the hardbody genre dominated Hollywood action films and they continue to make hardbody films well into the 21st century. Although these body-builder actors had significant cultural staying power—hence the multitude of films in both their repertoires—as the audiences began to change their prominent box office status began to wane. Their most recent films, *The Expendables* and *The Terminator* franchises simply do not earn the same type of blockbuster attention as their earliest films. The decrease in their popularity and the lack of demand for bodybuilder stars can be attributed to a number of factors but the significance of the cultural shift in audiences will be explored in detail in the final chapter.

### **The Action Body**

One of the most prominent generic conventions resulting from the hardbody cycle of films – and central to this project – is the prominence of the body as spectacle within the action genre. “Indeed it is the emphasis on action in these films which both legitimates, through the affirmation of an active understanding of masculinity, and provides a narrative justification for such physical display.”<sup>62</sup> This narrative practice eventually became so prominent within the action genre it expanded beyond just the hardbody films and well beyond the tenure of the 1980’s bodybuilder action stars.

Lisa Purse describes the contemporary function of body-as-spectacle in the

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<sup>61</sup> Drew Ayers, “Bodies, Bullets and Bad Guys: Elements of the Hardbody Film,” *Film Criticism* 32(3) 2008: 41.

<sup>62</sup> Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 2.

action genre as ‘the action body’ which informs not just the narrative of the film but the blocking, choreography, framing, camera movement and embodied experience of the audience as well.<sup>63</sup> “Both narrative and aesthetic design thus appeal explicitly to our sense of the hero’s physicality. At the same time, writers, commentators and film critics regularly describe action movies and the effects of watching them in bodily terms.” The action body specifically within the context of the action genre then can be analyzed in terms of representation as well as an embodied experience for spectators. The concept of ‘the action body’ provides a central focus in which all bodies within the action genre can be explored through the affective potential of the genre’s affordances.

According to Purse, spectators have an embodied response to onscreen stimuli, we “flesh out” the experiences of the characters and the movement of the film body. Our senses respond to the images, sounds and rhythms of the physical acts displayed. This phenomenon is our body’s affective response to the action body. The Hollywood action film foregrounds the physical dexterity and mastery of the action star and therefore is able to evoke an affective response housed in the corporeal presentation of the action star. “Action bodies...offer fantasies of empowerment that allow us to rehearse our own dreamed-of escapes, our own becoming-masterful, in a fantasy context, allow us to ‘feel’ this mastery for ourselves through our sensorial connection with the body of the hero.”<sup>64</sup> The action star provides the vessel for a corporeal experience of the physical aspects of action on screen, which has a two-fold effect: the audience experiences the action onscreen through the embodied filmic process *and* the embodied action star. As

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<sup>63</sup> Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 40.

<sup>64</sup> Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 45.

spectators we extend our own bodies into the bodies of the actors onscreen and the physical spaces they inhabit. As spectators when the onscreen action requires the lead character to hold their breath, balance precariously on a ledge, or extend their body to retrieve an item just out of reach, we find ourselves subconsciously holding our breath, tightening our muscles, and extending our necks along with the characters on screen. This results in a spectator experience unique to the action genre in that, while we may never directly experience the physical acts of the bodies on screen, the action body expands our passive watching experience into a fantasy of physical mastery. "These fantasies are grounded in physical movement, and while we may not have ever leapt from a car onto a moving train, or used mixed martial arts to fell several opponents, we are familiar with the sensory experience of human comportment and physical exertion, and this informs our embodied engagement with the spectacle of the body's mastery."<sup>65</sup>

In order to effectively produce this type of affective viewing experience the action genre has developed conventions and tropes associated with 'the action body' of the film. The first of these is that the action film will establish fairly early in the film what its relationship is to real-world physics. The film must establish for its audience the general spatial and comportmental parameters of the diegetic world. "In each action film the limits of the onscreen body's capacities are established, usually in the first action sequences, to be reiterated in later sequences. These limits make reference to real-world correspondences and set the boundaries for what physical acts will be effortful, risk-filled, easy or impossible."<sup>66</sup> This relationship is established through

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<sup>65</sup> Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 45.

<sup>66</sup> Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 46.

correspondences to weight, momentum, force, speed, and the material body of the action star. For instance, what type of damage is visible on the body of the action star when they experience a fall, a car crash, or a punch. This also establishes how similar the action body is to the audience's and therefore either enhances our engagement with the onscreen body through affective corporeality or it diminishes the capacity for affective corporeality. If an onscreen body seems entirely unencumbered by naturalistic restrictions of human comportment, and impervious to pain or injury, then the affective corporeality will be limited. However, if an onscreen body experiences pain, injury, and has similar physical limitations to our own embodied experiences then the affective corporeality is enhanced.

An additional element of the experiential quality of the action film is the corresponding use of special effects and cinematic technologies to emphasize the spectacle of both the action body and spectacular action. Cinematic affect speaks directly to the ways in which the film's embodiment is not only connected but referential to the movements of the human body and the human body's spatial relationship to the world. Barker describes this phenomenon in her book The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience: "We hitch ourselves to the film's body because we can, because it seems so easy, because the film's body moves in ways similar to ours. The empathy between the film's and viewer's bodies goes so deeply that we can feel the film's body, live vicariously through it, and experience its movements to such an extent that we ourselves become momentarily as graceful or powerful as the film's body, and we leave the theater feeling invigorated or exhausted, though we ourselves have hardly moved a

muscle.”<sup>67</sup> In a sense the spectator takes on an embodiment of the film’s body and is able to experience the cinematic world in the position of the camera as if we were by-standing within the filmic world itself. However, because cinematic technologies extend beyond our body’s physical and visual capabilities, maintaining and prioritizing an affective response for audiences is contingent upon a precarious and delicate relationship between the real-world considerations of bodily comportment and the seemingly infinite possibilities of cinematic technologies.

For instance, if the film body offers the spectator a better vantage point of an action feat by switching from a close up to a long shot this does not present a disorientation for the spectator. A shift in angle or distance can assist in orienting the spectator to the complexity of the action within the scene. However, when the cinematic techniques prove overly advanced or too far removed from the natural relational considerations of real-world physics for the spectator this can minimize or entirely sever the affective response for the spectator. This means that there is a figurative threshold for using cinematic technologies when attempting to maintain an affective response for audiences. That is to say, there is a difference between the affective response during the slow-motion shot in *The Matrix* (1999) when Neo dodges Agent Smith’s bullets, and the use of camera movements and CGI to depict the detailed transformation of an Autobot in *Transformers* (2007). Both tactics are invested in spectacle; however, *The Matrix* maintains affective corporeality for the spectator by not deviating from natural extensions of the action body while *Transformers* intentionally deviates from natural

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<sup>67</sup> Barker, Jennifer M. ( 2009 ), *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* , Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. Pg. 83.

extensions of the action body resulting in an affective response more invested in exhilaration than corporeality. The first utilizes cinematic technologies to display Neo's speed and ability as an extension of real-world human movement while the latter utilizes cinematic technologies and extensive **Computer-Generated Images** to depict the fantastic spectacle and size of the Autobot aliens. Therefore, cinematic technologies in the context of affective capacity have the ability to enhance or denigrate the affective corporeality of the action body. Audiences' attention to and concern about the level of cinematic technology versus practical effects in the action film will be explored in further detail in chapter six with an analysis of audience reactions to the trailer for *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* (2024).

While this is a very generalized notion of the spectator's experience and definitely does not account for all viewers or all experiences of embodiment, this does establish the generic elements of the action film that directly inform the intended goal of cinematic affect within the action genre. "The action body is in a continual state of 'becoming', perpetually renegotiating limits as his or her mastery develops and as the film seeks to escalate the spectator's sensory engagement with and exhilaration at that body's achievements."<sup>68</sup> This unique experience associated with the action genre explains how and why films which prioritize an affective spectator experience such as the horror film and the action film tend to have such established formulas and such devout audiences potentially due to a "desire to return again and again to a state of embodied exhilaration, to the fantasies of becoming-powerful that have the capacity to

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<sup>68</sup> Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 47-48.

resonate corporeally in the most arresting ways.”<sup>69</sup>

### **The ‘Action Babe’**

While the action genre presents a uniquely empowered and embodied viewing experience the generic history of an idealized gender presentation is still imbued in the action body of the action genre. This results in limitations and containment for certain bodies within the genre. This can partially explain trends associated with the female body in sub-genres of the action film such as ‘musculinity’ and the ‘action babe’ cycles in the 90’s and early 00’s.

“While 1980s action was for many associated with an articulation of specifically male violence, with built male bodies dominating screens, action films of this period also incorporated female performers in tough action roles both supporting and in some instances as action protagonist.”<sup>70</sup> Following this 1980’s body-as-spectacle trend the female action stars of the late 1980’s and 1990’s presented a stand-in type of corporeal physicality in which their bodies were largely absent of feminine signifiers and adopted many of the masculine signifiers of the 1980’s male bodybuilder aesthetics. Tasker refers specifically to this tendency as musculinity: “In order to function effectively within the threatening, macho world of the action picture, the action heroine must be masculinised. The masculinisation of the female body, which is effected most visibly through her muscles, can be understood in terms of a notion of ‘musculinity’. That is, some of the qualities associated with masculinity are written over the muscular female

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<sup>69</sup> Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 48.

<sup>70</sup> Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*, 42.

body. 'Musculinity' indicates the way in which the signifiers of strength are not limited to male characters."<sup>71</sup>

Following this cycle of films, the post-feminist sentiments of the late 1990's and early 2000's presented a desire to see women embrace a feminine aesthetic but still be central characters in the narrative. "post-feminism trades on a notion of feminism as rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist. In contrast, post feminism offers the pleasure and comfort of (re)claiming an identity uncomplicated by gender politics, postmodernism, or institutional critique . . . From the late 1990s renaissance in female-centered television series to the prolific pipeline of Hollywood 'chick flicks,' to the heightened emphasis on celebrity consumerism, and the emergence of a new wave of female advice gurus/lifestyle icons, the popular culture landscape has seldom been as dominated as it is today by fantasies and fears about women's 'life choices.'"<sup>72</sup> Women went from being oppressed by the expectations of having to conform to the patriarchal standards of behavior and appearance down to very little control over their own bodies (aka when they can have sex, have children where they can go etc.) to 'taking back' the control over their bodies and their choices and reappropriating sexual objectification into sexual empowerment.

Due to the established body-as-spectacle formula of the Hollywood action genre, combined with the post-feminist sentiments of female sexual empowerment in the 1990's action heroines entered the action genre space as overtly sexualized characters who were able to 'kick-ass' *and* look good doing it. This specific archetype is referred to

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<sup>71</sup> Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 149.

<sup>72</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (Taylor & Francis, 2009): 2.

as the 'Action Babe' and is an exceptionally prominent trend for most female action stars in the 90's through the mid 2000's.

The action babe cycle is important to the analysis of action bodies as affective due to the gendered framing of the action heroine within the spectacle of the action film. Marc O'Day refers to this as stressing the sexuality and availability of the action babe. She is presented both as 'to be' and 'to be with,' in that the presumed audience would fall into one of these two categories of either wanting to be her or to be with her.<sup>73</sup> This depiction means that the action babe oscillates between masculine identifiers within the context of the action film i.e. she drives the narrative, action and spectacle of the film while simultaneously occupying the object of the male gaze through the erotic, sexy-as-spectacle presentation of her body. This locks the archetype into an unfortunate trap in which the corporeal affect of the action heroine's body is undermined by the attempts to maintain her sexual desirability. She therefore cannot be too strong, too powerful, too masculine or she risks losing conventional feminine attractiveness and desirability. "Representational gatekeeping in the action babe arena demands an actress who is 'young' (usually in her twenties or early thirties), slim, shapely, often (though by no means exclusively) white and marketed as of primarily (though not necessarily wholly) heterosexual orientation, who repeatedly undergoes the celebrity makeover of the beauty and gossip industries and is willing to undergo what we can call 'the action makeover' to prepare her for the rigours of fights and stunts in the action babe spectacle."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Marc O'Day, "Beauty in Motion: Gender, Spectacle and the Action Babe," in Yvonne Tasker (ed.) *The Action and Adventure Cinema* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004): 201-219.

<sup>74</sup> O'Day, *Beauty in Motion*, 206.

Some of the more successful (by box office standards) and prominent representation of the action babe are *Lara Croft* (2001-2003) and *Resident Evil* (2002-2016). The movie posters for these films make clear the investment in a post-feminist sensibility by featuring the characters in body-hugging body suits or high-cut dresses while brandishing weapons; a juxtaposition that reads—deadly but beautiful. “Action babes embody fantasies of empowerment that are not just physical but socio-economic and represent a sanitized picture of female perpetrated violence within a fictional fantasy setting.<sup>75</sup>” According to Jeffery Brown the action babe’s ability to convey physicality and authority as an action body is undermined when the mode of presentation is most explicitly invested in an objectified presentation of the action heroine.



Figure 3.3: Poster for *Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* (2003)

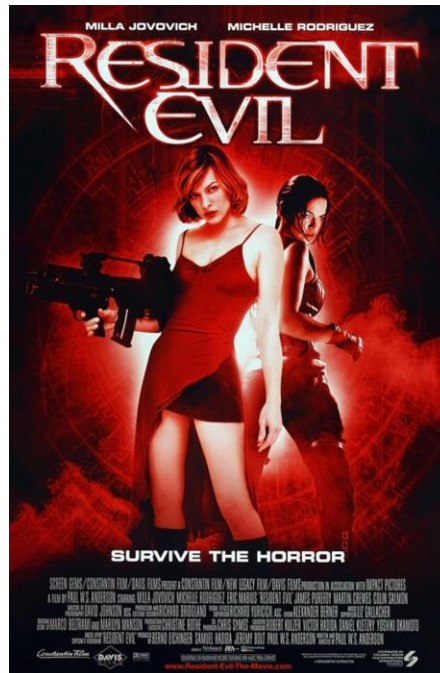


Figure 3.4: Poster for *Resident Evil* (2002)

“All these action heroines are displayed in ways that eroticize their gendered form – often precisely at the same moments they are demonstrating their active, capable

<sup>75</sup> Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 91.

physicality – and cannot help but evoke the scantily-clad, hyperfeminine, gun-toting women of 1970s exploitation flicks.”<sup>76</sup>

The success of films like *Resident Evil* and *Lara Croft* did offer, through the ‘action babe’ archetype, an avenue of representational visibility for thin, white conventionally beautiful women to step into the role of central action star rather than functioning as a side character or romantic interest, or as the central characters in exploitation films. However, as filmmaking technologies became more sophisticated and demand for action films ramped up through the late 2000’s into the 2010’s the spectacle of the action film shifted. Soon action films began to focus on a more realistic style that featured tight shots during fast paced hand-to-hand combat scenes bringing audiences right into the center of the action. Franchise films like the *Bourne* trilogy, the reboot of *James Bond* with Daniel Craig and even *Transformers* set a new standard for action spectacle, one that specifically relied on a calculated presentation of corporeal affect. The action in these films was reliant on a naturalistic presentation of physicality, usually resulting in the action hero taking a few knocks before ultimately vanquishing the ‘bad guy.’ This also means that the body of the action hero no longer looks like the muscle-bond behemoths of the 80s but more like an every-man. If the action hero of the 1980’s soars across the proverbial finish line, throws his arms high in the air in triumphant glory, then the action hero of the 2010’s limps across the finish line exhausted, bruised and beaten, barely able to stand to celebrate their victory. Unlike the hardbody films of the 1980’s, part of the spectacle and affect of the 2010’s action film was allowing the

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<sup>76</sup> Brown, Jeffrey A., “Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and the Point of No Return,” *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011).

audience to believe – if only for a moment – that the hero might not ‘win.’

These action films of the 2010’s required particular attention to the physical parameters of the fictional world which is often intended to feel as close as possible to the world of the spectator. This presents a significant problem for the ‘action babe’ since as an archetype her affect is compromised by improbability. Her costume is designed to show off her curves and is often highly improbable for the action-packed scenarios in which she finds herself. Her hair is usually long and flowing and perfectly tousled rather than short or pulled out of her face so as not to obstruct her vision during fight scenes. Her face is almost always perfectly made-up and if she does incur injury, it most definitely does not compromise her looks or her cinematic aesthetic; unlike some of her male counterparts who end up with swollen faces, black eyes, and broken noses. The action babe’s injuries are not naturalistic but strategically constructed to leave her sexual and glamorous appeal intact.

The 2009 film *Wanted* functions as an effective case study which reveals the results of fast-paced close-contact naturalistic style of the 2010’s action films intersecting with the non-naturalistic aspects of the action babe archetype. After her status and success as Lara Croft, Angelina Jolie is a recognizable ‘Action Babe’ with significant box-office clout. Jolie stars as Fox, a seasoned assassin with superhuman weapons skills. One of the elements central to the film’s premise is that certain individuals have superhuman skills which allow them to perceive high speed movements in real time and manipulate their bodies within this perceived notion of time. This gives *Wanted*’s characters the ability to bend bullets around corners and make shots at angles impossible for the average assassin to make. Fox is presented within

the narrative as both mentor/trainer and as Wesley's (James McAvoy) ultimate sexual fantasy. The film mixes a voyeuristic and fetishistic point-of-view of Jolie's body with high-concept, fast-paced, spectacular action sequences.

In the action sequences the spectacle of the fight scenes showcases her action skills as simultaneously physically capacitated and sexually erotic. In one of the central action sequences Jolie straddles the front seat of a viper while shooting at would-be assailants. The scene cuts between Fox's point of view and Wesley's. He is situated between her legs attempting to drive the car while she maneuvers across the hood to get the best shot. In the most tense and climactic moment of the scene Fox is caught between the edge of the viper and a city bus. Fox, assessing that the bus is coming too fast to swerve out of the way, prostrates herself across the hood and between the two vehicles emitting an audible moan as the bus speeds by inches from her face. The film's manipulation of relative speed allows specific action movements to be emphasized. During these movements the action is slowed down, further eroticizing Fox's action body. The notion of superhuman ability coupled with a voyeuristic lens situates Jolie's body as physically masterful but also as the object of the male gaze.

This type of representation resuscitates the 1990's 'action babe' archetype and brings her into the gritty fast-paced environment of the 2000's and 2010's action films, resulting in a multitude of action sub-genre films featuring female leading characters. This results in formulaic representational practices within the genre for female action stars which I will illustrate and categorize in the following chapter. Without attention to the oppressive cultural structures that designate certain bodies as representative of

physical mastery, world-saving authority, and capacitated corporeal affect, many of these archetypes result in plastic representation for female action heroes. Plastic representation as referenced in the second chapter is a contained, undermined representation that lacks staying power or representational power of its white male counterparts. Along with limited affective representational authority these female action archetypes, when situated next to prominent action cinema franchises operate in the periphery of the action genre rather than taking up central box-office and cultural real estate. Although they are abundant in number, these sub-genre female-centered action films tend to be straight to streaming or have very limited theatrical releases. Essentially, they function as low-budget spin-off secondary-versions of their male-centered franchise counterparts outside of a few notable exceptions.

#### Chapter 4: **Categorization of Female Action Archetypes**

Contemporary action films featuring female leads prominent in the 2000's and 2010's often fall into one of three categories: The Vigilante or Avenger, The Female Warrior or Superhero, and the Female Spy or Assassin. These categories arise from a combination of film and genre conventions as well as a desire to justify and validate female violence. It is important to recognize that the film and genre conventions for female bodies in the action genre begin from a place of subordination. They were first positioned as either the prize to be won for the hero when his mission or journey is complete, or they were the damsel in distress needing to be rescued by the male hero. Therefore, the journey from vulnerable damsel in early adventure films of the 1920s to central to action body at the turn of the century is rather miraculous and extreme and subsequently riddled with problematic representational fodder. The intention of this project is not to reiterate the problematic nature of these archetypes but rather to illustrate how they are evoking a certain affective response for the action genre spectator. These specific archetypes also attempt a post-feminist sentimentality while fulfilling the Hollywood action film aesthetic of spectacle which in most instances results in plastic representation for female action heroes.

In *Contemporary Action Cinema* Lisa Purse identifies the “containment strategies” for female action heroes during this period. “The strategies we have noted, such as depicting female physicality within comic or fantastical settings, or explicitly underlining the artificial nature of the physical action being displayed – are clearly ‘containment strategies’ which work to contain the threat embodied by the presence of

the physically powerful woman.”<sup>77</sup> By relegating her physical mastery to the cinematic contexts of artificiality, the ‘slapstick’ tradition unconcerned with bodily harm or injury, or fantastical environments in which her physical power or ability is presented in a world entirely divorced from the spectator’s physical reality, the female action body’s ability to convey an affective corporeal embodiment is incapacitated.

Additionally, certain containment strategies associated with these specific sub-genres work to undermine the physicality of the female action hero and inherently suspend her corporeal affect. Each of these sub-genres have the tendency to either incapacitate or qualify female action heroes’ affective corporeality resulting in a pool of plastic representations of female physical embodiment. This categorization of female action hero sub-genres will help determine not only why female physical embodiment and corporeal affect are so elusive in contemporary Hollywood action films, but also, reveal a path towards representations that depict capacitated corporeal affect for contemporary female action heroes discussed in Chapter 5.

### **Female Assassins: Evening Gowns and Guns**

“Their talents as spies have long been linked to sexuality rather than action, encapsulated in the image of the spy as ‘Mata Hari’<sup>78</sup>... Espionage provides a generic

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<sup>77</sup> Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 81.

<sup>78</sup> Mata Hari, professional name of Gertrud Margarete Zelle (1876–1917), Dutch courtesan and world-famous spy during World War I. Born in Leeuwarden and educated in a convent, she married Campbell MacLeod, a British-born captain of the Dutch army, when she was 18 years old; they were divorced a few years later. She settled in Paris, and shortly after 1900 she began to perform erotic dances for private gatherings. In 1907 she became a spy for Germany, attending a school for espionage in Lörrach. Through her liaisons with high-ranking Allied officers she was able to obtain important military information. She was executed in October 1917 by the French. “Mata Hari.” *Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia*, Jan. 2018, p. 1.

frame in which female action can be staged, one that foregrounds themes of disguise coupled to costume and glamour.”<sup>79</sup>

What has taken the place of the 1990’s “action babe” is a preoccupation with the physical, sexual, and reproductive capacities of the active female body in the form of female assassins. This category is particularly interesting because of the volume and rate at which these films are being produced in this contemporary generic cycle. These films feature a singular female spy/assassin narratively written as exceptionally good at the calculated and ruthless disposal of threats (other agents or marks) and often is responsible for infiltrating or exposing entire institutions. These archetypes’ motivation for violence is typically initiated when they discover some secret about themselves or the agency they work for and are subsequently inclined by an internal moral compass to punish any and all who are involved in the corruption of their purpose. At least a dozen films in this subgenre have been released in the last ten years most of which are concentrated in the last 5 years: *Salt* (2010), *Hanna* (2011/2019), *Violet and Daisy* (2011), *Haywire* (2011), *Spy* (2015), *Morgan* (2016), *Atomic Blonde* (2017), *Proud Mary* (2018), *Red Sparrow* (2018), *Anna* (2019), *Ava* (2020), *The Serpent* (2020), *Black Widow* (2021), *Kate* (2021). These films articulate a complicated trend that intersects directly with corporeal affect which manifests as an oscillation between being the central active body without disrupting the cultural gendered notions of a sexualized feminine identity.

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<sup>79</sup> Tasker, *Hollywood Action*, 175.

The previously established connotation of woman with domesticity and domestic space seems to be the anxieties expressed in the female assassin narratives as they are preoccupied with the impossibility of her body to be both the key to a domestic life and the harbinger of violence and domestic security. Therefore, these characters either disavow domesticity and motherhood or have been robbed of the option due to sterilization. This preoccupation expresses the anxieties about the female body specifically expressed through the narrative and corporeal capacity of the female assassin.

### **Warriors and Superheroes:**

The prevalent and lucrative cycle of superhero films within the action genre has resulted in a large body of texts featuring female action heroes such as *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Captain Marvel* (2019), *WandaVision* (2021) These archetypes typically have some type of superhuman power that is layered on top of their natural physical presence in the action film. While these archetypes are often generated from ensemble narratives featuring mostly male superheroes their rise in popularity and journey to stand-alone texts function as evidence that female centered high budget action films are profitable and popular. This categorical distinction (superhuman power) from the other two archetypes requires a nuanced reading of bodily capacity, corporeality, and affect that takes into consideration the narrative conditions of physicality for these active bodies in order to properly contextualize how these films are constructing female physicality on

screen. For these films it is important to acknowledge the spectatorial relationship between on screen bodies that are not realist representations of naturalized bodies in the physical space we occupy as spectators. So, for these texts the analysis will consider how the narrative component of superpowers potentially alters the spectator's affective experience of the text.

### **The Female Vigilante**

This category of films originates from a larger body of films concerned with a “sanctioned” type of spectacular violence perpetrated by women: the rape-revenge film. These archetypes span decades from *Coffy* (1973), *Alley Cat* (1984), *Lady Vengeance* (2005), *Colombiana* (2011), *Miss Meadows* (2014) up to some of the most recent iterations such as *Peppermint* (2018), *A Vigilante* (2018), and *The Rhythm Section* (2020) and they have done little to expand or complicate the plastic representation of embodied female action or violence. For these archetypes the active body is motivated by vengeance against some significant loss typically in the form of the death of a husband or child or in response to bodily harm such as rape or attempted murder. This trope functions as a containment strategy for these archetypes due to the need to justify their violence and juxtapose their violent or affective physicality with a traditional representation of heteronormative domesticity.

The most common narrative device utilized in contemporary Hollywood films to create this dual identity of housewife turned homicidal vigilante is trauma. There is typically some traumatic memory or event that is incidental to the character's propensity

towards violence. Unlike her male blockbuster counterparts such as *John Wick* (2014), or Brian Mills of *Taken* (2008) who have a past lives or jobs tied to violence; violence for the female vigilante is most often an aberration rather than an inherent quality.

Essentially, something made her this way, she was not violent prior to the trauma or loss that has created this version of her.

She cannot be a mother, wife, lover, daughter, or sister *and* a vigilante. It is only after she loses all signifiers of her domestic life, either literally or figuratively--and there are no heteronormative gender roles to outweigh her journey towards violent revenge--that she is able to fully step into the embodied physicality of the female vigilante. She is not returning to a past life of violence but rather picking up violence as part of her new identity, and as a new currency for her untethered non-domestic life. This creates a narrative juxtaposition of pre and post trauma which allows for the films to maintain their investment in heteronormative gender roles for the female leads, regardless of how violent the character is. In this juxtaposition, often utilizing narrative flashbacks, the audience is not forced to imagine a mother capable of such violence returning home to her family. In narratives that lean into this juxtaposition of heteronormativity the hyperbole of the scenarios is reinforced in the script as sheer disbelief that a woman could be responsible for the violence perpetrated by the character.

For instance, in the campy *Miss Meadows* Katie Holmes plays a primary school teacher who moonlights as a violent vigilante. The character Miss Meadows is an exaggerated version of the 1950's housewife who presents as a modest, well-mannered, young suburban schoolteacher. Her students and neighbors adore her, birds

sing, and deer frolic in her presence, making her the least-likely suspect in a string of violent vigilante murders. The local deputy refers to the composite sketch of her as a “pulp-fiction Mary Poppins” When the evidence clearly points to a female suspect the sheriff remains skeptical stating, “Personally, I’m just not buying that a woman is pulling

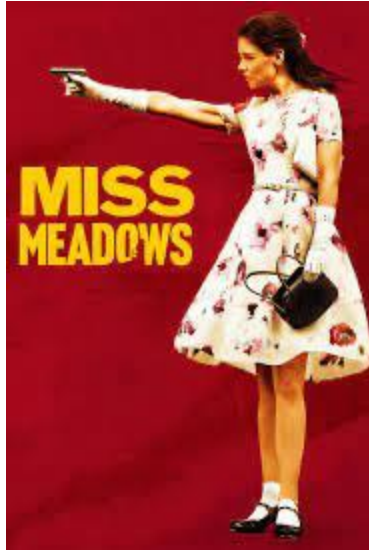


Figure 4.1: Poster for *Miss Meadows* (2014)

all this off.” The narrative of *Miss Meadows* reinscribes the disbelief of the violent female. Her overdetermined gendered presentation allows for her to hide-in-plain-sight specifically because outwardly she signifies what is culturally associated with harmless vulnerability and non-violence. The film relies on a campy tone to underline and reconcile what is narratively and culturally unsettling—a gun-toting homicidal schoolteacher.

To further explicate this containment strategy as well as the affective corporeality of female vigilantes *Peppermint*, starring Jennifer Garner, provides an effective case study. *Peppermint* directed by Pierre Morel, was released domestically on September 6th, 2018, by STX Entertainment. The modest 25-million-dollar film made 13 million on opening weekend and grossed 53 million worldwide. While these box office returns are heartening, the impact of casting female vs male action stars is made more clear when compared to other similar films. *Taken* released 10 years prior in 2009 with the same director and exact same budget, made almost the entire budget on opening weekend alone, and the worldwide gross returns come in at almost 180 million more than *Peppermint* at \$226,837,760. This box office data does

provide some unavoidable truths about the reception of the two films however it fails to provide contextual framing for questions about casting, gender representation, or generic expectations. The following textual analysis will provide that context by exploring the films' affective capacity.

The film begins with a suggestive shot of a car rocking back and forth with fogged-up windows. As the shot cuts to the interior of the vehicle the audience is thrust into the middle of one of the only hand-to-hand fights in the film. Riley (Garner) repeatedly slams the unknown man's head into the side of the car door. It is suddenly revealed that he has a knife as she blocks his attempts to stab her. On one blow he nearly misses her face, but she is able to deflect his arm and he slices her thigh instead. In an extremely confined space, with gritty low lighting coupled with multiple shots edited in fast-paced succession, it is difficult to make out exactly what is happening until the action stops when Riley pins the man to the door with her gun to his head. Riley asks the man "Do you remember me?" he replies, "fuck you" and she fires the gun. It is not revealed how or why she was fighting the man; we just see her dragging his body towards the trunk of the car as the camera pans up to the city skyline.

It is later revealed through flashback that as she is tending her injuries that she had a daughter and a husband. The juxtaposition of the two sides of her character is made instantly clear as the flashback reveals Riley in a long modest skirt business jacket and sensible heels. With her daughter in a girl-scout type uniform beside her, Riley hurriedly totes her daughter's fundraising cookies on a luggage cart to their car as another mother and daughter chase after her for infringing on their cookie-turf. The

heavy-handed juxtaposition of Riley's previous life is also not lost on the audience as we cannot help but to appreciate the severe differences between her previous life as a wife and mother and her current life as a vigilante killer. Prior to *Peppermint* Garner had notoriety as a Hollywood action star. Garner starred as CIA agent Sydney Bristow in J.J. Abrams' drama-action series *Alias*, which ran from 2001 to 2006. For *Alias* Garner was awarded 3 Emmy's and the Golden Globe for best actress in a drama series. She went on to star as the Marvel comics' deadly assassin Elektra in the 20th Century Fox version of *Daredevil* in 2003 and in a standalone film *Elektra* in 2005. The *New York Times*' review of "Peppermint" states that playing Riley marks a "return to her early action-hero roots" for Garner, referencing her status as an established action star.<sup>80</sup> However, the film still undermines the active female body and diminishes Garner's ability to convey affective corporeality through its presentation of exaggerated action choreography, and by limiting Garner's action scenes to long-distance shoot-ups or stealth marksmanship.

Minus the opening action scene Riley dispatches bad guys with well-timed shots from tactical weapons. She out-guns the bad guys rather than picking them off face-to-face in physical combat. In one climactic action scene Riley storms a piñata warehouse used for money laundering. Using a tactical shotgun, she blows away a dozen "bad guys" while they frantically try to defend themselves with their significantly less intimidating handguns.

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<sup>80</sup> Aisha Harris, "Review: 'Peppermint' Is Neither Sweet Nor Good," *The New York Times* (September 7, 2018): C6. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/06/movies/peppermint-review-jennifer-garner.html>

As Purse suggests the physical action within the diegetic world of the film is authenticated through the presentation of physicality in the fictional world. Early in the film the physical “laws” of the fictional world are established usually with an opening action sequence. The physical parameters of the fictional world are rendered “real” through a presentation of weight, momentum, resistance, gravity, impact and corporeality. In an action film during the opening action scene if the suture<sup>81</sup> is successful the spectator acclimates to the established physical laws of the fictional world and can experience the remainder of the action in the film as intended without having to reacclimate themselves at each action sequence. For instance, in action sci-fi films there may be non-naturalistic physical parameters for the fictional world such as differences in bodily momentum or strength due to fictional technological advancements or other-worldly settings. But what is physically possible and impossible within these fictional spaces is still established through the presentation of physics in relation to real-world bodily comportment of the spectator in order to maintain the suture. “Whether in the gym, running for a bus, or racing with friends in childhood, even the most sedentary of human beings have become conscious of their physical limits at some point, when

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<sup>81</sup> In psychoanalytic film theory, the filmic processes by which the spectator is continuously ‘sewn’ into the series of shots and spaces playing out on the cinema screen. Through these processes, it is argued, the spaces set out on the screen assume the appearance of a consistent, navigable, and coherent world; and the processes by which subjectivity is formed are continually re-enacted in the activity of viewing (see SUBJECT-POSITION THEORY). The term was first applied to film in the late 1960s by Jean-Pierre Oudart, who argued that the continuity editing system in classical narrative cinema, and above all the shot-reverse shot figure, is a primary means by which spaces and absences in the filmic field are expunged. In the shot-reverse shot, for example, cuts from one speaker or protagonist to another allow the spectator to put himself or herself in the position of whichever character is offscreen at any moment; and thus to experience himself or herself as caught up in, and part of, the space and the action on the screen. Oudart argued that the spectator is constantly in process of being formed as a subject through the filmic discourse, and that this is the key to film’s peculiar powers of illusion (see IDEOLOGICAL CRITICISM). Kuhn, Annette, and Guy Westwell. "suture." *A Dictionary of Film Studies*. : Oxford University Press, , 2020.

exertion became unpleasant, when the body strained to complete the task at hand. It is at the fictional equivalent of this real-world borderline between the physically possible and impossible that the action body demonstrates its tenacity, skill and strength, and thus supplies us our fantasies of empowerment.”<sup>82</sup>

In *Peppermint* the physics of the fictional world are established in the opening action scene as identical, or at the very least, not recognizably different from the real-world physics of the spectator. However, in an attempt to emphasize Garner’s physical capacity, the real-world physics of the fictional world are broken. Utilizing cinematic techniques, impact, weight, force, and speed are amplified either by speeding up the shot or using exaggerated choreography during action scenes. Although these manipulations of the visual perception of force, weight, speed, and impact are slight they nevertheless betray the established physics of the fictional setting and undermine Garner’s affective capacity. Maintaining believable corporeal norms in cinematic settings is a delicate task and audiences are keenly aware when movements and gestures seem unnatural. In the pinata scene, for instance, the impact on the bodies of the men shot by Riley’s gun (a Kel-Tec KSG Patrol shotgun) are excessively overemphasized and amplified. When her shots strike the bodies of the men in the warehouse they lift completely off the ground and fly across the room, even though Riley’s body and stance display no impact from the recoil of such a large-caliber gun.

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<sup>82</sup> Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 46.

In another scene Riley shows up to a lavish house in a suburban neighborhood. When a blonde woman (we later learn is the woman who gave Riley and her daughter a hard time about the cookie-turf) answers the door Riley instantly punches her, propelling her body backwards onto the floor at an exaggerated speed. The speed and impact of the punch on the woman's face are so quick the audience barely has time to process what has happened until the abrupt cut to the next shot which reveals the woman in the kitchen with a bloody nose. The speed and surprise of the punch suggests a comedic tone which is reinforced in the conclusion of the scene when Riley tells the woman "I'm going to burn your house down with you inside it," and then follows-up with, "stop squealing Peg, I'm just kidding." With little other physical action in the film to orient audiences to the capacity of Riley's action body we must assess the strength and power of Riley's body based on these limited and exaggerated moments. The comedic tone and hyperbolic corporeality of the action in these moments, while fleeting, are central to the audience's understanding of Garner's corporeal capacity in the fictional world of the film.

In addition to the exaggerated action choreography *Peppermint's* script also reinforces the skepticism of Riley's bodily capacity. When detectives Beltran and Carmichael are assessing the damage in the aftermath of the warehouse shootout Det. Carmichael challenges Beltran about his theory. "Well, this is a hard sell. You honestly think Riley North did this?" Meanwhile the background media news outlets convey the disbelief of a single suspect theory and the even more unbelievable theory that the suspect is a woman. In a later scene female FBI agent Inman played by Annie Ilonze—

the only woman of color with a speaking role in the film—visits a local skid row where crime seems to have inexplicably vanished. She spots 2 children outside of a disheveled tent next to a trash can fire and asks a local unhoused man “isn't it dangerous at night for the kids?” To which he replies, “Not anymore... We got an angel now.” A dramatic camera swivel aligns Inman’s gaze with the audience to reveal a large mural painted on the side of a building above a row of cardboard tents.

The mural features a hooded Riley flanked on either side by a fanned row of guns designed to resemble angel wings. Riley then becomes, in the fictional world of the film, an other-worldly slightly mythological character, removing her even further from the real-world physical parameters of the spectator and further compromising her corporeal affect.

Many of the films that fall into the female vigilante sub-genre feature some aspect of training most often accompanied by a montage editing sequence which collapses months or years of training into only a few minutes. The most recognizable of these training montage sequences is Stallone in *Rocky*. These sequences allow for audiences to see the action body in the context of display such as the muscular physique of the body, or the growing power and strength of the action hero. The training montage also functions at times as an erotic display of the action body which allows the body to be framed in a voyeuristic erotic gaze outside of specifically erotic settings or scenarios<sup>83</sup>. So not only is this an identifiable marker of the hardbody action film in the 1980's These montages function narratively to show progress of physical strength,

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<sup>83</sup> Drew Ayers, “Bodies, Bullets, and Bad Guys: Elements of the Hardbody Film,” *Film Criticism* 32:3 (Apr. 2008): 51-52.

power, and dexterity. They also reveal the passage of time, and present low-stakes trials for the action body of the main character and a potential boost of confidence through the triumph of surpassing a physical limit or ability. Specifically, though, for the purposes of action characters they function as a way to establish the potential affective corporeality by determining the limits and boundaries of the action body. These training montages are able to express the strength, speed, resilience, and endurance of the action body through the difficulty and ease of certain physical feats. Training montages are so closely associated with the action genre that much of the material produced and distributed on social media outlets leading up to popular Hollywood action films are behind-the-scenes training videos of action stars. Overall, they help to establish the physics of the fictional world as well as the physical capacity of the central action body. Therefore, these scenes can be incredibly capacitating for certain bodies, especially bodies that are, by default, debilitated in certain spaces, such as the female body in the action genre.

In *Peppermint* Riley begins and completes her transformation entirely outside of the frame. The audience is not invited to witness her physical and mental transformation into a homicidal vigilante. Instead, as Riley is being loaded into an ambulance on its way to a psychiatric facility, she breaks free from her restraints and flees. The next shot features a lower thirds title card that reads present day. The audience sees nothing of the time she has spent between that moment and the present moment in the film. The only indication of the passage of time is Riley's hair which has grown out from a choppy pixie cut to a shoulder-length wavy bob. During these elapsed years Riley has clearly developed a sophisticated understanding of weapons and tactical skills, although the

audience is not given any visual or narrative explanation for her newfound talent for killing. The lack of visible skill development via the traditional training montage creates yet another rupture in the affective capacity of Garner's action body. By exaggerating Garner's corporeal capacity *Peppermint* actually creates a non-naturalistic representation of real-world physics. This exaggeration leads to a rupture between the physical world of the film and the spectator's real-world understanding of weight, momentum, force, and impact, which results in a compromised affective capacity for Garner.

All three of these action archetypes occupy a significant portion of the contemporary action cinema pool, however they do not provide an equal representational opportunity when the central action body is female. This is not to say that certain female bodies have not come to represent an affective authority within the action genre. The thin, white, fit, and conventionally beautiful actresses that have embodied these characters became the standard across Hollywood action films.<sup>84</sup> There is indeed much to be said about Charlize Theron's affective corporeality, which is explored in great detail in chapter five, however, she functions as an exception to this pattern within the broader genre tropes. Most female action bodies exist within these three generic spaces and a reliance on these archetypes exposes the limits of affective corporeality for most female action heroes.

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<sup>84</sup> O'Day, "Beauty in Motion," 205.

## Chapter 5: Charlize Theron's Affective Capacity

Charlize Theron's many leading roles in action films, as well as her influence on the industry as a producer, has effectively solidified her status as a prominent action star. Her prominence in the genre of female led action films is explored in this chapter through an extensive analysis of three films starring Theron, one from each of the aforementioned action sub-genre categories. Looking at affective capacity in different archetypal contexts but through a singular body operates as a way to subsequently analyze the embodied qualities that have resulted in Theron's prominence and consistency in the genre's mainstream successes.

The 2015 installment of a 1980's classic action film franchise *Mad Max Fury Road* made big waves in the form of social media backlash as well as celebratory praise for such a feminist action film heroine. It is also not a fact to be overlooked that Charlize Theron action career spans decades going back to roles such as *The Italian Job* (2003) *Aeon Flux* (2005) and culminating in many ways in her role as Andy in Netflix's *The Old Guard* (2020) making her an ideal case study due to do her consistency in leading roles specifically contemporary action films of the last 15 years. Theron is represented in every category in the new Hollywood action cinema cycle: The Assassin in *Atomic Blonde* (2017), both The Warrior and Superhero in *The Old Guard* (2020) and *Hancock* (2008), and the Vigilante in *Mad Max Fury Road* (2015). The films are analyzed in the order of their release and to illustrate how the films exist as an ecosystem of referential markers that when considered as a collective body of work bolsters Theron's affective capacity with each role.

## The Furious Vigilante: Narrative Capacity and Corporeal Affect in *Fury Road*

As mentioned in Chapter 4 the female vigilante subgenre relies on specific containment strategies that excuse or contain female violence through tropes such as the rape-revenge narrative, dual-identities (the pre-trauma domestic female and the post-trauma homicidal vigilante) and loss. The resulting effect is that female vigilante archetypes typically oscillate *between* two modes of representation, one of heteronormative domesticity and the other of homicidal vengeful violence. This is not the case with *Mad Max: Fury Road*. When Furiosa is introduced, she is a fully formed violent vigilante in the middle of her current mission to liberate the sex slaves of Immortan Joe. There is no juxtaposition of her characterization with one of domestic heteronormativity. Furiosa's violence and physical mastery is narratively inherent to her character. While we do get an indication of her past trauma and potential violation at the hands of Immortan Joe (the moment before she kills him, she leans in and asks, "remember me?" indicating a previous violent encounter) this is left intentionally vague. There is no visual juxtaposition of some prior existence, her image and her body are only visually presented in the film as an active, violent, capacitated vigilante.

As a character, Furiosa breaks through the plastic representation of women in action films by achieving not only corporeal affect but also through narrative capacity in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. In order to fully appreciate the narrative capacity of Furiosa's character, it is important to illustrate the narrative structure of *Fury Road* as a war film. The plot, power dynamics, and thematic myth of *Fury Road* read as a war epic contextualizes the relationship and the parallels between Max and Furiosa. The physical, visual, and narrative parallels between Max and Furious are heavy motifs

throughout the film and provided much of the source of criticism from Men's Rights Groups leading up to the film's release.

Aaron Clarey, a well-known men's rights activist, wrote a blog calling for a boycott of the film due to a feminist agenda.<sup>85</sup> Throughout the blog Clarey references moments from the film which specifically speak to the narrative prominence of Furiosa's character over Max. "Clarey admits he has not seen the film yet, but his self-proclaimed 'spidey sense' noticed that Charlize Theron 'talked a lot during the trailers' for the film, and he said Tom Hardy only seemed to have cameo appearances."<sup>86</sup> *Fury Road* even makes a point to go beyond parallels between male and female action heroes by allowing Furiosa's narrative and physical prominence to eclipse Max which is evidenced by the forthcoming *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* (2024). The critical and popular reception of the film was resoundingly positive. The film grossed more than \$40 million opening weekend and over \$300 million worldwide. Clearly the call for a boycott had very little clout and even the reviews of the film were largely positive, championing Miller's return to the franchise. "Miller ... dreamed the mighty dream that is this film for more than a decade before being able to bring it to life. It has been worth the wait."<sup>87</sup> Brian Eggert 4/4 review speaks to the use of and use of practical effects and stunts: "The viewer becomes swept up in the forward-moving narrative impetus, thrilled to audible gasps by Miller's wonderfully excessive parade of stunts and effects, each more impressive and

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<sup>85</sup> Aaron Clarey, "Why You Should Not Go See 'Mad Max: Feminist Road,'" *Return of Kings* (December 10, 2015). <https://web.archive.org/web/20151210111522/http://www.donotlink.com/framed?704311>

<sup>86</sup> Lorena O'Neil, "Anti-Feminists Call for Boycott of 'Mad Max: Fury Road,' Citing Feminist Agenda," *The Hollywood Reporter* (May 15, 2015): <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/mens-rights-activists-boycott-mad-795658/>

<sup>87</sup> Turban, Kenneth, "Mad Max, kicks a post-apocalyptic extravaganza into overdrive," *LA Times*, (May 14, 2015): <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-mad-max-review-20150515-column.html>

more fantastically outlandish than the last.”<sup>88</sup> Currently the film sits with a 97% certified fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes, an 8.1/10 on IMDb and a 90% positive on Metacritic.

The conversations about the film circulating in online fan spaces appeared to be specifically concerned with screen time and narrative prominence of the character Max Rockatansky. On a reddit thread dedicated to the complaints about Max’s prominence in the film Davis\_Crawfish writes “Mad Max: Fury Road” is still very much about Mad Max. He gets more screen time; he has more action scenes. Even when Furiosa wows him with a perfect shot, he ones up her in the next scene. Never once does the movie turn into a Furiosa movie with Mad Max sidelined.”<sup>89</sup> Person McHuman writes, “It’s absolutely more about Furiosa. It’s a film about her from Max’s point of view.”

SuperSecretSunshine follows up with “I thoroughly disagree, regardless of Max having more screentime, his scenes are not nearly as meaty or memorable. The conflict and goals of the journey also skew more towards Furiosa and her arc. Max’s presence is night and day compared to his role in *The Road Warrior*. You disproved your own point by calling it “her journey” also.” These sentiments seem to indicate that the fans are explicitly concerned with whose film it is and what might happen if the franchise gets a new protagonist.

Tying this visibility concern back in with Clarey’s call to boycott *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Schowalter et al. in their analysis of Clarey’s blog claim that the response to the trailer and the subsequent attention the Clarey’s blog offers a glimpse “into the parasitic nature of misogynistic film criticism.” That the language of the criticism of *Mad Max:*

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<sup>88</sup> <https://www.deepfocusreview.com/reviews/mad-max-fury-road/>

<sup>89</sup>

[https://www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/18c1r71/people\\_who\\_complained\\_mad\\_max\\_fury\\_road\\_was\\_more/](https://www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/18c1r71/people_who_complained_mad_max_fury_road_was_more/)

Fury Road “trots out well-known feminist arguments about misrepresentations, underrepresentation, and vilification as a way to push back against the purported symbolic annihilation of men through “feminist propaganda.”<sup>90</sup> In essence, prominent female characters in the action genre still evoke strong responses due to the genre’s historically unchallenged presentation of an idealized hegemonic masculinity. Despite fans’ concerns about screentime and narrative prominence Furiosa and Max’s physical mastery and skills present with equal narrative significance and corporeal affect. Max is not always the central action body; in most instances Furiosa occupies the action body space and it is her movements, postures and actions that are driving the narrative.

When looking closely at the details and structure of the fictional world of *Fury Road* and specifically Immortan Joe’s “kingdom,” elements of the war film become apparent. Immortan Joe’s domain, the “Citadel” is structured very much like a medieval monarchy. There is a single ruler with ultimate power and an obsession with producing a genetically pure heir. The class structure is determined by access to resources, the lowest class having the least access to resources which are hoarded and sparsely distributed. The jobs within the Citadel are determined by both genetic purity and gender. Women who are still able to produce milk (but do not meet heteronormative standards of beauty) provide the “palace” with an alternative to drinking water. Women who are genetically pure (unaffected by radiation poisoning) and do meet heteronormative beauty standards are locked away and kept as “wives” by Joe and are made to “breed” the next heir. The workers in the Citadel are called “war boys” or “war

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<sup>90</sup> Dana Schowalter, Shannon Stevens, and Daniel L. Horvath. *The Misogynistic Backlash Against Women-Strong Films*. (New York: Routledge, 2021).

pups” all of whom are severely disfigured or diseased from radiation poisoning. Joe sends them on raids to retrieve gas (another valued resource).

Imperator Furiosa is Immortan’s most venerated driver. As Furiosa prepares to set out on another ‘raid’, Joe gathers the kingdom to celebrate and announce her mission as if sending a knight into battle. The people cheer for her as she climbs into her ‘war rig’ and leads the ‘war party’ into the desert. She is referred to by Joe and the Citadel as *Imperator Furiosa*, an indication of her status in the military rankings of the war boys. The war boys on her rig refer to her as ‘boss’ and obediently follow her orders with a sense of pride, at least until it is revealed that she is ‘stealing’ Joe’s wives and attempting to escape the Citadel.

Once the war boys discover her true intentions, they do whatever they can to stop Furiosa and return the wives in the hope of gaining praise, valor, and glory from Immortan Joe. Furiosa breaks from the war party and sets off towards “the green place,” her place of origin and from where she was kidnapped as a child. Max stumbles into Furiosa’s path when he is captured and used as blood supply by one of Immortan’s war boys. Max finally reaches Furiosa’s rig dying of thirst and after a raucous battle with Furiosa he forces her at gunpoint to allow him a ride on the rig. What begins for Max as a means of survival – joining Furiosa and the wives on the war rig – transforms into a battle for redemption for himself and Furiosa.

Max’s intentions in the beginning of the narrative as a lone survivor whose agenda, is entirely individualistic and anti-heroic, frames Furiosa’s agenda in comparison as selfless and moralistic, effectively prioritizing her narrative agenda over Max’s as the driving force of action. Her actions are driven by a concern for the greater

good and a desire to protect the innocent. In contrast Max, initially, is only acting in service to himself, his actions are driven by a concern for his own survival and desire to be isolated; to retrieve his car and head back out into the desert alone. Max is reluctant to attach himself to Furiosa's cause, and while he eventually is willing to put his life on the line for others, it is through circumstance not specifically a moral obligation that he joins and fights alongside Furiosa. When reading *Fury Road* as a war film it becomes clear that the ambiguous relationship between Max and Furiosa is that of comrades in battle or "brothers"-in-arms. Sherri Inness's discussion of *Blood of Heroes* suggests that tough women are often also positioned as the love interest alongside male counterparts<sup>91</sup> and this is still a prevalent Hollywood standard such as the woman of the *Mission Impossible* franchise. However, *Fury Road* breaks away from this trope by depicting a platonic relationship between Max and Furiosa. While there is a clear sense of affection, and even intimacy present between Max and Furiosa, it is not of a romantic nature, but rather something more akin to a shared understanding and experience. In the context of the fictional world of *Fury Road*, Max and Furiosa are comrades or allies, the moments of affection between them depict something closer to soldiers on a battlefield than romantic love. As Max cradles Furiosa's battered limp body and touches his head to hers this can be read as a recognition and respect for her and all that they have fought through together. This is also reinforced in Max's exit from the Citadel at the end of the film. As in a typical war film when the war ends soldiers part ways and return home. As Furiosa returns to the Citadel to liberate the people and

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<sup>91</sup> Sheena A. Inness, *Tough girls : women warriors and wonder women in popular culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

begin a new world, Max slips away in the crowd, they lock eyes and Max gives her a subtle nod of recognition and approval.

Their physical mastery and action bodies are also often mirrored or paralleled throughout the spectacular action sequences. The matching buzz-cuts and tandem fight stances present a strong visual parallel between the characters. With minimal dialogue needed to communicate, they anticipate each other's movements and actions and respond intuitively to each other. This not only reinforces Theron's narrative capacity but also her physical capacity and corporeal affect. For instance, in their very first encounter Max stumbles onto Furiosa and the wives outside the war rig.

Thirsty and desperate to be freed from the chain that tethers him to Nux (a war boy attempting to retrieve the wives), Max pulls a gun on one of the wives demanding water and bolt cutters. Furiosa has removed her metal prosthetic arm which is now hanging from the side of the rig out of reach, so she is forced to fight Max with her amputated arm exposed. When Max is momentarily distracted Furiosa runs and leaps into him tackling his body to the ground. The force is so great that Nux's unconscious body flails across the ground still bound to Max by the chain. She disarms Max and delivers a few punches across his face – with her amputated arm – she then pins his face to the ground and attempts to fire the gun which does not go off. In a succession of rapid movements and counter movements Max and Furiosa trade blows and attempt to immobilize the other. Furiosa swings the bolt cutters down towards Max as he scrambles away, eventually blocking the blows with a detached car door. The force of her blows is enunciated through the sound of metal on metal as the bolt-cutters hit the door, and the impact of the force is observed as dents and marks appear in the door

with each moment of contact. On the last blow the bolt cutters get lodged in the door and Max launches the door up into Furiosa's face. She falls backwards and the tight shot on her face reveals a bloody nose from the impact of the door. She raises her head and shakes, clearly stunned from the blow. She pushes herself upright on her amputated arm and leaps for the truck. Nux and Max trip her with the chain causing her body to hit the ground with an audible thud, but she stands again and reaches for something under the truck. The shot cuts to two human skulls mounted on the side of the truck chassis, she punches through the skulls shattering them and revealing a handgun. Nux then lunges forward and grabs both her legs bringing her to the ground. Max then retrieves the handgun but just as he begins to turn Furiosa wriggles free from Nux and tackles Max into the side of the truck tank pinning his hand and the gun. They struggle over the gun Max releases the magazine and it falls to the ground behind them. Furiosa forces the gun towards Max's head and fires with the round still left in the chamber. Max is able to turn just as the gun goes off discharging right next to his face. The shot is followed by a high-pitched ringing sound simulating the auditory aftermath of a round discharging in such close proximity to a person's eardrum. The wives grab the chain still attached to Max's metal facemask and he flails backwards onto the ground. Furiosa charges towards him and wraps the chain around his neck grunting and yelling as she pulls the chain tighter. Max then plunges his elbow into her side and frees

himself tackling her to the ground the two roll across the ground each attempting to maintain the dominant position on top of the other.

Finally, Max jabs the discarded magazine back into the gun, pins Furiosa's arms behind her and fires three shots into the dirt around her head, ultimately regaining physical control of the scene. The violent physical exchange between the two reveals



*Figure 5.1: Charlize Theron and Tom Hardy fight, Mad Max: Fury Road*

how well matched they are in fighting and physical mastery. Max is only able to subdue Furiosa with the threat of a gun. This scene also establishes the corporeal affect of the two characters. The affect of the violence and physical exertion are expressed

through their breath, sweat, contorted faces, and the correlating injuries as blows make contact with the material flesh of their bodies. The weight and momentum of physical movement is expressed through the combination of a displacement of surrounding objects such as the dirt, the chain, the metal door, the bolt cutters and the exertion of the bodies on screen when they lift certain objects or collide with other bodies. Through a delicate choreography of physical postures, the weight of bodies and objects in the fictional world becomes legible and authentic for the spectator and the resulting sensation is that the bodies onscreen are experiencing exertion, momentum, weight,

impact, and pain in a fictional setting that feels as close to real-world physics for the spectators.

Another important parallel between Max and Furiosa is that they also each carry what can be read as ‘battle wounds.’ Furiosa’s battle wounds are visible, the burn on the back of her neck and most significantly her severed arm. These are a corporeal representation of her experiences with violence and the physical toll of fighting previous unseen battles. Although her past physical experiences with violence are left slightly vague, it is clear through her characterization and her physical mastery that her past informs her aggression, fighting skills, and her particularly savage and aggressive displays of violence. In the action sequences throughout the film, she is presented as calculated, and restrained, but also highly volatile, effective and inspiring. Unlike Furiosa, Max’s wounds are not visible, they are mental. Throughout the film, Max suffers horrifying flashbacks of victims he was unable to save, they call out for his help as they die. It is significant that Furiosa wears the physical scars of war and survival while Max carries the specifically invisible scars connected to trauma. Mental instability is often used to contain or explain violent women. It follows the prescribed notion that women are too emotional and not able to control their own minds. Violent women are often framed as hysterical, not rational, as men are presumed to be.<sup>92</sup> *Fury Road* inverts this stereotype; Max’s flashbacks and hallucinations do not feminize him. His masculinity is not compromised by his mental disability, and Furiosa’s physical capacity is not debilitated by her physical disability.

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<sup>92</sup> Neroni, H. (2005). *The violent woman : femininity, narrative, and violence in contemporary American cinema* / Hilary Neroni. State University of New York Press.

The corporeal affect of Furiosa's character is also reinforced through the physical punishment she endures and the unfettered nature in which she sacrifices and demolishes her body during action sequences. With zero indication of self-preservation Furiosa pushes her body to its absolute physical limits in order to liberate the wives, kill Joe, and restore



*Figure 5.2: Furiosa fighting, Mad Max: Fury Road*

hope. In the 'action babe' tradition the female lead in action films is often hurt or injured but her wounds rarely compromise the 'quality' of her physical beauty<sup>93</sup>; she may become disheveled, but the framing, lighting, and costume still emphasize her sexual attractiveness. This can often explain the overdetermination of large phallic weapons used by action babes, as it removes them from any direct physical damage from hand-to-hand combat and avoids any potentially unattractive exertion or physical strain.

While it can be argued that Furiosa's war rig represents her phallic weapon, by the final fight she is engaging entirely in hand-to-hand combat. During the extensive battle scenes when Furiosa is stripped of weapons she uses her arms, legs, hands, and face to inflict pain and injury. Her physical mastery is uncompromised; she is not reliant on weapons and is able to carry out the physical feats using only her body. One specific example is during her encounter with Rictus in which, her body being pinned, she rears back and bashes him in the face with her head resulting in a significant toll on her physical appearance. Her face and body are mangled and disfigured. The substantial

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<sup>93</sup> Purse, Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 81



Figure 5.3: Furiosa damaged face, *Mad Max: Fury Road*

injuries sustained during the final fight scene leaves her barely clinging to life. As Max desperately attempts to save her life her battle wounds begin to appear; her face is swollen almost beyond recognition, and she gargles on her own blood

as she struggles to breathe.

Miller's investment in presenting a realistic depiction of physical violence is so unflinching that Furiosa is not restored to her pre-battle features even by the end of the film. The film's final shot is of Furiosa's mangled, swollen face. Miller's attention in *Fury Road* to the bodily damage sustained during the action sequences also informs the corporeal affect of the action body, specifically Furiosa's action body. By investing in an authentic representation of corporeal physicality through pain, exertion, and injury the audience is not severed from the affective sensations that correlate to the physical feats they witness on screen.

### **Atomic Blonde (2017):**

The fourth chapter details some of the prototypical elements of representation pertaining to the female spy action subgenre. To summarize there is specific focus on the female body as a site of mystery, allure, intrigue and sexual desire. This is achieved through a focus on beauty, disguise, sexual appeal, costuming and also through the

types of action postures of the female assassin archetype. Such as, dispatching bad guys in evening wear or posing as a sex worker in lingerie as a ploy to isolate their targets resulting in sexually suggestive blocking during the fight scenes. *Atomic Blonde* attempts to utilize some of the narrative elements of female espionage but makes a concerted effort to avoid a sexually exploited female action protagonist. Produced by Theron, *Atomic Blonde* was developed from the graphic novel “The Coldest City” by Antony Johnson about a spy and set in Cold War era Berlin. Theron plays Lorraine Broughton, an MI6 agent sent into tense and violent Berlin in 1989 just days before the fall of the wall. Broughton is to retrieve a “package” containing a list of every active intelligence agent in Berlin. The package turns out to be a Stasi office who memorized the entire list so she must now escort him safely across the wall to West Berlin. Directed by David Leitch, a former stunt coordinator who co-directed *John Wick* in 2014, *Atomic Blonde* is Leitch's official directorial debut.

The film opens with a five-minute chase sequence in which a man in a bathrobe and boots is chased through the streets of Berlin. He frantically and clumsily hoists himself over fences and gates, disheveled and out of breath he turns to look behind him at his pursuant. He emerges from an alleyway only to be hit by a car and pinned into a parked van. The car then backs up releasing his broken body from between the vehicles. A man emerges from the car and fires a single shot into his head and then dumps the man's lifeless body into the river. This opening chase sequence establishes that the physics of the fictional world of *Atomic Blonde* are indistinguishable from the real-world physics of the spectator. Meaning that the affect of the fight scenes later in the film will be at its most effectual and potent for the spectator.

The introduction shot of Broughton is a direct overhead of a bath filled with ice cubes. Theron's face slowly emerges from the ice bath and the camera pans down to her back as she sits up in the tub. Almost no part of her back is devoid of severe bruises and injuries. The camera shifts to her face and arms which are also entirely battered and bruised. The next shot she sits in front of a window overlooking the London skyline naked on the edge of the tub, the visible bruises continue down the rest of her back and legs, her posture is slumped and weary. She then stands at the bathroom counter; bandages line the sink as she picks one up and wraps it around her bloodied knuckle. Her movements are slow and concerted; she winces in pain when she shifts her weight. She picks up a bottle from a collection of medicine bottles and swallows a few pills. She looks up into the mirror and flips a switch, a bright white light floods her face almost washing her out entirely. As the camera slowly adjusts to the shift in light the true extent of her injuries comes into view.

She looks directly into the mirror (camera) and begins the work of attempting to minimize the multiple injuries to her face. She has a black eye, busted lip, and a collection of bruises and cuts across her face. With zero context the scene almost reads as a story of intimate partner violence. The final shot of the scene is a slow zoom out from a long shot of her battered naked body facing away from the camera. This type of introduction to the film's female protagonist has a few significant effects. It presents her body as legible and real. She is not a plastic action



*Figure 5.4: Charlize Theron as Lorraine Broughton, Atomic Blonde (2017)*

babe who comes out of battles unscathed. This display reveals the material flesh of her body, not as a sexual object but as a human body with a corporeal relationship to the physical world around her. This scene is also significant in the context of the female spy/assassin tradition because it strips the body down to the raw bodily flesh of the character alleviating any airs of allure or mystery and punctures any sexual fantasies tied to the interchangeability of her look. By revealing Broughton in this way from the onset the audience is not entranced by the shifting costumes and wigs, they instead are able to see the disguises as functional tools of the espionage trade.

From the bathroom scene forward, everything that Broughton puts on her body feels like a costume. The audience is not teased by the potential of a voyeuristic glimpse at a scantily clad Lorraine Broughton donning a new disguise. Instead, the tease is futile because the audience has already seen what is underneath the facade. This opening scene also pulls the audience out of a voyeuristic viewing position à la Laura Mulvey because Lorraine, while standing naked and alone in her bathroom, looks directly into the camera. This seemingly innocuous moment actually gives Theron command of the gaze, she is not just being looked at, she is looking back.

The fight scenes in the film are grueling and authentic both due to the extremely long uninterrupted takes as well as the absence of typical cinematic action sequence tactics such as speeding up the frame rate to increase the perceived speed of movement. These tactics make the action feel more spectacular, but it denigrates the affective connection to the real-world physics of the spectator. The action sequences in *Atomic Blonde* also do not utilize a static camera for a majority of the scenes. Instead, Leitch opts for the handheld Steadicam and positions the audience in the center of the

action moments. The naturalistic posture of the Steadicam resembles the movements and gestures of the human body as the camera leans in and out of the action scenes and stumbles backwards and forwards to get the perfect angle on the fight. The Steadicam often mimics the postures of the actors as they regain balance and steady themselves for the next phase of the fight. This technique amplifies their affective capacity by extending the action body to include the audience. The audience is invited into the action space with the characters, and they are moved and jostled during the fight just as the characters are (hence the impetus behind the title of this project, *moving bodies*, as in characters' bodies and audiences' bodies). This phenomenon is the result of the combination of affective capacity and corporeal affect in the action film, which will be explored in greater detail in the discussion section.

The corporeal affect of Theron's body in *Atomic Blonde* is achieved through the careful and intentional choreography of the fight scenes. In addition to extensive training and preparation for the filming Theron and Leitch coordinated movements and postures for fight scenes that would feel as real as possible for the audience. According to an article by Eliana Dockterman for *Time* magazine:

The film's violence will make some viewers uncomfortable. In one sequence that only lasts about 20 minutes but feels like an hour, Lorraine is thrown down a flight of stairs, shot at, stabbed and repeatedly punched. Much of it is shot in a single, excruciating take that leaves Theron's character and one of her assailants gasping for breath and struggling to stand upright...Most directors are reluctant to show women with black eyes, let alone being hit. So they pit female heroes against female villains, or pretend petite women can flip 200-lb. men, or simply cut away during fight scenes. Leitch argued there was no reason to "make allowances for the fact that she's a woman." Adds Leitch, "For me it's more compelling to be with her while she's suffering." Theron agreed. "It's a disservice to women. Part of it is male filmmakers not being comfortable with putting a woman in that position," she says. "If a female spy is sent into the field, why wouldn't she experience the same sh-t as a male spy?" Before filming began, Theron spent four hours a day training at the gym Leitch founded with his John Wick co-director, Chad Stahelski. They

concentrated on realistic moves a woman could actually use against a 6 ft. 4 in. opponent.<sup>94</sup>

The careful and intentional choreography referenced in the above passage is evidenced in the particulars of the fighting style performed in the film. In instances where Theron is executing moves that require her to hoist a 200lb man



Figure 5.5: Stairwell fight scene, *Atomic Blonde* (2017)

over her body, kick someone into a wall, or down a staircase, there is a noticeable calculation of leverage, weight, and momentum in her fighting that makes these actions believable for audiences on an affective level. For example, Theron does not stand upright and launch a man over her head onto the ground; she instead thrusts herself forward and then crouches all the way to the floor using her body as counterweight and leverage to heave the man over her shoulder. In another fight scene she goes to kick one of the men down a flight of stairs, as he lunges towards her, she jumps upwards and then brings her entire body weight down with the force of the kick to assure she has enough power to counter his weight and momentum.

Theron and Leitch's insights suggest a clear knowledge about the expectations of action film audiences to which they acquiesce through the construction of action sequences in *Atomic Blonde*. Specifically, that, a.) audiences care about the authenticity

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<sup>94</sup> Eliana Dockterman, "How Charlize Theron Invents a New Kind of Badass in the Stylish *Atomic Blonde*," *Time* (July 26, 2017). <https://time.com/4874478/charlize-theron-atomic-blonde/>

of fight scenes, b.) audiences are able to recognize the affective capacities of the bodies on screen, and c.) audiences were ready to see a female action star perform this type of action-violence, even if other directors are still leery of how to portray violent women.

### **The Old Guard (2020): Ushering in the Capacitated Black Female Body**

The superhero subgenre of action films specifically focuses on bodies with superhuman capacity. This means that while the action body is layered with a superhuman ability and through the spectacle of the action genre the superhero action sequences are constructed around displaying the superhuman extensions of the central action body. Tasker describes the spectacle and patterns of the superhero subgenre as: "... expressed via his/her enhanced body, intelligence or weaponry. An accelerating pattern of action sequences both demonstrates and extends the hero's abilities so that by the climax stunts and combat sequences are more demanding, louder and more spectacular underlining the enhanced hero at work. Although in superhero cinema the central characters are by definition extraordinary (even in some instances god-like), these action cinema patterns remain in place." Essentially, the parameters of the action genre's attention to affect and spectacle remain intact however the corporeal affective capacity of the action body for the superhero archetype is often compromised due to the non-human aspects of the character and their physical ability. This does not mean that the physics of the fictional world are disregarded but rather that they are expressed through the lens and context of fantasy rather than a real-world correlation to bodily comportment.

Another notable generic pattern for superhero action films is that female superheroes are also frequently featured as part of a team either managed or outnumbered by men e.g., Storm in *X-Men* (2001), Black Widow in *The Avengers* (2012), Diana in *Justice League* (2017), Sue Storm in *Fantastic Four* (2005). *The Old Guard* (2020) follows this generic pattern featuring a team of mostly men however, the team is led by Andy (Theron) and this leadership role is not understated, it is reiterated throughout the film that she's the 'boss' in charge of the 3 men on her team. Theron's character is the oldest and founding member of the team and makes the ultimate decisions about what missions the team takes on and how the missions are carried out.

Edited by Terilyn Shropshire and directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood *The Old Guard* features two black female creatives behind the camera, the first for an action-comic book film.<sup>95</sup> Netflix's *The Old Guard* (2020) achieves affective capacity for black female bodies in representation as well as authorship. Shropshire and Prince-Bythewood's creative presence embodies capacity for black female bodies on and off screen. Netflix has proven to be a lucrative alternative to the rigid gatekeeping of the Hollywood movie industry but with considerable cultural and economic capital, making it an ideal distribution outlet for *The Old Guard*. Starring Theron as Andy and Kiki Layne as Nile, the film deviates slightly from traditional action genres in its depiction of supernatural elements but as with most action films, features intense close contact fight scenes and group battle scenes.

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<sup>95</sup> *The Old Guard* was a 2017 comic series published by Image Comics. Written by Greg Rucks (best known for his runs on Wonder Woman and Gotham Central) and drawn by Leandro Fernandez (who had drawn several issues of the Spider-Man and the Punisher, as well as the comic adaptation of *Mad Max: Fury Road*), *The Old Guard* was optioned by Skydance Media in 2017, and the creators began a second volume of the series in 2019.

*The Old Guard* tells the story of four warriors who have mysteriously been gifted with immortality. They cannot be killed, and they do not age. Andy, Booker, Joe and Nicky, all different ages but all centuries old, move through the world together fighting the ubiquitous forces of evil they encounter. They are connected through a shared subconscious in which they experience the same dreams and emotions as each of the other immortals. On a mission to rescue a group of kidnapped schoolgirls in Sudan they are ambushed. Their execution and subsequent reanimation are captured on camera which fuels an opportunistic pharmaceutical executive Stephen Merrick to pursue the group in order to discover their source of immortality. The group is eventually captured by Merrick's forces and tortured, until the newest member of the immortals rescues the group. The opening action sequence establishes the superhuman abilities of the main characters in accordance with a real-world presentation of physics. The immortals are not able to die however they are not immune to injury or pain. Their bodies are presented as material flesh with their only superhuman quality being the ability to heal rapidly from any wound or injury, including fatal ones. This characteristic is illustrated in the ambush scene when the original four are lured into an underground room outnumbered and gunned down.

Armed with H&K G36C automatic assault rifles Merrick's men empty their entire magazines into the four. The immortals' bodies flail and spasm as they are littered with bullets. A tight shot on Theron's face reveals



Figure 5.6: Charlize Theron as Andy, *The Old Guard* (2020)

bullet wounds in her head and cheek, and her fully dilated eyes. The reflective floor mirrors her face and reflects it as a grotesque skull emphasizing the macabre affect of the shot. As the shot lingers on Andy her pupils suddenly shrink and she gasps for air as the bullets slowly leak from her face. This opening scene helps to establish how the film presents corporeal affect for these non-realist immortal bodies. The exertion, pain, and damage to the body is still constructed as realistic but the threat of death is essentially removed. This presents a uniquely liberating scenario for depicting corporeal affect, in this fictional context the injuries sustained by the bodies can be accurate, grotesque, and graphically detailed without indicating any level of mortal wounding. It essentially allows for an extension of the materiality of the corporeal body but does not denigrate the affective capacity of their active bodies.

Nile, a young black female marine who is killed in action in Afghanistan is the newest addition to the group. Once the other warriors dream of her death Andy, the oldest and the group leader, sets out to find Nile. The characterization of Andy and Nile functions as an affective allegory of Theron ushering in a young black female action hero into prominence in the genre. Andy, the more seasoned and experienced of the two, is jaded and cynical about the world. Just before Nile's character is introduced Andy spouts off a bitter sentiment "Let the world burn for all I care." This is followed by an immediate cut to Nile in a United States Marine Corps uniform negotiating with locals in Afghanistan. It cannot be overlooked that the sentiments of the two women – one willing to let the world burn, the other serving her country in a foreign war – are positioned as opposing views. Andy is also dismissive of Nile's Christian devotion, telling her that God is not real. This positions Andy as morally, politically, and

philosophically un-American while Nile's character upholds the traditional values of American patriotism. Nile presents a non-threatening black female capacity. She is a U.S. Marine who is killed in action which in the current cultural climate of American patriotism affords her character unchallenged reverence. While this may seem insignificant, the significance becomes clear when considering the implications of reversing the characterization. What this juxtaposed characterization reinforces is the affective capacity of Nile as a black female action hero ready to do what's right and save the world, and positions Andy as a capacitated white female hero who is tired of saving the world.

The black feminist influence of the film's production is felt throughout the film in other subtle but significant ways. For instance, Nile's unit consists primarily of queer bodies and women of color depicting a diverse and feminist military presence which reinforces the diegetic world of capacitated female bodies. Nile functions as the hero and the immortal group's sense of morality. She displays a stronger moral compass amongst the group of mercenaries that have resigned to their fate and never question their actions. "We do what we feel is right" says Nicky when asked by Nile how they choose their missions. It is the physical presence of a young black woman entering their space that challenges their sense of self-righteousness. Nile literally and figuratively pushes back against their prescribed notions of balance and justice asking questions about the missions, refusing to simply take orders and fall in line, and rejecting the relentless killing of innocent soldiers who get in their way. Nile's heroism culminates in her choice to either return to her family or rescue the captive immortals. Nile breaks into the facility and repeatedly sacrifices her body to save the others, concluding with an

explosive gesture to save Andy. She launches her body towards Merrick and out of the high story window, plummeting to the ground, and ensuring Merrick's death. This intersection of morality and physicality gives Nile's character both affective and narrative capacity.

Nile represents not only a capacitated black female embodiment but also acts as an extension of the disembodied through her connection to other tormented immortals. When Nile is awoken from a horrific dream Joe and Nicky tell the story of the first immortal Andy found, Quynh (another young woman of color). Quynh and Andy were captured and accused of witchcraft in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century during the witch trials. Quynh was put into an iron maiden<sup>96</sup> and cast off into an unknown sea. "I feel her pain. Her rage." Nile describes her ability to feel Quynh's torment. Nile's connection to the unseen bodies that have come before her, specifically those that have been violently punished and suffered elevates her affective capacity. This mental connection to tormented bodies also attaches her character to the lineage of subjugated black and brown bodies so that her capacity extends beyond her body to include the disembodied female action hero.

In many ways the film still prioritizes a white feminist agenda. Most of Andy's interactions with Nile revolve around sharing battle techniques, worldly wisdom and teaching Nile how to use her newfound capacity through immortality. Nile's physical capacity on screen is ultimately undermined by her youth and naivety. However, the film's strongest themes of identity, humanity, and torture being told through a black

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<sup>96</sup> The iron maiden is a torture device, consisting of a solid iron cabinet with a hinged front and spike-covered interior, sufficiently tall to enclose a human being.

feminist gaze are imbued with levity. The black female action hero in *The Old Guard* is made visible—although through a neo-liberal frame—and is no longer relegated to a disembodied offscreen presence. *The Old Guard* has presented an avenue through which the action film genre stands to gain significant strides in its potential for the affective capacity of female bodies and has laid important groundwork for future depictions of female action archetypes.

## Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

Having complicated, diverse female heroes elevates the storytelling. It's given us more places to go to and things to play with. It's about eliminating these tropes, these ideas that women can only live and breathe in the action genre if they've been motivated by some great loss, or their husband had died, or their child was taken. All these trope-y things are slowly disappearing, and you're seeing women living and breathing in these worlds the way men have for centuries. We don't have to explain ourselves anymore. We can fight and save the world and make a mess, and we don't have to have some reason behind it. We can just live and breathe and be. – Charlize Theron 2020<sup>97</sup>

### Charlize Theron's Impact on the Action Genre

Charlize Theron is a 48-year-old single mother living in LA. She has a Hollywood film career that spans almost three decades. She was born outside Benoni, South Africa, where she studied ballet at a performing arts boarding school. She began to pursue modeling as a teen and moved to Milan to begin her career as a working model at the age of 16. She then moved to New York and continued modeling while studying at the Joffrey Ballet School. There she suffered an injury that prevented her from pursuing work as a professional ballet dancer. She relocated to LA and began booking acting jobs in the mid 1990s. Her career began to flourish, and she landed roles in more prominent films such as *Cider House Rules* (1999) and



Figure 6.1: J'Adore by Dior Poster feat. Charlize Theron

*The Italian Job* (2003). In 2004 she won her first Academy Award for Best Actress for

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<sup>97</sup> Devan Coggan, "Charlize Theron Reflects on the Importance of Action Heroines: 'We can fight and save the world and make a mess,'" *Entertainment Weekly*, 1592/1593 (August 2020): 34-36.

her role as Aileen Wuornos in *Monster*, a role that required an extreme physical transformation. She was praised not only for the performance but also for the physical transformation.

In 2004 she signed an unprecedented brand ambassador contract with Dior to be the face of the long-term perfume campaign. The contract was originally written for 11 years with a full payout of \$55 million but was extended; she has now been the face of the brand for 20 years.<sup>98</sup> It remains one of the highest-paid brand endorsements to date.<sup>99</sup> Theron began working as a producer in 2003 when she launched her production company Denver & Delilah. She claims that the inspiration to produce came out of a fear about the financial backers for *Monster* only wanting “a hot lesbian movie with me and Christina Ricci.”<sup>100</sup> She has since made it her goal to create safe and supportive

Everyone's acting like Zac Efron as Ted Bundy is the best thing and I'm over here like Hey! Charlize Theron as Aileen Wuornos...



Figure 6.2: Collage: Headshot of Theron/Theron in *Monster*/Aileen Wuornos

environments for female creatives stating that she “want[s] to create environments that feel like the things that I wish I had 30 years ago when I started.”<sup>101</sup>

<sup>98</sup>Mark Elgon, “Charlize Theron Remains the Ultimate Dior Woman as the Face of the New L’Or de J’adore Fragrance,” *The Fashion Spot* (August 31, 2023): <https://www.thefashionspot.com/fashion-news/878572-charlize-theron-remains-the-ultimate-dior-woman-as-the-face-of-the-new-lor-de-jadore-fragrance/>

<sup>99</sup>Umesh Bhagchandani, “10 highest-paid celebrity brand endorsements, ranked: from Charlize Theron’s US\$55 million Dior contract to Beyoncé and Taylor Swift’s rival deals with Pepsi and Diet Coke,” *Style* (September 10, 2021): <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3148155/10-highest-paid-celebrity-brand-endorsements-ranked>

<sup>100</sup> Leah Chernikoff, “Charlize Theron Still Loves Hollywood. She Just Wants It To Be Better,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, 3705 (September 2022). <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a41231538/charlize-theron-interview-october-2022/>

<sup>101</sup> Leah Chernikoff. “Charlize Theron Has Sustained a Career in Hollywood For More Than a Quarter Century Because She Still Loves It and Wants It To Be Better (And Because Her Kids Are Watching Too,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, 3706 (October 2022): 108.

As a former ballet dancer, model, academy award winner, and 20+ year run as the glamorous face of Dior, Theron is able to exemplify the idealized Hollywood body and glamor while simultaneously maintaining status as a dedicated and serious actress. This affords her particular freedoms when it comes to how she approaches the physical and subsequently affective elements of action roles. Partially, as a result of her significant transformation for *Monster*, she is an actress audiences recognize as not only talented but malleable, due to her willingness to compromise her features to embody a character. This gives Theron an affective capacity that extends beyond the screen and also carries over from screen role to screen role. Due to her A-list Hollywood status most audiences will have been exposed to her glamorous form – either through red carpet appearances or her glamorous perfume ads – but they are invited to suspend that image when they invest in watching her embody a character that does not present as glamorous or even conventionally beautiful. Her ability to convincingly present an authentic uncompromised performance and follow it up with a glamorous red-carpet appearance helps to expose the artifice of Hollywood glamor and the power of an affective performance.

The previous chapter looks into the different ways that Theron has conveyed affective corporeality in her action film roles. For action stars this often means committing to a potentially unflattering presentation of the face and body in order to authentically convey exertion, strength, pain, impact and injury. For male action stars in Hollywood this has not been a significant drawback considering that rugged masculinity is served by imperfect features. However, for women in Hollywood conventional Eurocentric beauty is still clout and currency which has been exposed and challenged

by the recent surge of attention to sexist rituals and behaviors associated with red carpet appearances such as #askhermore, #allbodies, and #oscarssowhite. For female action stars, the enduring investment in Eurocentric feminine beauty has led to the tendency towards sexually objectified characters and stereotypes such as the ‘action babe’ which allows action stars to present as beautiful and ‘kick-ass.’

For Theron, her star persona incorporates the “uncertainties generated by her image,” a notion that Tasker identified as particular to female action stars.<sup>102</sup> In other words, her transformative capacity is written into her media and star persona.<sup>103</sup> Audiences are already attuned to her ability to temporarily transform her face and body for a dramatic role, therefore they are primed to believe that for an action role she would adopt the physical traits and dexterity required of an action star. Audiences can then anticipate the dedication and commitment they had come to expect from Theron, that she would not retreat from displays of disfigurement required of her role.<sup>104</sup> This, coupled with extensive and calculated media campaigns detailing her training and physical mastery, has solidified her affective capacity and corporeal affect as ingrained aspects of her star persona (and celebrity performance).

The action genre’s investment in spectacle, and the fairly recent ubiquity of social media, has led to a cultural preoccupation with behind-the-scenes material associated with the special effect and stunt work in action films. Audiences are curious about how

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<sup>102</sup> Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 14.

<sup>103</sup> Richard Dyer, “Stars as Images,” in P. David Marshall (ed.), *The Celebrity Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 153-178.

<sup>104</sup> Corinne Heller, “Revisit the Most Shocking Oscar Movie Role Transformations of All Time,” *E! News* (April 23, 2021): <https://www.eonline.com/news/1261223/revisit-the-most-shocking-oscar-movie-role-transformations-of-all-time>

certain action sequences are executed which suggests that spectators have a keen awareness of the affective capacity of the action body. They are both mesmerized and perplexed by the spectacular physical feats performed by action stars because their connection to real-world bodily comportment and the physics that reinforce their understandings of risk and danger. Media coverage of stunt mechanics, training regimens, and behind-the-scenes footage have provided audiences with insight into the specifics of mitigating the danger for action stars while also bolstering their corporeal authenticity.

When audiences engage with the secondary and tertiary media that surround films dealing with physical capacity, these secondary texts facilitate the affective capacity of the corporeal aspects of these particular media images. For instance, there are a number of media stories that circulate around the filming of big action sequences such as the short film released by paramount pictures and posted on the mission impossible Instagram account: “Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning Part One | The Biggest Stunt in Cinema History (Tom Cruise).”<sup>105</sup> The film details the execution of a complicated stunt performed in *MI: Dead Reckoning* (2023) focusing on the danger and risk involved to perform the stunt as well as Tom Cruises’ dedication to performing the stunt himself, a significant component of his star persona (authenticity). Reports that detail injuries sustained during filming reinforce the risk and danger to action stars, but they also serve as authentication of the corporeality of the action body. During an interview on the Graham Norton show, Daniel Craig discusses the toll filming the Bond

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<sup>105</sup> “Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning Part One | The Biggest Stunt in Cinema History (Tom Cruise)” *Paramount Pictures* (December 19, 2022): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lsFs2615gw>

franchise has taken on his body. He details the litany of injuries he sustained throughout the process such as broken fingers, teeth, his ankle, and a substantial knee injury.<sup>106</sup>

There are similar secondary texts circulated around the release of *Atomic Blonde* which reported that Theron broke two teeth and had to have surgery.

There were some hazards to this line of work. 'My teeth are in bad shape,' Theron said. 'I'm actually still undergoing surgery. It's really crazy. When I trained, I cracked two teeth in the back of my mouth, clenching while fighting, because apparently my arm strength wasn't strong enough.' She had to complete an operation before the shoot started. 'And I'm still f—ing dealing with it,' she sighed.<sup>107</sup>

Another article in *Women's Health* detailed her injuries but also the training regime used to get her into shape for the demanding fight scenes. "For her role as an undercover spy Theron braved 20-hour-day shoots, fighting up to twenty times on set. She dealt with bruised ribs and cracked teeth — shooting *Atomic Blonde* demanded she built a strong body and tough mind."<sup>108</sup> In addition to the press around the films there were social media campaigns that featured videos and images from on set or during training sessions. Both KiKi Layne and Theron posted multiple times leading up to the release of *The Old Guard*.



Figure 6.3: Kiki Layne Instagram post

<sup>106</sup> Graham Norton, "The Worst Injury Daniel Craig Ever Had as 007," *BBC* (September 24, 2021): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-lkmPKLJJM>

<sup>107</sup> Ramin Setoodeh, "Charlize Theron Cracked Two Teeth While Filming 'Atomic Blonde'" *Variety* (March 13, 2017): <https://variety.com/2017/film/news/charlize-theron-atomic-blonde-training-cracked-teeth-1202007730/>

<sup>108</sup> Ally Head, "Why Charlize Theron's PT Wouldn't Let Her Train For More Than 25-Minutes," *Women's Health* (August 10, 2017): <https://www.womenshealthmag.com/uk/fitness/a707032/charlize-theron-atomic-blonde-training/>

The circulation of these texts as separate and outside of the films they reference further facilitates a social and cultural discourse about the corporeal capacity of female bodies. An audience member does not have to consume the YouTube or Instagram videos of behind-the-scenes footage of actors preparing for their roles, nor does an Instagram user have to have seen the film attached to the actors' Instagram stories, but because all of these texts are orbiting in a larger networked media space they are all simultaneously informing the contemporary understandings of female physicality and contribute to a convincing portrayal of female-embodiments of physical strength and power of which Theron is at the forefront.

The significant and distinctive difference between Theron's presentation of the female action body is that she breaks away from the dominant presentations of women characters in the action genre, which have been primarily constructed and controlled by white cisgendered heterosexual men. Theron has made her investment in the naturalistic and real-world physicality of her characters known through extensive behind-the-scenes coverage as well as interviews detailing her approach to the physical aspects of her roles resulting in lasting and impactful affective corporeality that extends from role to role. Her star persona, her hands-on involvement in the creative processes of action films, and her commitment to convincing displays of physical mastery rooted in real-world physical comportment operate as an affective signature, entirely unique to Theron. Theron's affective signature elevates her status as an action star and solidifies her influence on the genre. With each action film that prioritizes the affective corporeality of Theron's characters, she gains more credibility and becomes more legible as an action star for audiences.

Building off of her repertoire of films which have established Theron's affective corporeality she is effectively able to move beyond merely showing audiences action, she is able to *move* audiences. The affective corporeality of her physical mastery and real-world accounts of exertion and injury extends the cinematic experience into the bodies of spectators. Because these depictions prioritize an affective corporeal presentation of physicality over an unrealistic aesthetically pleasing action babe presentation, audiences are not encouraged to simply see Theron's characters onscreen, but to be moved by and with them. The effect of Theron's affective corporeality of physical embodiment stays with audiences longer because it is felt rather than seen. Reminiscent of the affective spectacle of action films writ large, Theron's affective signature in the action genre leaves spectators with a lasting impression audiences associate with Theron and seek to experience again and again.

In the tradition of plastic representation, Theron can be read as an answer to the overdetermined 'plastic' tropes that construct female action stars as 'action babes.' Theron's body is 'made real' for audiences and represents a figurative break from the reliance on typical containment strategies in the action genre which have situated female action stars as either masculine stand-ins for their male counterparts, or oversexualized and unrealistic female action figures. Theron's affective signature has impacted the action genre by offering an understanding and representation of female physical embodiment and physical potency that would previously have been contained or undermined within the gendered history of the action genre. Her in-demand status as an action film star and the anticipation of future action film projects has the potential to perpetually challenge the dominant gender binaries of the action genre.

## **The Affective Spaces of Active Black Female Bodies:**

Textual analysis as a method when applied to certain cultural artifacts (such as film) reveals the narrative tropes, cinematic language, and symbolic meanings that constitute how reality is shaped and stories are told within a specific culture. As a subject of analysis, texts according to Stuart Hall are “literary and visual constructs, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in its widest sense.”<sup>109</sup> Textual analysis as a method uses texts to consider the relationships between media and the social and cultural construction of reality. “From this perspective, texts are thought to provide traces of socially constructed reality which may be understood by considering words, concepts, ideas, themes and issues that reside in texts as they are considered within a particular cultural context.”<sup>110</sup> Textual analysis removes the assumed naturalness and assumed authority of images and visual language to reposition the text as a singular iteration within a larger cultural and political structure. Textual analysis allows the researcher to deconstruct the hypermediated often overdetermined meanings, symbols, and ideological structures of cultural texts.

Although textual analysis can be a revealing method for discerning the structures that determine how meaning is expressed through cultural artifacts, textual analysis is only as strong as the interrogation of the texts allows. Therefore, if when doing textual analysis, a researcher does not interrogate what they are inevitably *able* to look for and

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<sup>109</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997): 17.

<sup>110</sup> Brennan, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 204.

what they are *able* to see within the constructed system that produced the text, textual analysis will only serve to reinforce the meanings that the language of the medium is able to express. Without considering standpoint and positionality the researcher is unable to see the “man behind the curtain” or in other words, to see beyond the veneer of the mediated system which produces constructed meanings that render certain bodies, stories, and ways of seeing illegible or entirely invisible.

It is not enough to resign ourselves as researchers to an analysis of the text alone because the text does not inherently reveal itself as a constructed cultural artifact. “One of the fundamental criticisms of text-based approaches, then, is that they can lead to meanings being “read off” texts in ways that reflect the values and assumptions of the researcher, rather than those of the audience.”<sup>111</sup> The language of film, particularly mainstream Hollywood film, was from its inception designed to suture audiences into the diegesis of the film and feel like a natural extension of the established epistemological structures of western culture. Therefore, the text itself must also be analyzed against or as within the larger structures that prescribe symbolic meanings and determine textual readings.

Expanding textual analysis beyond the limitations of the text allows for consideration of the text as potentially decolonial, anti-racist, *and* feminist. Textual analysis from a black feminist film theory perspective allows the text to be “taken out of context” in the same way a word or a visual can be removed from its paradigmatic context to reveal the constructed nature of the language and system in which it derives its meaning. Textual analysis within a black feminist film theory tradition reveals the

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<sup>111</sup> Michelle Phillipov, “In Defense of Textual Analysis: Resisting Methodological Hegemony in Media and Cultural Studies,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 30:3 (2013): 209-223.

structures of racial hierarchy that designate certain bodies and experiences as legible in a white patriarchal system.

Black feminist theorists such as Candace Owens and Saidiya Hartman have also interrogated the overdetermination and exploitation of the black female body in western culture which cannot be divorced from the societal and cultural meanings produced by the mainstream Hollywood film system. “Many of the meanings associated with blackness in dominant culture are written specifically across the body, an emphasis on physicality that ‘does not allow Blacks to be anything other than their bodies’<sup>112</sup>” This emphasis does, however, make the African American a good ‘fit’ for the universe of action cinema, which is itself predicated on a preoccupation with physicality and the body as spectacle.”<sup>113</sup> As for Black female capacity in the action genre there is significant potential however the tendency is for capacitated black bodies to exist in spaces entirely isolated from white bodies.

Two recent films *The Woman King* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* both released in 2022 feature central black female action bodies. *The Woman King* directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood (who also directed *The Old Guard*) is a historical war epic about an all-female unit of warriors, the Agojie, in the African Kingdom Dahomey in the 1800’s. The film is based on the true story of the Agojie and stars Oscar winner Viola Davis as General Nanisca as she trains and prepares the next group of young female warriors to fight and defend their Kingdom. The capacitated black female body in *The Woman King* (2022) is expressed not as a singular body but as a collection of fierce black capacitated female bodies, a significant shift from the exploitative patterns of

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<sup>112</sup> Richard Dyer, *In The Space Of A Song: The Uses of Song in Film* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 103.

<sup>113</sup> Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 35.

Blaxploitation films. The women use their bodies and weapons crafted to their specific physical skills. They are also willing to modify and disfigure their features to weaponize their entire body. For example, Izogie shapes her nails into sharp talons that she uses to puncture the eyes of her enemies. The fighting postures reinforce the corporeal physicality of their bodies without hyperbolic choreography or cinematically enhanced speed and force. *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022) features a black capacitated female body stepping into the space previously occupied by a black capacitated male body of King T'Challa. The film tells the story of the people of Wakanda fighting to safeguard their home from outside forces. The fantasy elements frame Wakanda as a fictional futuristic black utopia with advanced technologies and resources shielded from the outside world. Shuri, the younger sister of T'Challa, takes his place as the Black Panther protector of Wakanda and gains superhuman powers. Shuri's superhuman powers do not undermine her affective capacity due to the superhuman abilities of her enemy Namor. Their fight scenes convey force, impact, power and strength within the context of their well-matched superhuman abilities. Audiences still witness moments of exertion, pain, and injury framed within the superhuman physicality of their bodies.

In both cases the black female action body successfully conveys affective capacity and corporeal affect. However, their narrative capacity relegates these bodies to entirely black worlds rather than incorporating capacitated black bodies into the heroic narratives of white-centric action films. Therefore, it is essential to question what affective capacity looks like for black bodies in a generic space that has a history of using black bodies to shore up a capacitated whiteness such as the case with black and

brown bodies in *Alien 3* (1992), *Starship Troopers* (1997), *I am Legend* (2007), *Pacific Rim* (2013) and *The Hunger Games* (2012).

### Addressing the Current State of the 'Action Babe'

The recent move away from the 'Action Babe' representation can be visually



Figure 6.4: Movie poster for Lara Croft (2001)



Figure 6.5: Movie poster for Lara Croft (2018)

shorthanded with a simple side-by-side analysis of Lara Croft and Harley Quinn in the movie posters for the *Tomb Raider* remake and *Birds of Prey*.

The original versions of the two characters clearly prioritizes the 'action babe' mode. The

characters are posed in sexually suggestive stances and their revealing costumes hug their curves. Lara looks down and away from the camera so as not to disrupt a voyeuristic gaze at her body. The remake/sequel versions of the two characters are displayed as active and de-sexualized. Harley is entirely covered and rather than posing, she is active, mid-stride, in the center of the street surrounded by other active female characters. Lara stares directly into the camera commanding the gaze, and her round muscular shoulders fill the space to the edge of the frame. These images expose the sincere and concerted effort to depict a capacitated active female body.

Unfortunately, the box office returns for the films suggest that while these efforts are

being made, they are not necessarily being financially rewarded, which can mean resistance from the industry to continue investing in female-led big budget action films. The 2001 version of *Lara Croft* grossed more than \$130 million in domestic sales on its \$115 million dollar budget, while the 2018 version only grossed \$58 million in domestic sales on its \$94 million dollar

budget. *Suicide Squad* (2016), responsible for the first introduction to Harley Quinn, grossed more than \$325 million in domestic sales on a \$175 million budget. In comparison the more empowered version of Harley Quinn in the standalone feature *Birds of Prey*



Figure 6.6: Movie poster for *Suicide Squad* (2016)



Figure 6.7: Movie poster for *Birds of Prey* (2020)

(and the *Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn*) (2020) only grossed \$84 million on an \$84 million dollar budget.

Although this comparison appears telling, it would be misleading to ignore the many other factors that could be responsible for the severe difference in the films' performance. The year 2001 saw Lara Croft onscreen for the very first time and there was a built-in audience carried over from the video game. *Suicide Squad* (2016) is an ensemble cast featuring many other A-list actors which also bring larger crowds to the theater. *Birds of Prey* (2020) was released during the global pandemic. However, from an industry standpoint it appears that female centered action films that attempt to avoid sexual exploitation simply do not perform as well as their sexually objectified

counterparts. So how is the industry supposed to shift representational practices without alienating audiences?

Perhaps, the best example to consider here would be *Black Widow*. As the first chapter illustrates, audiences have noticed the decreasing level of sexual objectification of Natasha's character across the Marvel films. This culminates in a significant recognition of these previous patterns and a self-effacing, self-referential approach in the standalone film. Natasha's character in *Black Widow* (2021) is confronted with the younger, more cynical Yelena who challenges Natasha about her superhero image and why she surrounds herself with "super-scientist friends" who are conveniently absent when the women need them. Yelena also makes specific and graphic references to the forced sterilization both her and Natasha experienced at the hands of Dreykov after they were taken to the Red Room to be trained as Widows. Yelena criticizes Natasha for her showboating as an Avenger and specifically questions Natasha about the signature Black Widow fighting stance. Yelena: "Why do you always do that thing you do when you are fighting? You know with the arm and the hair? ... You're a total poser. I mean they are good poses, but it does look like you think everyone is looking at you." Yelena's character brings a self-awareness to the film and Natasha's character, exposing the unnatural and overly stylized postures that are associated with female heroes in the Marvel Universe. Later in the film she attempts the pose and immediately recoils in disgust.

*Black Widow* also brings the previously mentioned patterns of disfigurement and corporeal affect associated with Charlize Theron's action star persona into the narrative of *Black Widow*. Romanoff's violent and graphic display of breaking her nose in front of

Dreykov in order to sever the olfactory nerve and disarm the pheromone implanted in all widows makes for a significant divergence from previous patterns of superhero women who rarely have to compromise their features in the line of duty. It is significant that this display was the climactic moment of the film bashing and disfiguring her face functions as an allegory that the character is 'breaking through the plastic' of her previous 'action babe' signification, and that she is stepping into a corporeal space allowing her body to signify strength, power, and affective capacity. This is also referential of Theron's influence on the genre which has the potential to push the prioritization of conveying affective capacity for action bodies specifically for conventionally beautiful, white, female bodies that would otherwise be relegated to the plastic representation of the action babe.

### **Future Research Horizons**

When considering future research in the area of affective capacity there are a few potentially lucrative avenues. One of the natural progressions from reading for affective capacity is to ask questions about its limitations. Are there spaces or modes of visual communication that complicate or obscure a body's affective capacity? The recent reactions to the new *Furiosa* trailer might provide some insight into this question. "The new trailer for *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* has reaffirmed that one of the biggest initial complaints about the movie was always ridiculous. When the first trailer for the heavily anticipated *Mad Max* prequel was released in late November 2023, many viewers were quick to comment on its notable use of CGI. This had caused some *Mad Max* fans to wonder whether the entire film would rely too heavily on CGI, unlike the 2015 instant classic *Mad Max: Fury Road* that looked incredibly realistic by

comparison.”<sup>114</sup> We can also see these concerns in reddit threads such as “Anyone else bummed out with FURIOSA lack of practical effects : (“<sup>115</sup> These concerns over the impact of CGI on the ‘realness’ of the film exposes a sense of expectation for action films and action bodies as well as spectator’s awareness and attention to the affective capacities of bodies within noticeably artificial environments. This suggests that audiences might have different affective relationships with bodies onscreen depending on the level of technological intervention utilized to execute spectacular stunts and action sequences which is a ripe area for study considering the emerging trend of immersive visual experiences.

Another area that has significant research potential is to consider how affective corporeality transcends genre by looking at visual depictions of specifically corporeal experiences such as sex, birth, and rape. For instance, how can prioritizing affective capacity in depictions of rape help maximize empathy for victims of sexual violence? Additionally, how can representations of birth incorporate affective capacity to authenticate a real-world corporeal experience? Equally important to considerations of communicating affective capacity in visual mediums is to consider how affective capacity is articulated for differently abled bodies. Overall, it is important to consider how affective capacity can be articulated to enhance empathy for subjugated bodies and to expose the debilitating social structures that marginalize and oppress certain bodies while prioritizing and capacitating other bodies.

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<sup>114</sup> Greg MacArthur, “Furiosa Proves The Movie's Biggest Trailer Complaint Was Always Laughable,” *ScreenRant* (March 19, 2024): <https://screenrant.com/furiosa-trailer-cgi-complaint-fix/>

<sup>115</sup> rasculin, “Anyone else bummed out with FURIOSA lack of practical effects? : (“ *r/Moviesinthemaking* (December 1, 2023): [https://www.reddit.com/r/Moviesinthemaking/comments/187zk7h/anyone\\_else\\_bummed\\_out\\_with\\_furiosa\\_lack\\_of/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Moviesinthemaking/comments/187zk7h/anyone_else_bummed_out_with_furiosa_lack_of/)

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