

## GENDER AND THE ACTION FILM: QUESTIONS OF FEMALE HEROISM (ANALYSIS OF FEMALE MASCULINITY OF THE FEMALE HEROIC CHARACTER)

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**Abstract.** Action has established itself as one of the leading genres which has been present in the film industry for a long time. Although the action movie is primarily identified with Hollywood, the state-of-the-art of the action movie, the Bond movie, however, is first and foremost a British product. Action genre has been characterised as male-oriented (Tasker 2004: 8) whilst Laura Mulvey's essay of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) serves to remind us of the significant part played by the issue of gender and the feminist film criticism, in the analysis of action cinema. This paper examines the development of action cinema alongside the construction of female heroic characters, which suggests the idea of female 'masculinity', a term coined by Tasker (1993). The reinforcement of gender binary codes was examined on action films that leads to the argument on identification of female empowerment or exploitation in selected action filmic texts of 2010 and 2011. Based on Laura Mulvey's theory on male gaze, the analysis of the screening of the body in action films revolves around the aspects of narrative, and cinematography of the selected films: *Salt* (Phillip Noyce, 2010).

*Key Word* : Action films, Female Heroism, Gender

**Abstrak.** Action telah memantapkan dirinya sebagai salah satu genre terkemuka yang telah hadir di industri film untuk waktu yang lama. Meskipun film aksi sering kali diidentifikasi dengan film produksi Hollywood, dan disebut sebagai *state-of-the-art* dari film aksi, film James Bond, bagaimanapun, adalah pertama dan terutama adalah produk Inggris. Bergenre action, film ini ditandai sebagai film berorientasi laki-laki (Tasker 2004: 8) sementara itu melalui esainya *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*" oleh Laura Mulvey (1975) mengingatkan kita pada bagian penting yang dimainkan oleh isu gender dan kritik film yang feminis, dalam analisis film aksi. Makalah ini membahas perkembangan film laga atau aksi dalam proses untuk membangun karakter heroik perempuan, yang menunjukkan gagasan perempuan 'maskulinitas', istilah yang diciptakan oleh Tasker (1993). Penguatan kode biner gender telah diteliti pada film-film aksi yang mengarah ke argumen pada identifikasi pemberdayaan atau eksploitasi dalam aksi yang dipilih teks filmis dari 2010 dan 2011. Perempuan Berdasarkan teori Laura Mulvey pada pandangan laki-laki, analisis skrining tubuh di film action berkisar pada aspek narasi, dan sinematografi film yang dipilih: *Salt* (Phillip Noyce, 2010).

Kata kunci: film aksi, heroisme feminin, gender

## INTRODUCTION

Action has established itself as one of the leading genres which has been present in the film industry for a long time (Neale, 2000). Although the action movie is primarily identified with Hollywood, the *state-of-the-art* of the action movie, the Bond movie, however, is first and foremost a British product (from the early 1960s until the recent years). As such the Bond movie has set the touchstone for many of the subsequent action series or also known as action franchise movies. To name a few: *Die Hard*, begun 1987; or the *Lethal Weapons*, begun 1988 – the two biggest grossing of Hollywood's action spectacular series (Hayward, 2006: 6). Hayward goes on to say that “although action movies are clearly an intensely male category of film, nonetheless, they have spawned a few female action heroes”. Sigourney Weaver thrilled moviegoers worldwide as Ellen Ripley, daringly stripped off her femininity and allowed a wiry ‘masculinity’ to emerge in its place (ibid., 11). Stasia (2004: 175) states that action films recently have begun to explore the market for sharp and agile female heroes. The images of women fighting and fighting back are available, with more and more women are emerging as female action heroes; with the examples like *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* [Simon West, 2001] and the crossover hit *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [Ang Lee, 2000] to *Double Jeopardy* [Bruce Beresford, 1999] and *Enough* [Michael Apted, 2002] (ibid.).

With an aim to examine the physical representation of female heroes in action films, this paper will focus on the analysis of the two crucial aspects of physical representation: physical action – through character/role development, and physical depiction – through costume/wardrobe and cinematography; with thorough examination on the films' narrative structure, mise-en-scène and cinematography.

In order to place my arguments in this paper into a larger context, it is absolutely essential to conceptualise or define the prominent concepts or terms that are being utilised in this whole dissertation. First off, this research revolves around the ‘action genre’ which is a rather broad and all-encompassing term for films which can be categorized as fast-paced, packed with sit-at-the-edge-of-your-seat excitement. The structure is best categorized as a ‘roller coaster ride’ with several points of adventurous climax throughout (Schmidt, 2005: 34). The terms ‘action’ or ‘adventure’ never referred to fixed, generic objects. According to Neale (2000: 51), ‘our approach to genre needs to recognise the fact that many Hollywood films – and many Hollywood genres – are hybrid and multi-generic’. The term ‘action-adventure’ is nowadays mainly used to describe what was perceived in the 1980s and 1990s to be a new and dominant trend in Hollywood production, a trend illustrated by the *Alien* films [1979, 1986, 1993], the *Indiana Jones* films [1981, 1984, 1993], the *Rambo* films [1982, 1985, 1988], the *Terminator* films [1984, 1991], as well as films like *Total Recall* [1990], *Point Break* [1991], *The Last of Mohicans* [1992] and *Braveheart* [1995] (ibid., 46). Film genres often hybrid and branch out into subgenres, which create different terms but blended with the same themes and elements. There are many subgenres, including: ‘action-adventure’, ‘suspense action’, ‘sci-fi action’, ‘action thriller’, ‘espionage/spy action’, ‘martial arts action’, also ‘action comedy’.

As suggested in the research title, the idea of ‘female hero’ in this dissertation draws on the notion of narrative ‘hero’ which according to Bernstein (2002), is defined as “an individual of elevated moral stature and superior ability who pursues his goals indefatigably in the face of powerful antagonist(s)”. He then states that ‘heroism’

consists of four components: moral greatness, ability or prowess, action in the face of opposition, and triumph in at least a spiritual, if not a physical, form. An uncompromising commitment to morality is the foundation of heroism (ibid.). The term 'action hero' refers to a protagonist in an action-adventure film which usually suggests that the role is played by a male for the reason that the work of fiction has only been acknowledging men to play that part and women are just the side-kicks. In every action films, a female leading character has always been called a 'heroine', for she has commonly been characterised as the romantic interest that needs to be saved by the male hero. Le Guin (1993: 16) notes that the portrayal of heroes only as men in the literary tradition was based on a myth that perceived men as a liberating figure and independently real but women, only as non-men. Only when the iconic Ellen Ripley from the *Alien* film sequence (1979, 1986, 1992, and 1997) appeared on the silver screen, it has raised intriguing questions of the transgression from the traditional role of an insignificant lover to a significant role of a strong action hero. The revisioning of the hero archetype allows us to have a vision of a courageous female hero displaying leadership and assertiveness, rather than just a mere romanticised heroine. In relation to that, there are various terms defining the same type of the strong female-bodied hero archetype. Tasker (1993) for example prefers to identify them as the 'action heroine' or 'active heroine' in her writing; which perhaps can be induced as the embodiment of gendering a term. In that regard, there are variations of terms which can relate to the idea a powerful female hero; encompassing from 'action chick', 'action babe', 'girl hero', 'feminist hero', 'female fighter', also 'female warrior'. These various terms are created by linguistic usage which would somehow be interpreted

into a synonymous word. In this dissertation I will employ the term 'female action hero', because by calling her 'heroine' in my opinion indicates a role which is less dominant and more capable of being controlled.

Last but not least, an analysis on the films' cinematography is essential for this study as it affects the mood and tone of a movie as well as the viewers' feelings while watching a movie. It has the ability to evoke extreme emotions of delight, sadness, fear or panic; through the cinematic language. In this study, I will address the elements of the films' 'camera shot', 'camera angle' and 'camera movement' which form the essence of cinematography. The construction of shots and various types of camera work in films aesthetically produce meaning and have different purposes of telling a story in a cinematic language (i.e. the close-up of the lips has metaphoric sexual connotation; or low angle shots symbolise power, strength and authority). The cinematic language can be figuratively translated through the reading of the cinematography of a film, simply to clarify the portrayal and roles of female action hero, and to determine whether or not these type portrayals and roles are positive or negative upon the image of women.

Derived from the aim of this thesis, which is to examine the physical representation of female heroes in action films, the main objectives of this thesis are subsequently drawn upon the identical framework, which are to study the gender performance through the three aspects of film: narrative structure, mise-en-scène and cinematography.

Feminism is said to be the movement to end women's oppression (hooks 2000, 26). One possible way to understand 'woman' in this claim is to take it as a sex term: 'woman' picks out human females and being a human female depends on various

biological and anatomical features (like genitalia). Historically many feminists have understood 'woman' differently: not as a sex term, but as a gender term that depends on social and cultural factors (like social position). In so doing, they distinguished sex (being female or male) from gender (being a woman or a man), although most ordinary language users appear to treat the two interchangeably. More recently this distinction has come under sustained attack and many view it nowadays with (at least some) suspicion (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

**The sex/gender distinction.** The terms 'sex' and 'gender' mean different things to different feminist theorists and neither are easy or straightforward to characterise. Sketching out some feminist history of the terms provides a helpful starting point. Most people ordinarily seem to think that sex and gender are coextensive: women are human females, men are human males. Many feminists have historically disagreed and have endorsed the sex/ gender distinction. Provisionally: 'sex' denotes human females and males depending on *biological* features (chromosomes, sex organs, hormones and other physical features); 'gender' denotes women and men depending on *social* factors (social role, position, behaviour or identity). The main feminist motivation for making this distinction was to counter biological determinism or the view that biology is destiny (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

A typical example of a biological determinist view is that of Geddes and Thompson who, in 1889, argued that social, psychological and behavioural traits were caused by metabolic state. Women supposedly conserve energy (being 'anabolic') and this makes them passive, conservative, sluggish, stable and uninterested in politics. Men expend their

surplus energy (being 'katabolic') and this makes them eager, energetic, passionate, variable and, thereby, interested in political and social matters (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). These biological 'facts' about metabolic states were used not only to explain behavioural differences between women and men but also to justify what our social and political arrangements ought to be.

More specifically, they were used to argue for withholding from women political rights accorded to men because (according to Geddes and Thompson) "what was decided among the prehistoric Protozoa cannot be annulled by Act of Parliament" (quoted from Moi 1999, 18). It would be inappropriate to grant women political rights, as they are simply not suited to have those rights; it would also be futile since women (due to their biology) would simply not be interested in exercising their political rights. To counter this kind of biological determinism, feminists have argued that behavioural and psychological differences have social, rather than biological, causes (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). For instance, Simone de Beauvoir famously claimed that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, and that "social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature" (Beauvoir 1972 [original 1949], 18; for more, see the entry on Simone de Beauvoir). Commonly observed behavioural traits associated with women and men, then, are not caused by anatomy or chromosomes. Rather, they are culturally learned or acquired.

Although biological determinism of the kind endorsed by Geddes and Thompson is nowadays uncommon, the idea that behavioural and psychological differences between women and men have biological causes has not disappeared. In the 1970s, sex differences were used to argue that

women should not become airline pilots since they will be hormonally unstable once a month and, therefore, unable to perform their duties as well as men (Rogers 1999, 11). More recently, differences in male and female brains have been said to explain behavioural differences; in particular, the anatomy of corpus callosum, a bundle of nerves that connects the right and left cerebral hemispheres, is thought to be responsible for various psychological and behavioural differences (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). For instance, in 1992, a *Time* magazine article surveyed then prominent biological explanations of differences between women and men claiming that women's thicker corpus callosums could explain what 'women's intuition' is based on and impair women's ability to perform some specialised visual-spatial skills, like reading maps (Gorman 1992). Anne Fausto-Sterling has questioned the idea that differences in corpus callosums cause behavioural and psychological differences. First, the corpus callosum is a highly variable piece of anatomy; as a result, generalisations about its size, shape and thickness that hold for women and men in general should be viewed with caution. Second, differences in adult human corpus callosums are not found in infants; this may suggest that physical brain differences actually develop as responses to differential treatment. Third, given that visual-spatial skills (like map reading) can be improved by practice, even if women and men's corpus callosums differ, this does not make the resulting behavioural differences immutable. (Fausto-Sterling 2000b, chapter 5).

**Gender terminology.** In order to distinguish biological differences from social/psychological ones and to talk about the latter, feminists appropriated the term 'gender'. Psychologists writing on transsexuality were the first to employ

gender terminology in this sense. Until the 1960s, 'gender' was used solely to refer to masculine and feminine words, like *le* and *la* in French (Nicholson 1994, 80; see also Nicholson 1998). However, in order to explain why some people felt that they were 'trapped in the wrong bodies', the psychologist Robert Stoller (1968) began using the terms 'sex' to pick out biological traits and 'gender' to pick out the amount of femininity and masculinity a person exhibited. Although (by and large) a person's sex and gender complemented each other, separating out these terms seemed to make theoretical sense allowing Stoller to explain the phenomenon of transsexuality: transsexuals' sex and gender simply don't match (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Along with psychologists like Stoller, feminists found it useful to distinguish sex and gender. This enabled them to argue that many differences between women and men were socially produced and, therefore, changeable. Gayle Rubin (for instance) uses the phrase 'sex/gender system' in order to describe "a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention" (1975, 165). Rubin employed this system to articulate that "part of social life which is the locus of the oppression of women" (1975, 159) describing gender as the "socially imposed division of the sexes" (1975, 179). Rubin's thought was that although biological differences are fixed, gender differences are the oppressive results of social interventions that dictate how women and men should behave. Women are oppressed *as women* and "by having to *be women*" (Rubin 1975, 204). However, since gender is social, it is thought to be mutable and alterable by political and social reform that would ultimately bring an end to women's subordination (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Feminism

should aim to create a “genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one's sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love” (Rubin 1975, 204).

In some earlier interpretations, like Rubin's, sex and gender were thought to complement one another. The slogan ‘Gender is the social interpretation of sex’ captures this view. Nicholson calls this ‘the coat-rack view’ of gender: our sexed bodies are like coat racks and “provide the site upon which gender [is] constructed” (1994, 81). Gender conceived of as masculinity and femininity is superimposed upon the ‘coat-rack’ of sex as each society imposes on sexed bodies their cultural conceptions of how males and females should behave. This socially constructs gender differences – or the amount of femininity/masculinity of a person – upon our sexed bodies (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). That is, according to this interpretation, all humans are either male or female; their sex is fixed. But cultures interpret sexed bodies differently and project different norms on those bodies thereby creating feminine and masculine persons. Distinguishing sex and gender, however, also enables the two to come apart: they are separable in that one can be sexed male and yet be gendered a woman, or vice versa (Haslanger 2000b; Stoljar 1995).

This group of feminist arguments against biological determinism suggested that gender differences result from cultural practices and social expectations. Nowadays it is more common to denote this by saying that gender is socially constructed. This means that genders (women and men) and gendered traits (like being nurturing or ambitious) are the “intended or unintended product[s] of a social practice” (Haslanger 1995, 97). But which social practices construct gender, what social construction is and what being of a certain gender amounts

to are major feminist controversies. There is no consensus on these issues. (See the entry on intersections between analytic and continental feminism for more on different ways to understand gender.)

The positions outlined above share an underlying metaphysical perspective on gender: *gender realism*. That is, women as a group are assumed to share some characteristic feature, experience, common condition or criterion that defines their gender and the possession of which makes some individuals women (as opposed to, say, men). *All* women are thought to differ from *all* men in this respect (or respects). For example, MacKinnon thought that being treated in sexually objectifying ways is the common condition that defines women's gender and what women *as women* share. All women differ from all men in this respect. Further, pointing out females who are not sexually objectified does not provide a counterexample to MacKinnon's view. Being sexually objectified is *constitutive of* being a woman; a female who escapes sexual objectification, then, would not count as a woman (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

One may want to critique the three accounts outlined by rejecting the particular details of each account. (For instance, see Spelman [1988, chapter 4] for a critique of the details of Chodorow's view.) A more thoroughgoing critique has been levelled at the general metaphysical perspective of gender realism that underlies these positions. It has come under sustained attack on two grounds: first, that it fails to take into account racial, cultural and class differences between women (particularity argument); second, that it posits a normative ideal of womanhood (normativity argument) (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Elizabeth Spelman (1988) has influentially argued against gender realism with her particularity argument. Roughly:

gender realists mistakenly assume that gender is constructed independently of race, class, ethnicity and nationality. If gender were separable from, for example, race and class in this manner, all women would experience womanhood in the same way. And this is clearly false. For instance, Harris (1993) and Stone (2007) criticise MacKinnon's view, that sexual objectification is the common condition that defines women's gender, for failing to take into account differences in women's backgrounds that shape their sexuality. The history of racist oppression illustrates that during slavery black women were 'hypersexualised' and thought to be always sexually available whereas white women were thought to be pure and sexually virtuous. In fact, the rape of a black woman was thought to be impossible (Harris 1993). So, (the argument goes) sexual objectification cannot serve as the common condition for womanhood since it varies considerably depending on one's race and class (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

For Spelman, the perspective of 'white solipsism' underlies gender realists' mistake. They assumed that all women share some "golden nugget of womanness" (Spelman 1988, 159) and that the features constitutive of such a nugget are the same for all women regardless of their particular cultural backgrounds. Next, white Western middle-class feminists accounted for the shared features simply by reflecting on the cultural features that condition *their* gender as women thus supposing that "the womanness underneath the Black woman's skin is a white woman's, and deep down inside the Latina woman is an Anglo woman waiting to burst through an obscuring cultural shroud" (Spelman 1988, 13). In so doing, Spelman claims, white middle-class Western feminists passed off their particular view of gender as "a metaphysical truth" (1988, 180)

thereby privileging some women while marginalising others. In failing to see the importance of race and class in gender construction, white middle-class Western feminists conflated "the condition of one group of women with the condition of all" (Spelman 1988, 3).

Betty Friedan's (1963) well-known work is a case in point of white solipsism.[4] Friedan saw domesticity as the main vehicle of gender oppression and called upon women in general to find jobs outside the home. But she failed to realize that women from less privileged backgrounds, often poor and non-white, already worked outside the home to support their families. Friedan's suggestion, then, was applicable only to a particular sub-group of women (white middle-class Western housewives). But it was mistakenly taken to apply to all women's lives — a mistake that was generated by Friedan's failure to take women's racial and class differences into account (hooks 2000, 1–3).

**Gender in Action Cinema.** Growth in genre film production is usually accompanied by the content-based genre definitions involving repeated plot motifs, recurrent image patterns, standardised narration configurations, and predictable reception conventions (Altman, 1996). Hollywood's genres have always been a major originating source, and modifier, of filmic character types. Neale (1990: 46), one of the leading theorists of genre, explains:

*"These systems provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding. They help render films and the elements within them, intelligible, and therefore explicable. They offer a way of working out the significance of what is happening on the screen: a way of working out why particular events and actions are taking place, why the characters are dressed*

*the way they are, why they look, speak and behave the way they do, and so on.”*

The construction and marketing of character configurations by Hollywood genres intersects with audience expectations (Hanson, 2007: xiii). Genre criticism in film studies has progressed through various paradigms. One of the problematising factors in the concept of genre is that it cannot be seen as discrete and ideologically free. Genres, according to Hayward (2006: 186), are not ‘safe’ but are ideologically inflected, which can be perceived through films with a series of binary oppositions which, among other hegemonic ‘realities’, reinforce gender distinctions. For instance, constructs of sexuality revolves around the patriarchal ideology with images of the active male versus the passive female; while in marriage and family – independence versus entrapment (ibid.). Simply put, the action and adventure cinema can be seen as merely a fantasy-fulfilling source of entertainment made for our viewing pleasure, but only if it is discussed in a non-ideological point of view. Nevertheless, the action genre does not exist as ideologically free, hence the problematic ‘viewing pleasure’ the action cinema suggests; which adopts radical critique of psychoanalytic and feminist discourse in analysing the viewers’ way of looking.

The action genre has been picking up broader interest among critics studying gender and genre. The female figures (female heroes) within action films, possess an interesting portrayal on the ways in which they are represented and positioned within the genre’s narrative. Hills (1999: 38) states that “action heroines are often described within feminist film theory as ‘pseudo males’ or as being not ‘really’ women.” She further argues that:

*“one of the reasons why action heroines have been difficult to conceptualise as heroic female characters is the binaristic logic of the theoretical models on which a number of feminist theorists have relied. For example, feminists working within the dominant theoretical model of psychoanalysis have had extremely limited spaces within which to discuss the transformative and transgressive potential of the action heroine. This is because psychoanalytic accounts which theorise sexual difference within the framework of linked binary oppositions (active male/passive female) necessarily position normative female subjectivity as passive or in terms of lack. From this perspective, active and aggressive women in the cinema can only be seen as phallic, unnatural or ‘figuratively male’.”*

Bean (2004) states that, “The most notable characteristic of the action cinema is the dynamic tempo: rapid editing at once articulates and accelerates the breath-taking pace of the stunting human body.” She further argues that action films speak through visual spectacle which takes precedence over narrative meaning (ibid.).

**Theoretical Framework.** Laura Mulvey’s interpretation of the traditional Hollywood narrative film in her essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), adopts a radical critique of contemporary cinematic discourse by using psychoanalytic and feminist discourse to analyse “the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking, and spectacle.” (Mulvey, 1989: 14).

Mulvey had more interest in making ‘political use’ of Freudian psychoanalytic theory (in a version influenced by Lacan)

than to tackle the aspect of empirical studies of actual filmgoers, in her study of cinematic 'spectatorship' (Edwards, 2003: 62). This psychoanalysis-inspired study of 'spectatorship' is more inclined to focus on how 'subject positions' are constructed by media texts rather than investigating the viewing practices of individuals in specific social contexts (ibid.). Freud refers to the term 'scopophilia' in explaining the pleasure in looking at other people's bodies as erotic objects. Mulvey argues that the private viewing conditions of cinema help in the voyeuristic process of 'objectification' of female characters and also the narcissistic process of 'identification' with an 'ideal ego' seen on the screen. She also proposes that in patriarchal society pleasure in looking [scopophilia functions on the axis of activity and passivity, and this binary opposition is gendered [active/male and passive/female] (Smelik, 2007). This can be explained in the narrative structure of the traditional cinema, which established the male character as active and powerful, while the female character is passive and powerless: she is the object of desire for the male character (ibid.). Mulvey adds, "As the spectator identifies with the male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events, coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (Mulvey, 1975.). This 'controlling male gaze' presents woman as 'image' or 'spectacle' and man as 'the bearer of the look'.

Mulvey (1975) introduces two distinct modes of looking for the film spectator: 'voyeuristic' and 'fetishistic', as responses to male 'castration anxiety' presented in Freudian terms. 'Voyeuristic' looking involves a controlling gaze which has associations with sadism: 'pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt - asserting control and

subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness'. 'Fetishistic' looking, in contrast, involves 'the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous' which constructs 'the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself' (ibid.).

"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," is surely a significant essay ever to be published. It has shaped the way in which we discuss cinema – its presentation of women, the nature of the cinematic apparatus itself and the whole notion of 'the male gaze' – and its influence have fed through into other disciplines (Gibson, 2004: 138). Mulvey argues that the narrative structure of Hollywood classical cinema positions the male character as active and powerful while the woman as passive who act as the object of desire for the male. She specifies that there are three levels on which the gaze is operating in the cinema; first is the voyeuristic gaze of the camera as it is filming, second is the look of the protagonists [usually the look of the male protagonist as it positions women characters within the narrative itself], and finally the gaze of the spectator, as it is facilitated by the previous two positions (Homer, 2005: 30). Through the three levels of cinematic gaze - camera, character, and spectator, women are established as the object 'to-be looked-at' (ibid.).

With an aim to study the physical representation (physical action and physical depiction) of the female action hero, I will incorporate Mulvey's male gaze theory as the basis of my theoretical framework in the analysis of this dissertation. The evaluation of the female hero's physical action can specifically be analysed through the film's narrative structure (story and plot); whether it reinforces or rejects the notion of gender binary opposition as suggested by Mulvey,

drawing from the conception of active/male and passive/female. A female hero's physical depiction can be assessed through the elements of *mise-en-scène* (action and performance, and costume) and also through cinematography (camera shot, camera angle and camera movement); which are apparent to the eye of a spectator and can be read through cinematic language with the ideological viewing of 'male gaze'. This thesis will look at how the current action filmic texts have started to distort the traditional notion of gender binary (active/male and passive/female), which used to represent women as the passive and submissive secondary character who only act as the object of desire for male protagonist. Instead, the current action films have placed women at the centre of narrative, thus proving their ability as the active fighting heroes who in return knock down the males with their physical strength and ability. Also, through the elements of *mise-en-scène* (action and performance, and costume) and cinematography (camera shot, camera angle and camera movement), this study will then verify the sense of exploitation through erotic 'male gaze' or, in contrast, the portrayal of visual empowerment, which exist in the selected action filmic texts.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Throughout this thesis, the research method applied is the qualitative textual analysis, which derives from film studies by executing a detailed examination of the selected action filmic texts that feature female heroic character for the year 2010 and 2011. For 2010, films that will be analysed are *Salt* (directed by Phillip Noyce). The selected films will be analysed with the emphasise on elements such as narrative structure, and cinematography, by means of extensive research on gender and

action genre; and the physical representation (physical action – through character/role development, and physical depiction – through costume/wardrobe and cinematography) of female heroes in filmic texts as compared to the male heroes. The aspect of narrative structure of a film is viewed in terms of 'story' or content which is the chronological events that take place; and 'plot' or design which is related to conflicts that form the structure of the flow a narrative.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We are drawn to female heroic characters because it is rather refreshing to see them lead – since we have been fed with images of male protagonists, running around with their bulging muscles shooting things around. Patriarchal system has been dominating the way how societal cues are perceived – from the way they speak, behave and look. Social norms impose that women should be compassionate, nurturing, and tender-hearted. Gender bias, which arises from the patriarchal thinking, exists in most forms of the media, particularly the visual form. Smelik (2009: 180) states that film should not be regarded as a 'reflection' of meaning given in advance, but as a 'construction' of meaning. Within film studies, and predominantly within visual studies, it is still customary to pay attention to these social and ideological issues. The feminist analysis of 'the gaze' has been generally accepted in cultural studies, which makes feminist theory as an important factor in film studies ever since it came into existence (ibid.).

The study on the relationship of action female heroes and the male gaze relies upon a psychoanalytic framework in which women are described as 'castrated' or representing threats educing male castration anxiety. As stated by Prince (1996), "contemporary theories of spectatorship are

distinguished by a preference for employing psychoanalysis as the primary modality for explaining film viewing". Cited in Smelik (2009: 180), Freud links fascination for film to sexuality. Freud in his *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905) argues that eroticism begins with looking: 'scopophilia'. Touching and the sexual act are developed from the desiring gaze. Film theorists then proposed that the medium of film is in fact based on scopophilia: in the darkness of the cinema, the viewer is a voyeur who can unlimitedly look at the silver screen (ibid.).

In analysing the construction of heroic female figures in action genre, I specifically focus on examining the physical representation of active female heroes through the evaluation of the aspects of physical action – through character/role development, and physical depiction – through costume/wardrobe and cinematography; which thus brings to the discussion of how the female hero is empowered or exploited in films. Feminist approaches to film in general were launched by Laura Mulvey's classic influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Mulvey's model stems from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective which considers the concepts of castration anxiety and visual fetishism, also the idea of patriarchy. Mulvey's theory unfolds the conception of women's passivity in films; that visual pleasure is achieved through scopophilia, and identification with the male actor in the movie. Mulvey (1975) believes that film produces space that enables female sexual objectification and exploitation with the combination of the patriarchal ideology; "the cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking". The representation of women in action films through the elements of female heroism and female masculinity will be analysed intensively with regard to Mulvey's male gaze theory; in the hope to study the visual objectification of women's

bodies incorporated in those films (S Hajariah : 2011).

**Analysis of Salt Film.** The opening scene portrays her as a tough agent, with her cover as an executive of an oil company, resulting in her captivation by the North Korean government. The prologue is being referred to the same scene in *Die Another Day* (2002) where James Bond has to under go an interrogation and afterwards tortured with no mercy. Salt has weakened the conventional notion of gender binary as she takes over Bond's seat; being beaten up aggressively, but still appears resilient when she is released. She is not locked to the 'female-feminine' set but rather escapes from being identified as one and proudly embodies a more transgressive epithet of 'female and masculine'.

The movie has been brought forward to two years ahead and when Salt's life appears to be stable and normal, Orlov's visit seems to alter the progress which promises us with some lined-up actions. After being accused of being a mole, she knows that they will track her husband and hold him for ransom in order to get to her. When planning for escape, Salt even builds bomb to counterattack the approaching tactical team. At this point, the story has begun to destabilise the traditional feminine role as she takes over the responsibility of saving her husband. In this case, the role reversal by Salt has portrayed that it is not her who is castrated but it is Michael instead. Michael is now a 'castrated female' while waiting for a masculine female hero to save him.

What makes *Salt* most intriguing is how the movie takes more than a few twists and turns in the hopes of figuring out who Evelyn Salt is, and the characters around her. Right after exerted herself mightily to run from authority – building a pipe bomb out of an office chair to escape from the highly secured building, she seems to move

along with the command to kill the Russian President. She single-handedly plots and executes the killing plan, not depending upon any comrades to give her a hand, not that she has any. In this case, the conventional and rigid notion of gender binary seems frail and irresolute, with the image of a one-man assassin (Salt) versus the big military unit of national security agents (Winter and the gang) established in a single scene. The juxtaposition vindicates the use of 'female action hero' instead of 'action heroine' in this study, which refers to Tasker's (1993) argument on the portrayal of a heroine as only the hero's sidekick in an action piece. Salt here is definitely neither a hero's romantic interest nor a sidekick; she is rather the mastermind playing a one-man show in this action movie – a female hero who has denigrated and castrated all the uniformed men with style.

Angelina Jolie as Salt is a strong female lead, as she has always been – she is definitely a force to be reckoned with. Noyce paced the film well allowing the stunts and chases to stop just in time to sneak in another curve to the plot. The new curve sets on when Salt meets Orlov and his men at the barge where her husband is being kidnapped. However the second when she lays eyes on Michael, one of Orlov's men kills him in front of her naked eye. To convince Orlov of her spy status, she does not grieve over Michael's death but instead agrees to be on another mission. The moment she has been waiting for, Salt literally shoves a liquor bottle down Orlov's throat, aggressively attacks him to death. She then fires his gun to every one in that barge leaving no man behind. This particular scene reveals that lethal Salt does not fear anything or anybody, even her own cult leader. Evelyn Salt stretches over the fence between being a warrior and protector as she witnesses her husband being shot before she could do anything. Blending the right

mixture of indestructibility and tenderness, we never quite know where her allegiances lie.

On her mission to kill the US President, Salt infiltrates the White House, disguised as a man. She is now embracing true masculinity and musculinity by dressing up as a male agent and fighting like one. Salt's hair is short, she dons a pair of suit and men's shoes, and she also speaks in a lower register, though very minimally. As she gets into the building, she then peels off the prosthetics she wears on her face, getting on with her mission to kill the US President. From this point of the movie, she goes full-on into masculinity (short hair and menswear) and even covers herself with blood hard as steel. Then comes an intense and unexpectedly raw scene where Salt jumps over the railing of a staircase and strangles Winter to death with her handcuffs.

In an interview for sci-fi/geek site *io9.com*, director Phillip Noyce talked about the narrative aspect as Jolie is featured to be the female hero; "When we started to rework the film with Angelina in mind, to try and make the film, where this was the quest: if you stopped the film at any moment in the movie and asked the audience what is going to happen next, they would be wrong. And secondly, I described to the screenwriter that I wanted a movie that was like a snake the kept changing its skin and its appearance and kept weaving around and around, and you couldn't quite grab hold of it, and you were afraid of where it was going to take you, and what it was going to do with you" (Woerner, 2010). *Salt* is not just another video game action hero but a real woman. In the same interview by Woerner, the producer Lorenzo di Bonaventura believes that taking the risk is rewarding despite the changes involved, as Jolie has an attitude which is going to work on the action level (Woerner, 2010).

**Action and Performance.** Evelyn Salt utilizes her brain as well as her brawn, which brings forth a whole new range of women's personalities. She affirms that women do not have to be stereotyped as reserved and prissy but they can also be a hard combatant who would castrate the male counterpart at any time. In *Salt*, Jolie proves that she is more than capable of taking justice into her own hands, which could literally herald an overture for more strong women protagonists and female-fronted films; expanding gender roles from the inside.

Jolie has already proven to be a smashing female action star; where she further builds her credibility as Salt in this fast and explosive film. She sits firmly into that mould, plays the role of being a spy to perfection. She is the familiar emotionally stunted female hero who saves the world but runs from her own government. Salt escapes her job at the CIA rises up against the kidnapers and killers of her husband to uncover the plot against her. Jolie's performance seems emotionally stunted considering the way she stares down her opponents with near cold eyes. She also has a stern and firm expression when encountering the antagonists. Her forceful and intense spirit somehow castrates the idea of gender oppositions as she does not embody the 'female-feminine' duo, rather chooses to embrace being a female who is masculine.

**Cinematography.** The chase and action sequences provide heart stopping, jaw dropping moments and extremely well put together. The movie moves so rapidly from one death-defying stunt to the next, all brilliantly choreographed and shot. The camera movement is an essence that creates a lot of tension which appeared compelling to the eye of the viewer. When Jolie goes on

the run, the usual steady pace abruptly gains speed when switching from one image to the other. The camera movement employed as Jolie runs, is very rough, as it is a hand-held shot, which inevitably constructs a more realistic action mood. The camera is never completely still when conflict arises and action is taking place. The rapid cut makes *Salt* more thrilling and boosts Jolie's skills as a personage among other female heroes.

On the contrary, talking about an image of a strong female hero, the camera shots however do not seem to empower her as much. The full body shot of Salt in the torture chamber is clearly sexualizing her character, where she could have been clothed and not stripped down leaving just her undergarments intact. The use of medium shot for the taxi scene seems unproblematic at once, but it somehow becomes unnecessary as she stoops down, pulls up her legs and shows off her toned thighs, enabling the viewers to gaze at the fetishistic long legs of hers. Another obvious type of camera shot that is ideological and problematic is the close-ups and the extreme close-ups which are usually used to intensify the character's expressions. Jolie's seductive pout is always open, most of the time, which literally induces sexual connotation hence making her an 'erotic spectacle' for the male gaze. The voyeuristic process of objectification of female character is made possible by the various aspects of cinematography, which plays a crucial role in enhancing the act of 'scopophilia' of the cinema spectators.

### **Discussion**

In terms of narrative structure, *Salt* represents an empowered protagonist who is always ready for unforeseeable conflicts which take place throughout the whole commotion of unpredictable plot. She has outstanding fighting skills battling against men twice her size, blurring the

conventional notion of gender binary. She is neither viewed as a passive secondary character nor an object of male gaze, but she moves a step further playing a role as a tough and independent protagonist who is able to save herself without any help from any male character.

The third portion of this analysis is on the film's element of cinematography consisting of different types of camera shots, angles, and movements. In this film, Salt is being exploited visually, if not narratively. The camera functions to objectify and sexualised her body, by focusing on breasts, thighs, butt and lips, enabling the viewers to gaze at the fetishistic body of hers. Jolie is always shot with her mouth open, inducing sexual connotation which leads her to be indentified as an 'erotic spectacle' for the male gaze, which enhances the act of 'scopophilia'.

## CONCLUSION

The textual analysis of action films; *Salt* (2010), on the representation of the masculine female action hero, seems to illustrate a rather interesting finding, which draws influence from related textual analysis of action cinema in the previous centuries. Observations have been done on the aspects of narrative, mise-en-scène and cinematography of each film with relation to the film's portrayal of female hero's body which may connote various inconceivable meanings. The theoretical framework supporting this analysis is provided by Laura Mulvey's body of work, in her remarkable essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975).

In terms of the films' narrative aspect, all four movies employ intriguing narrative structure in which the lead protagonists are projected as empowered. These action films are provided with conflicts which are progressed by the character's complexity that catalyses unpredictable plots and

endings. Each *Salt* (2010) has its own thought-provoking narrative with series of challenges imposing physical skills, frenetic chases, endless shootings and bombings. The female action hero in each film possesses a sense of 'musculinity' which explains the androgynous personality thus showcases the breadth of diversity of women's personalities and unhesitatingly opposes to the rigid notion of gender binary.

The second part of the analysis focuses on the films' mise-en-scène and emphasis has been given to two important aspects; 'acting and performance' and 'costume'. Collectively, all the actors have shown outstanding acting skills with convincing performances. They have displayed profound efforts in getting into character and perform most of the rigorous masculine tasks at their level best. These female heroes have made the intense and physically demanding role seems like a piece of cake, disregarding the conventional itemisation of being female and feminine thus blurring the boundary formed in the notion of gender binary.

The concerning issue of sexual objectification towards female action heroes can be directly read through the physical representation of the particular character that comes forth by way of the costume donned by the actors. In *Salt* (2010), Jolie is sexualised and objectified only at the beginning of the film where she is stripped half naked in the prison and at her office where she is dressed in skirt suit which cuts through the side that makes it inappropriate for the action sequence taking place right after. An analysis on the films' cinematography is essential for this study as it produces meaning through the cinematic language which can sometimes be deemed as ideological and problematic. In *Salt* (2010), the camera is used to objectify and sexualise the female body by capturing and focusing on parts of her body such as

breasts, thighs and lips. By utilising the different type of shots and camera movements in a stereotypical way, these female heroes will never break free from the visual exploitation, which further enhance the act of 'scopophilia' and the fetishistic male gaze.

Female action heroes have not simply given up their femininity in favour of 'masculine' performances; rather, they have been truly transgressive in blurring the boundaries within the rigid notion of gender binary. In so doing, they have integrated both traits of femininity and masculinity into a distinct type of toughness which form a sense of empowerment which they embody. Nonetheless, the female action heroes have continually been exploited through their sexuality which suggests a sense of pleasure for the male viewer.

The representation of gender and body in action films has long been contested. Specifically, I have argued in this dissertation that, with an exception of the rest of the films (*Salt*) have 'abused' and exploited the female heroes one way or another, making it rather impossible to truly empower a woman, even if she is given the primary, masculine role in a film. Through critical analysis on the physical representation in the aspects of a film's narrative, mise-en-scène and cinematography, it is found that how ever the director wished to empower the female protagonist, the character has inevitably fallen into the same mould of female objectification and are placed in the frame as a spectacle to be looked at, in all three levels of cinematic gaze – camera, character, and spectator. From the narrative standpoint, the study of the female heroes of *Salt* (2010), come across the same path, where these heroes appear strong, independent and cross over the boundaries of gender binary opposition. Things become problematic when the analysis progresses to the aspect of

cinematography, which involve deeper understanding of cinematic language and psychoanalysis. This explains the tepid process of producing the 'model' female action hero, as compared to the much elaborated construction of the hyper-masculine male heroes. Though the portrayal of the blurring boundaries between femininity and masculinity in aforementioned films are visible at certain level of analysis, the female heroes still function to remind the audience that while they rigorously fight the male counterparts, they are still positioned in the frame for erotic pleasure.

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