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**CONTEMPORARY ACTION
HEROINES: THE QUEST FOR
EMANCIPATION FROM THE
MALE GAZE.**

AYESHA ROMIA DEY

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Masters in English Literature

The University of Huddersfield

July 2019

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Sarah Falcus for her invaluable support and unwavering guidance throughout the process of creating this thesis. I can't imagine reaching completion without her involvement and positive encouragement along every step of the way.

I would like to acknowledge the camaraderie of the postgraduate community (faculty and students, alike) at the University of Huddersfield. It's been a privilege to be part of such a diverse and passionate collective of people- I am deeply thankful for all of the laughter, stimulating conversations over coffee and existential debates whilst trading Happy Tattoos.

I would additionally like to express gratitude for my family and friends for having the patience to support me throughout the development of this thesis. I'd like to say thanks to my mum and dad for persistently goading me on when my under-confidence gets the better of me. Also, I would like to thank my Tama, for inspiring me to challenge myself and live life to the fullest. I hope I'm bringing you *khushi*.

Table of Contents:

Abstract	page 6
Introduction	pages 8-18
Chapter 1: Lara Croft <i>The Action Babe Heroine</i>	pages 19-34
Chapter 2: Wonder Woman <i>The Superheroine</i>	pages 35-51
Chapter 3: Red Sparrow <i>The Femme Fatale</i>	pages 53-68
Conclusion	pages 69-73
Bibliography	pages 74-78

Abstract:

The commercialised male gaze has facilitated a postfeminist culture in which women continue to be moulded into scopophilic pleasures and now willingly participate in presenting themselves as such, out of a self-proclaimed right to reclaim their sexualities. This thesis explores the way in which contemporary action heroines are visually represented by deconstructing three filmic examples of contemporary action films. The iconographic figures of the action babe heroine, the superheroine and the contemporary femme fatale are depicted in the blockbusters; *Tomb Raider* (2018), *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Red Sparrow* (2018). As major adaptations of literary texts and video games, the movies serve as modernised representations of visual spectacles. Close textual analysis traces the evolution of the iconographic figures from their initial appearances in source materials through to their current iterations, as presented in the aforementioned films. The evolution of heroine representation is contextualised against the conventional feminist wave system, in order to explore the correlation between feminist ideology and the representation of the female body in film. Additionally, the chapters deconstruct the action babe heroine, superheroine and femme fatale, considering the way in which directors have successfully allayed/challenged the male gaze and/or preserved female protagonists as scopophilic pleasures.

The premise of this thesis was inspired by the paradoxes of Hollywood, a male-dominated industry wherein 'empowered' women are still subjected to blatant gender disparities including lesser pay and stereotypically gendered roles. The thesis concludes with a reflection upon the current Hollywood climate and a speculation as to whether emancipation from the male gaze will ever be viable for action heroines.

INTRODUCTION

The action genre is referred to as an 'almost exclusively male space' (Tasker, 1993: p. 17) by Yvonne Tasker (1993) in her exploration of gendered bodies within *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. Despite the generally male-dominated nature of the action genre, there have been numerous iconographic female-led action films wherein women portray active roles, becoming the subject of the narrative and subsequently driving the action of the movie forward. This is a positive subversion in that Tasker noted the prevalence of the archetypally disempowered 'damsel in distress' roles carved out for women within male-led action films. She stated that there was a tendency within male-led films for women to be 'fought over rather than fighting, avenged rather than avenging' (Tasker, 1993: p. 17). To this extent, female-led action films suggest progression in that the female protagonist's perspective is centralised and she gains a crucial sense of agency within a stereotypically male-dominated genre.

However, Jeffrey A. Brown (2011) critiques the role of the action heroine, stating that, '...the action heroine is just a sheep in wolf's clothing, rather than a legitimate role for women' (Brown, 2011: p. 23). Brown's cynicism as to the legitimacy of the action heroine is born from a retrospective and feminist analysis when considering the historically troubling presentations of the female body in action films. Action heroines have always held potential as empowering figures for spectators, yet they have been persistently disempowered through their bodily representations. Dominant modes of bodily representation are either overt sexualisation or excessive muscularity. Overt sexualisation is characterised through the display of exposed skin, voluptuous curves and an exaggerated hip-to-waist ratio. This stereotypically sexualised portrayal alleviates male anxieties towards the threat of an empowered female protagonist in the male-dominated arena of the action genre; however, it also fundamentally satisfies male audiences through an emphasis upon gratifying the male gaze. On the other hand, in mimicking the generic hardness of the male body and acquiring a masculinised physique (characterised by striations, bulging muscles etc.), there's a common misconception that '... the action heroine is a man in drag' (Brown, 2011: p. 25). Essentially, Brown summarises that the performativity of gender is highlighted within action films through a striking polarity between sexualisation and masculinisation. Brown suggests that the repercussions of such limited representations is the overall prohibition of 'legitimate, alternative female identities' (Brown, 2011: p. 25). By this, Brown refers to the

possibility of nuanced roles which don't revolve around the salience of scopophilic pleasure and the male gaze.

This thesis examines contemporary action films, ascertaining the extent to which contemporary action heroines are offered opportunities to present progressive and legitimised female identities. The titles present three distinctly dissimilar visual spectacles which have been adapted from literary materials such as novels and comic books as well as visual materials such as video games. Such dissimilar icons have been selected intentionally in order to highlight the broad expanse of the action genre as well as document the changing faces of action heroines across action sub-genres. The films featured within this thesis' analysis are *Tomb Raider* (2018) in which Roar Uthaug revives the iconic action babe heroine; Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* (2017) which realigns a historical superheroine to contemporary audiences; and finally Francis Lawrence's *Red Sparrow* (2018), which presents the contemporary femme fatale. In terms of the iconographic spectacles, the action babe heroine finds its roots in masculinity; the superheroine possesses a unique hybridity in that she constitutes a melange of both masculinised strength and sexualisation and the femme fatale is intrinsically bound to notions of sexual availability. *Tomb Raider* and *Wonder Woman* evidence a positively changed representation of action heroines, reflective of some progression within the mainstream action box-office. Within the aforementioned titles, there are some bold attempts to deemphasise to-be-looked-at-ness and consequently, more nuanced portrayals of the popular and historically iconic heroines have emerged. However, *Red Sparrow* highlights the intrinsically sexualised nature of the femme fatale and the difficulty in striving to distance contemporary iterations of the femme fatale from a canon of predecessors who have been persistently presented as primarily, scopophilic pleasures.

The male gaze, within the context of this thesis, is derived from Laura Mulvey's epochal work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). This text also pioneered the term 'to-be-looked-at-ness' to describe the way in which women 'are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact' (Mulvey, 1975: p. 172). The women presented onscreen are 'styled accordingly' (Mulvey, 1975: p. 172); by this, Mulvey refers to the way in which male directors embed scopophilic potentiality, as well as their own notion of fantasy, within women by dressing them as visual spectacles. This is subsequently perceived by male spectators who derive gratification; Mulvey delved into the notion that the setting of a cinema provides solace for the fixated male in that he shrouds

himself in the darkness of the theatre and finds himself gratified by the experience of voyeurism, without condemnation from the outside world. Fundamentally, Mulvey's observations highlighted the subjugation of women within traditional Hollywood films, wherein women were intrinsically encoded as erotic objects, subsequently reaffirming the power dynamic wherein the woman remains 'tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning' (Mulvey, 1975: p. 169). The female's primary purpose is to be gazed upon, as she is tailored to serve as a passive source of scopophilic pleasure for audiences. This phenomenon is condensed into the term 'the male gaze', used specifically by Mulvey to address the trappings of visual representation within the Hollywood industry, yet used as common vernacular by many film theorists when considering the way in which female bodies continue to be objectified onscreen.

This thesis acknowledges that the objectification of women onscreen is symptomatic of a widespread, societal issue of gender disparity. There is evidently a correlation between the oppressive male gaze upon female characters within film and the misogynistic violence against those actresses who embody such roles within Hollywood. The premise of this thesis was inspired by Harvey Weinstein's exposure as a sexual predator. The unveiling of Weinstein's reputation was a significant moment as *The New York Times* (2017) stated that they had unearthed 'previously undisclosed allegations against Mr. Weinstein stretching over nearly three decades'. The behemoth giant, rumoured for years to have kept the toxic 'casting couch' culture alive by preying upon the vulnerabilities of young, up-and-coming actresses, was finally being challenged by numerous victims who had surfaced following prolonged periods of dormancy. Following the initial revelation of the scandal, there was a mass outpouring of testimonies, not only against Weinstein but other executives within the film industry. The scandal highlighted a crucial juxtaposition- many examples of successful, often outspoken actors and actresses were speaking of their personal experiences of powerlessness in the industry. Weinstein's victims remained silenced due to a variety of fears, as expressed by *The New York Times*: 'some said they did not report the behavior because there were no witnesses and they feared retaliation by Mr. Weinstein. Others said they felt embarrassed'. The abuse was systematic and dehumanising; Harvey Weinstein's actions illuminated the façade of progression within the Hollywood industry in that actresses were still subordinated through sexual denigration and exploited by powerful male industry moguls. Most importantly, the allegations against Weinstein echoed high profile cases of sexual assault allegations of the past. Anita Hill's sexual assault testimony against Clarence Thomas (Henry, 2004: p. 16) was a

significant incident which drew attention to the prevalence of gender disparity and misogynistic, sexualised violence in the early nineties. Hill's injustice ignited third-wave feminism, yet she still continues to be persecuted in the present day. In his persistent denial and manipulation of testimonies, Weinstein seems to be pushing for the same opportunity to be spared, as Thomas once was. However, the sheer magnitude of the case against Weinstein blatantly highlights the paradoxical nature of perceived progress for gender equity within the Hollywood industry. Furthermore, Weinstein's case forces us to interrogate the validity of seemingly positive legislative and social changes (which have been achieved through the efforts of vigilant activism) for women and the relationship between modern women and feminism as a construct.

Threats to reproductive rights, allegations of sexual assault and examples of institutionalised misogyny have served as a stark reminder that gender equity remains a valid objective in the present day and this has led to a resurgence in feminist activity. Particularly as a retaliatory platform for commentary and critique of major political events within the Western World (such as Donald Trump's inauguration as the POTUS, the Harvey Weinstein scandal and Brett Kavanaugh's silencing of Christine Blasey Ford at the Supreme Court hearings), social media has played an important part in facilitating a dialogue regarding the broad issue of prevalent gender inequity. Ealasaid Munro (2013) considers fourth-wave feminism to be characterised by an extended focus on 'calling out' culture, enhanced by the technological advancement of the internet. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have enabled women to connect and communicate on a global scale, encouraging an online *mélange* of intersectional women. This collectivism was evidenced by the response to the Harvey Weinstein media circus- there was substantial traction for the #MeToo movement which became a way of displaying solidarity with the victims who had spoken out regarding their experiences of sexual assault and harassment at the hands of Weinstein. This trend is symptomatic of fourth-wave ideology which recognises that, 'the internet has facilitated the creation of a global community of feminists who use the internet both for discussion and activism' (Munro, 2013).

Feminism and the female body

Feminism is a crucial discussion point within the thesis as the movement contextualises pivotal aspects of action heroine characterisation, particularly the physical representation of visual spectacles. Methodologically, the chapters trace the evolution of the action heroines by considering their initial

origins (within their source materials), the way in which preceding popular iterations have interpreted the source material and finally, the way in which the contemporary adaptation reverts to older iterations and simultaneously reinvents, in order to align the heroine to modern audiences. This thesis delves into the profound influence that feminist ideology has had upon the representation of female protagonists within action films, especially noting the influence of fourth-wave feminism and the postfeminist sensibility upon modern iterations of characters. Thus, I use common terminology such as postfeminism and fourth-wave feminism to contextualise the climate in which the selected films have been created.

The waves structure within feminism allows for theorists to trace the timeline of changing feminist agendas by summarising the key aims, figureheads and milestone events of each era. However, the conventional feminist wave system is heavily critiqued for numerous failures. Firstly, each feminist wave itself is deeply fractured by the onset of subgroups, vying to have different issues addressed or taking oppositional stances to that of the majority group. Additionally, the relationship between generationally divided feminists evidences clashes at the heart of the cause. Astrid Henry (2004) noted such frictions and described the relationship between second-wave feminism and third-wave feminism/postfeminism as being alike to that of the over-zealous mother and her rebellious daughters. Primarily, this was on account of an observed age difference between those older women who had already engaged in vigilant feminist activism during the second-wave and the emergence of those younger women, beneficiaries of such activism, who reaped the benefits whilst proclaiming a new generational message within the third-wave. Second-wave feminists such as Susan Brownmiller had outlined the correlation between rape discourse and the misogynistic nature of the pornographic industry. Initially, 'Brownmiller and her compatriots felt they were liberating women from degrading sexual stereotypes and culture of male domination' (Levy, 2006: p. 63); however, this anti-porn statement fractured the women's liberation group and caused furor. It became apparent that there were fundamentally opposing views regarding the expression of sexuality as well as the gratification of female sexual desires, '... even the question of how to *have sex*- became divisive' (Levy, 2006: p. 62). Third-wave feminists/postfeminists placed an increased emphasis upon individualism and the necessity of sexual gratification, inviting the possibilities of sexual exploration (beyond the realms of normalised heterosexual relationships) and alternate identities which defied the norms of the gender binary. With her problematic use of a familial metaphor to describe the volatile relationships between waves of feminism; Henry highlighted the extent to which

feminism is regarded a deeply divisive movement, noting the pre-existing, internal hostilities between those who are seemingly fighting for the same concept of gender equity.

Secondly, progression can never be deemed a universal stance within the feminist wave system in that matters of class, age, culture, sexuality and geography separate women and thus experiences of womanhood are intrinsically different. So too are the solutions for gender disparity- for instance, whilst some women are empowered with the reproductive rights (thus a sense of autonomy over their own bodies), some women are still bound by societal laws that fail to accommodate female agency.

Thirdly, the feminist wave system is not linear to the extent that there is no conclusive 'end' to each wave of feminism- remnants of unresolved agendas continue to trickle down and permeate successive eras. As much as positive changes have been adopted, issues that were prevalent and verbally addressed during the first wave remain in the modern day, which indicates that there is no clear-cut division from wave to wave. Overlapping objectives obfuscate a definitive, universal understanding as to what each wave is particularly synonymous with, in terms of objectives stated and objectives achieved. A prominent example is the confusion between the terms third-wave feminism and postfeminism. A series of historic trends such as raunch culture and sex-positivity (two crucial societal trends which particularly inform the visual representations of the action babe heroine and the femme fatale within my analysis) are often accredited by different scholars as pivotal attributes of both third-wave feminism and postfeminism. Third-wave feminism and postfeminism are heavily contested, often used interchangeably, '...to mark out a time not after feminism per se, but after a particular moment of feminist activism (usually in the 1970s)' (Scharff & Gill, 2011: p.3). For the purpose of this thesis, the distinction is made that third-wave feminism was a movement which followed a perceived 'dormant' period in the 1980's and was retrospectively critiqued as a wave which prioritised feminism as a theoretically grounded subject yet failed to infiltrate discussion within the general public. Postfeminism, first noted in 1982, is more typically regarded an accessible subject of popular culture and can be noted as a broad influence upon presentations of gender in contemporary culture. Within this thesis, the postfeminist sensibility is the dominant contextual feminist influence within the contemporary films due to the recurring thematic notions of choice and empowerment across all texts and the noticeable influence of raunch culture within the Lara Croft chapter.

Postfeminism itself is used as a broad term and often, 'it is used with such a lack of specificity, to signal such a wide range of meanings' (Scharff & Gill, 2011: p.3). Theorists such as Henry (2004) address the movement as 'both an anti-feminist critique of the misguidedness of feminism and a pro-feminist nod to feminism's victories' (Henry, 2004: p. 19). Within this thesis, postfeminism is read 'as an object of critical analysis, rather than as a theoretical orientation, new moment of feminism or straightforward backlash' (Scharff & Gill, 2011: p.4). Postfeminism is understood to be a dynamic sensibility that 'characterizes increasing numbers of films, television shows, advertisements and other media products' (Gill, 2007). Gill's (2007) definition of the postfeminist sensibility maps accordingly onto the intersectional approach for this thesis wherein the action heroines featured are prominent examples of adaptations from source materials such as video games, literary texts (prose) and comic books. The action heroines have become embedded within contemporary, popular culture and across the aforementioned platforms, we can see that the postfeminist sensibility informs the way in which they are represented. Gill highlights key attributes that comprise the postfeminist discourse, noting the way in which 'femininity is increasingly figured as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification in the ways that (some) women are represented' (Scharff & Gill, 2011: p.4) and also the way in which there is a substantial emphasis upon 'consumerism and the commodification of difference' (Scharff & Gill, 2011: p.4). The postfeminist sensibility is plagued with paradoxes which invites furore and debate amongst many feminists. In particular, postfeminism's promotion of sex-positivity complicates notions of agency, choice and empowerment.

The postfeminist sensibility ignited sex-positivity, a loud and liberated approach to sexuality, 'one that emphasized women's pleasure and power over their victimization' (Henry, 2004: p. 22). Kristen Anderson (2015) notes a lamentation for feminism is evident through rhetoric and this is evidenced by postfeminism's adoption of 'some of the language of the feminist movement such as "empowerment" and "choice"' (Anderson, 2015: p. 1). Anderson (2015) highlights that notions of empowerment and choice enable women to 'now choose to be sexualized and objectified' (Anderson, 2015: p. 12), as a means of reclaiming the body as a source of power. Power equates to status; however, Anderson (2015) states that this is 'the kind of power that doesn't threaten real power- political, economic, and cultural power' (Anderson, 2015: p. 16). A product of postfeminism, raunch culture was born in the late nineties-early noughties, a movement in which women self-sexualise as a means of empowerment. On the one hand, this movement is perceived to be a statement of liberation for women in that traditionally,

women have been subjected to objectification. Through self-sexualisation, women invite as well as command the gaze and this is perceived to be a powerfully transgressive act. However, Levy (2006) interrogates this paradoxical movement- identifying the raunch movement as a cultural convalescence. Levy observes that essentially, '... our interest is in the appearance of sexiness, not the existence of sexual pleasure' (Levy, 2006: p. 30) so as to suggest that the male gaze/male sexual gratification continues to be centralised within this narrative and notions of women's sexual gratification are subsequently displaced. Levy suggests that, despite their intentions to reclaim their bodies through actively commanding the scopophilic gaze, raunch women assume a role of passivity. Levy additionally states that, 'In their performances, which is the only capacity in which we see these women we so fetishize they don't even speak' (Levy, 2006: p. 196). Levy deems this regression to the prioritisation of to-be-looked-at-ness as a crucial undoing of progression, claiming that this concept of new feminism is instead a revisiting of old objectification.

The postfeminist sensibility is considered (by some), to be a necessary and full-fledged departure from the essentialist and reductionist feminist wave system altogether. Christina Scharff's seminal work *Repudiating Feminism: Young Women in a Neoliberal World* (2012) concludes that feminism is deemed an anachronistic ideology for many women due to their perceived privileges in the modern world. Scharff notes that women repudiate feminism because it 'robs them of the opportunity to produce, construct and present themselves as capable managers of their own lives' (Scharff, 2012: p. 11). This value of independence is imperative to modern women as a regression to feminism would endanger the façade of a self-produced, neoliberal woman. Within this context, neoliberalism is defined as a, 'mobile, calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising' (Scharff and Gill, 2011: p. 5). Scharff and Gill (2011) identify a strong relationship between neoliberalism and the postfeminist sensibility, constituted of numerous factors. Firstly, both neoliberalism and postfeminism promote modes of individualism to the extent that people now believe that they are no longer subject to any social or political influences outside themselves. There's a prioritisation of self-governance and an emphasis upon individuals to take responsibility for their own lives. Secondly, the subject of neoliberalism is self-regulating, just as the subject of postfeminism is active and considered to be constantly reinventing. Finally, women are expected, more than men, to constantly regulate the way in which they conduct themselves whilst simultaneously making it appear as though they've made such stylistic choices of their own volition.

In summary, the postfeminist sensibility infiltrates popular culture and therefore can be seen as a dominant influence upon ideas pertaining to the female body, sexuality and agency. The movement emphasises notions of individualism and sex-positivity which are evident themes throughout the selected films. The representations of the female body within contemporary action films are particularly interesting due to the genre's unique stylistic properties. This thesis suggests that action films pose great potential to empower female actresses, filmmakers and spectators.

The contemporary action sensibility has been selected as the primary focus for this research due to its problematisation of the conventional male gaze. Mulvey frames the male as exclusively dominant and active, whilst the female is always reduced to pacified spectacle for the pleasure of other men. Yet in *Beauty in Motion: Gender, Spectacle and Action Babe Cinema* (2004), Marc O'Day argues '... both the action hero and heroine can increasingly be viewed as simultaneously active and passive, both in action and on display' (O'Day, 2004: p. 203-204). This analysis suggests that the central protagonist, regardless of their gendered body, is both active and objectified by the spectator. O'Day (2004) emphasises that the action figure is employed to fulfil two main objectives: to depict great strength/function as an active device which pushes forward the narrative and simultaneously to serve as a visual pleasure, in terms of to-be-looked-at-ness. To this extent, the action genre problematises Mulvey's male gaze dichotomy in that scopophilic potentiality is not solely affiliated with the female form. Additionally, O'Day highlights the redundancy of Mulvey's traditional male gaze in that it relies heavily upon a heteronormative model of attraction with an active male spectator and passive, objectified actress. Thus, to account for a changed relationship dynamic between audiences and the characters with which they identify onscreen, O'Day identifies the 'have me/be me' axes of desire. This model analyses the relationship between the spectator and the action babe heroine. O'Day claims that the action babe heroine appeals, 'not only to heterosexual boys and men, who desire to 'have' her in fantasy but also to heterosexual girls and women, who desire to 'be' her in fantasy' (O'Day, 2004: p. 204). In summary, the action babe heroine is seen as both an idea of women to be coveted by male spectators and an empowering figure to inspire female spectators.

Mimicking the paradoxical, perpetual struggle for gender equity (as highlighted by the feminist wave system), visual representation for female protagonists within film is inconsistent. Mulvey sought to force change within the Hollywood industry with her benchmark essay by highlighting the subordination of

female characters, framed around the male narrative and the objectification of female bodies, designed to cater to male spectators. However, close textual analysis of three films, representative of the 'contemporary', illuminate the fact that despite elements of progression, the struggle to empower female voices and bodies persists in the present-day.

The first chapter traces the evolution of Lara Croft from virtual character to live-action figure, noting the costume, physicality and characterisation changes observed since she was first introduced to the world as a virtual character in a 1996 PlayStation game designed by Toby Gard. The chapter compares as well as contrasts the visual representations of Lara Croft within Simon West's early-noughties action film *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* and her later iteration in Roar Uthaug's *Tomb Raider*.

The second chapter highlights the hybridity of the globalised icon Wonder Woman, who straddles a balance of both masculinised strength and hypersexualisation in Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman*. As a character whose rich iconography has evolved substantially over her eighty-eight years of existence, Wonder Woman's various iterations have been historically heavily sexualised within comic books and within the TV adaptation in which she was played by Lynda Carter. This chapter posits the contemporary Wonder Woman against her predecessors, considering the traditional tropes such as costume, story arc and origin narrative retained by Jenkins within *Wonder Woman* as well as aspects of characterisation which have been intentionally rejected or modified.

The third chapter is focused on the contemporary femme fatale as presented within Francis Lawrence's *Red Sparrow*. The chapter examines to what extent *Red Sparrow* successfully departs from glamourised portrayals of espionage by empowering its contemporary femme fatale, Egorova. The relationship between the spy-thriller novel and the blockbuster film is investigated, noting the fundamental differences in the way that outspoken protagonist and dancer-turned-spy Egorova is translated from the pages of Jason Matthews' debut novel *Red Sparrow* (2013) to the screen.

Paradoxically, there are both elements of progression and a regression to earlier iconographic iterations evident within all of the selected films. On the one hand, there are positive attributes such as the centralisation of female narratives, yet simultaneously, there are problematic portrayals of action heroines such as the contemporary femme fatale, which remain preoccupied with scopophilic gratification and stereotypically gendered characterisation. This thesis produces an intelligent

speculation as to what the future holds for action heroines within Hollywood films and whether the quest to achieve emancipation from the shackles of the male gaze (and the objectification it endorses) will ever be truly viable.

CHAPTER 1: LARA CROFT

In 2001, Angelina Jolie starred in the first filmic franchise for live-action Lara Croft. In his review of Jolie's portrayal, Peter Bradshaw (2001) vividly described the sexualised manner in which Jolie's body had been tailored for the role,

Hair tied back. Weaponry strapped to gorgeous legs. Lips big and smouldering like a fire-damaged Dali sofa. Huge breasts monolithically immobile, as if encased in some new brand of hi-tech assault sports bra. (Bradshaw, 2001)

Bradshaw's descriptive review for *The Guardian* aligned readers to the scopophilic potentiality of Lara Croft and additionally suggested that the authenticity of Jolie's role as an action babe heroine was undermined by a persistent exaggeration of her sexuality. Following a critically panned sequel, the Lara Croft franchise was shelved indefinitely and Brown had speculated of potential future casting that Paramount Studios would be likely to cast 'an actress that filmgoers have no preconceived notions about. Someone who's a blank slate' (Brown, 2011: p. 98). Brown implied that Jolie had been 'imbued with a subjectivity of her own' (Brown, 2011: p. 98), that her celebrity and sex symbol status had limited audiences' identification with her portrayal of Lara Croft and that film studios would limit this impact by opting for a lesser-known actress in future projects. Seven years later, Warner Bros. greenlit the reboot for the franchise and Norwegian director Roar Uthaug took the helm with *Tomb Raider*, the first film to feature Alicia Vikander as Jolie's successor. However, Vikander was also criticised from the outset, though preliminary criticisms were directed towards her inability to exhibit sexuality in the same way that her predecessor had. A promotional photo for the film was released and, in an online blog that was later retracted, film critic Jerome Maida launched a vitriolic tirade following the announcement that the new face of Lara Croft had been cast:

Vikander's appearance is also markedly different than Jolie's... She never comes across as having an ounce of sex appeal and, at times, looks like she could be 16. Toss in the lack of curves and Warner Brothers could have decided to gender bend and make a film titled "Luke Croft" — and it would have come across the same way. (Medeiros, 2018)

Pitting one actress against the other, Maida's criticism highlights the sensibility which drives spectators of the Lara Croft franchise to seek a sense of true fidelity to the source material's depiction of Croft's

physicality. Within his analysis of Vikander's appearance, Maida draws upon the 'lack of curves' which becomes synonymous, within his reading, with the absence of womanhood. It is evident that this factor is pivotal to the avid fans of the Lara Croft franchise and that the imposition of a new visual representation, differing substantially from that of her predecessors, evokes a sense of anxiety within viewers.

This chapter compares and contrasts Simon West's *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* against Roar Uthaug's contemporary *Tomb Raider*. As visual spectacle, Jolie's Croft is portrayed as a raunchy and flirtatious character who invites the scopophilic gaze- she's a transgressive figure who vies to toy with her voyeurs. In comparison, Vikander's Croft is depicted as a nimble yet powerful fighter with many scenes focusing upon her impressive physicality without her body being overtly sexualised. Vikander's performance is less concerned with binary opposites of hypersexualisation or with binary opposites of hypersexualisation or masculinisation as a means of reclaiming the female form; instead, Lara Croft is presented as both physically strong and emotionally vulnerable.

Examining the Lara Croft phenomenon involves delving into her evolution- since the initial video game was launched, there have been a total of nineteen video games added to the franchise as well as three filmic adaptations which employ different representations of the character. This chapter adopts a chronological approach in tracing the representation of Lara Croft; initially, the analysis begins with the source material (video game), delving into Toby Gard's primary intentions when creating the iconic prototype for the first female protagonist. Then the analysis moves on to consider the way in which Lara Croft was translated to the silver screen and embodied by Angelina Jolie within *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, before finally considering the contemporary iteration of the iconographic figure in *Tomb Raider*.

The dominant visual mode of the action babe heroine explored within this chapter is the muscular protagonist. Tasker argues that from the late eighties to the early noughties, an emphasis was placed upon creating new active female characters in film, yet also notes that the image-makers responsible for producing such characters relied upon archetypes and conventions that were already familiar to society. For example, the leather-clad dominatrix became popularised by many producers but went on to be ridiculed by critics who deemed these representations 'exploitative, and [...] directed at male rather than female audiences' (Tasker, 1993: p.20). Consequently, a new extreme visual spectacle, characterised by excessive musculature, became a viable alternative. Tasker coined the term

'musculinity' to describe the phenomenon observed within action films wherein action heroines sported hardened physiques in the late eighties/early nineties as an assertive response to the limitations of stereotypically sexualised roles for women. Musculinity is defined as the 'extent to which a physical definition of masculinity in terms of a developed musculature is not limited to the male body within representation' (Tasker, 1993: p. 3); strong visual examples of this trend are characters such as Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) and Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens* (1986). Both characters are portrayed as women who wear no make-up and costumes consisting of plain vests with combat pants (which aren't form-fitted); they are also characterised as being aggressive. Tasker states that traditionally 'Weakness, vulnerability is expressed through the mobilisation of traits associated with femininity, most particularly a softness or lack of definition which might allow the body to be fatally penetrated' (Tasker, 1993: p. 17). In their adoption of muscular bodies, often a product of gritty and punishing physical regimes, the action heroines donning striations and bulging muscles essentially abandoned femininity and affiliations with inherent vulnerability. This departure from the normalised sexualisation of women within Hollywood evoked anxiety within some spectators, forcing producers to allay this masculinised representation of action heroines 'through either the sexualisation of her persona or the use of comedy, or both' (Tasker, 1993: p. 20). Consequently, some films began to platform an iteration of the muscular heroine who was also able to be perceived as a scopophilic pleasure/sex symbol; an example of this is *Red Sonja* (1985) which starred Brigitte Nielsen as the protagonist. Nielsen embodied a distinctive aesthetic which consisted of a naturally lean muscular physique on a tall build (she loomed at over six feet tall), broad shoulders, a prominent jawline and short cropped blonde hair. Nielsen's masculine features were counterbalanced by a natural glamour and sexual allure - accompanying her acting career, Nielsen had embarked upon a modelling career and was often hypersexualised in magazine spreads, seen to be wearing exclusive fashion brands and styled with make-up. Nielsen served as an example of a transgressive action heroine icon within a predominantly male-dominated industry and genre, who simultaneously achieved success as a sexualised commodity who satisfied scopophilic audiences. Subsequently, heroines like Nielsen became examples of figures who evoked a simultaneous fear and desire within male audiences. This impact posed a lesser threat to the masculinised landscape of the action genre (in comparison to excessively muscular action heroines who weren't sexualised); therefore, this melange of strength and sexuality became a common composition for a sub-musculinity prototype. Fundamentally, this partial reversion to sexualising female

protagonists highlights the perpetual struggle to accept empowered women in film who deviate from primarily satisfying scopophilic audiences.

Within the late nineties/early noughties, the iconography of the action heroine substantially shifted from that of masculinity. Representations of the action heroine further reverted back to explicit, overt sexualisation; this was exemplified by the adoption of raunchy lead protagonists. Brown suggests that this shift in action heroine representation alleviated spectator anxieties towards dominant female protagonists in action films, suggesting an extension of the Nielson effect. Brown argues that, 'The threat of action heroines being too manly or possibly lesbian eventually led to an increased emphasis on the sexuality of heroines in later films' (Brown, 2011: p. 31). This new raunchy iteration of the action heroine was epitomised by the release of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* starring Angelina Jolie as the titular character. The film served as the first live-action adaptation of a popular, critically acclaimed video game *Tomb Raider* (1996) which was the product of a relatively unknown, yet talented, game designer named Toby Gard. In 1995, Gard was commissioned by Core Design to develop ideas for an upcoming game to be published by Square Enix Europe (formerly known as Eidos Interactive). Gard proposed a third-person perspective game, the premise of which involved globe-trotting, buried tombs and treasure acquisition but most importantly, an iconic Indiana Jones styled character at the helm. Opting for a third-person view was subversive, as most video games prior to this point focussed on the first-person perspective; yet this wasn't the limit to Gard's innovation. A two-gun toting English archaeologist clad in a grey shirt, khaki shorts and boots became the first prototype of Gard's primary player; however, it was the startling addition of large breasts and long hair which distinguished Gard's game from all predecessors. The digital babe Lara Croft was born and with her inception, the world of gaming had been irrevocably changed. *Tomb Raider* (1996) was released into wider circulation to avid praise, with critics commenting on the quality of the production and the success of a female protagonist.

The success of Lara Croft as a gaming figure was owed, in part, to her attractive fantasised appearance. As a digital image, Lara Croft served as the principle star of men's magazines covers, including that of *The Face*. This print publication dedicated an entire spread to Croft and interviewed Toby Gard in an article named 'My Girl'. Of his initial concept when creating Lara Croft, Gard explained within this iconic interview that,

Lara was designed to be a tough, self-reliant, intelligent woman. She confounds all the sexist clichés apart from the fact that she's got an unbelievable figure. Strong, independent women are the perfect fantasy girls— the untouchable is always the most desirable. (Toby Gard's interview with *The Face* as cited in Brown, 2011: p. 91).

In his analysis of Croft's representation, Gard deems Lara Croft to be an empowered figure, a defiant woman with paramount qualities of independence and strength. However, Gard also implies a sense of unattainable, overtly sexualised perfection in his precious digital goddess, framing her as the ultimate fantasy figure for both himself and the gamers that are to play her. Even the apt title for the article 'My Girl' connotes a sense of ownership or subordination, as though Lara Croft were a commodity to be consumed and owned.

The scopophilic gaze embedded by the male designer is perpetuated by male audiences. On the one hand, within the parameters of the video game, Lara Croft is an empowering figure wielding guns who becomes a transgressive icon for action heroines; yet, problematically, she also serves as the object of desire who lacks autonomy (in that she is fully controlled by players who command her character and movements). Brown suggests that, 'By most accounts, the incredible popularity of Lara Croft is due as much (if not more so) to her idealized image as it is to the quality of the game' (Brown, 2011: p. 91). This commentary suggests that Lara Croft's prevalence as a visual action babe spectacle overshadows the quality of the game. This aesthetic prominence is indicative of an inherently sexist discourse at the heart of video game programming. For instance, if a male protagonist were to have stood in her place, would his physical characterisation have become the residual discussion point amongst the male-dominated playership of video games? Brown proposes that the anxieties for male players in identifying with the female protagonist of the video game had to be alleviated in some way and that therefore, the overt sexualisation of Lara Croft was perceived a necessity as a 'type of sexist compensation for the dissonance players may feel about identifying with a female character' (Brown, 2011: p. 95). Therefore, this sexualisation sustains the male gaze as well as reinforces the binaries of masculine control and feminine passivity, which is further accentuated by the fact that '...virtual Lara Croft never returns the viewer/player's gaze. As a virtual character controlled by the player, Lara is oblivious to her objectification' (Brown, 2011: p. 95). Ward observed of the gameplay that as a result of Lara Croft barely turning around to challenge the gaze, players often see her body from behind and, 'she is freely

available for looking at: she is always the center of the frame, the focus of all attentions' (Ward, 2000). Lara Croft's presentation as a scopophilic pleasure is heightened by her mute disposition- she becomes a non-speaking, non-subjective visual pleasure who, for all intents and purposes, serves as a historic icon due to her femininity in a male-orientated gaming industry yet is objectified in the same way that women have always been traditionally oppressed onscreen.

Beyond the realms of the video game, Lara Croft's objectification was further perpetuated by a reactionary trend which saw some avid gamers develop the 'Nude Raider' culture, wherein nude images and 'even sites offering "videos" of her performing stripteases' (Brown, 2011: p. 95) were formed and shared online. In later years, live-action iterations of Croft further reiterated her status as a sexual commodity. A primary example of this is Lara Weller's hypersexualised embodiment of the iconic character for promotional purposes, she frequented game conventions (in character) and was featured extensively within marketing for Tomb Raider 4. The official trailer entitled Tomb Raider 4 Commercial - Lara Weller (TombRaiderEmpire, 2014) evidences this hypersexualisation- the video begins with an image of ancient ruins which fades out, the edges of the screen covered by animations of flickering flames. Then, still obscured by flames, a camera pans across a naked leg which rests upon a boulder, following the curve of the leg up to high-cut combat shorts (with an embellishment of gun holsters) and then further up past a pale blue vest covering a proportionally small waist and ample bosom. Finally, the camera lingers over Lara Weller's face, her eyes peering over the rim of small, circular sunglasses and dark hair plaited into two pigtails. The visual representation of Croft is, within this context, concerned with sensualising the character by not actually showing her in action (despite the action-adventure genre of the game). Weller's Croft remains static as she allows the viewer to run their eyes over her body and when the camera finally meets her face, she coolly gazes back. On a popular website dedicated to cultural critique, Mike Ward (2000) published a piece observing the fundamental differences between Croft's characterisation within the video game and her representation by Weller within the promotional video. Ward noted that, 'Weller's Lara is sexual spectacle at the same time that she embodies rage against the spectacle' (Ward, 2000). Ward essentially summarises that though Weller is stylistically sexualised and treated as a sexual object within the trailer, her role as a passive, scopophilic pleasure is somewhat problematised by her capacity to challenge the gaze by gazing back upon voyeurs. Weller's portrayal of Croft subsequently invites readings of the character as a, 'sort of riot grrrl and a sort of fetish' (Ward, 2000). Croft's solitary status as a female protagonist within the video game industry

is a positively transgressive stance and yet her continued objectification indicates that she is intrinsically tied to the fetishistic values embedded in Gard's original design of the character. Therefore, Weller's performance both satisfies the conventional male gaze whilst simultaneously challenging it, in that she displays an active self-awareness as to her sexuality and invites spectators to gaze upon her.

The overt sexualisation of Croft was further accentuated when the character was projected to a larger mainstream platform and adapted for the silver screen. The *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* movie starred outspoken Angelina Jolie as the lead protagonist. Particularly observed in noughties action films, O'Day comments of stars such as Jolie, who have been cast for highly sexualised action babe heroine roles, that 'their erotic glamour and aura of sexual availability' (O'Day, 2004: p. 206) were integral attributes. This suggests that the performativity of sexual availability is an essential criterion for successful female protagonists within action films of this period. Jolie herself addressed the pressures of playing the first live-action iteration of a character renowned for being heavily sexualised, stating that she accepted the role on the grounds that she wouldn't have to wear super short cargo shorts. Despite her initial protestations, Jolie admits that an executive decision was made to keep this costume within the film and so she obliged, though she deemed this uncomfortable. Her justification for this uncomfortable self-objectification was the need to satisfy loyal fans of the franchise; in an interview she summarized, 'for the people who know her, you have to get in the shorts' (ScreenSlam, 2015). Critics suggest that this obtuse sexualisation robbed Jolie of valid opportunities to exercise her prowess as a credible action actress; many critical reviews of the film revolved around the inauthenticity of Lara Croft. For example, Todd McCarthy (2001) of *Variety* summarised that,

Interest is all but limited to watching Jolie strike her slinky poses, trot out her clingy costumes, vault around via bungee cords and pulleys and move with inhuman speed and coordination thanks to the wonders of machine-gun editing and special effects. (McCarthy, 2001)

McCarthy's review acknowledged the heavy reliance upon effects added during post-production stages, he considered Jolie's active performance to be minimal and limited only to her 'slinky poses' and 'clingy costumes'.

In contrast, upon *Tomb Raider's* wide release, critics predominantly praised Vikander's impressively muscular and less hypersexualised iteration. Considering the physicality of her performance (upon the

film's release), Seitz addressed within his review for *The Guardian* how Vikander, 'makes you feel the physicality of this intensely visceral performance' (Seitz, 2018). Seitz also noted the way in which Vikander's performance illuminated moments of distress as well as physical and emotional exertion, which was integral to the portrayal of a contemporary Lara Croft in that it confirmed, 'that the movie isn't going to just graft a bunch of standard-issue, strong-silent tough guy clichés onto a female lead and call it a day' (Seitz, 2018). This review is particularly telling when compared to reviews of Jolie's portrayal as the contrast between the physical presentations of Lara Croft is indicative as to significant changes in feminist culture and film. Seitz argues that the reboot 'treats Vikander as a moving piece of sculpture, admiring her not in a sexually objectifying way, but as one might an athlete' (Seitz, 2018). The prime influence for the contemporary iteration of Vikander's Croft in *Tomb Raider* is the most recent reboot of the video game series which introduced a significantly modified digital Lara Croft profile. Reflective of a more athletic and less sexualised protagonist, the *Tomb Raider: A Survivor Is Born* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013) game is an origin story which depicts a young Lara Croft on her first adventure. Her appearance consists of muscularly defined arms and a lean, muscular frame. Most importantly, Croft's breasts and waist-hip ratio are exponentially less exaggerated than her predecessors in the video game canon. In terms of costume, she wears a grey tank-top and dark green cargo pants, clutching a more traditional weapon of bow and arrow. In *Lara Croft and Gaming: Feminism in a Hyper-Masculine Industry* (2016), Lisa McInnes acknowledges that the new and improved Croft is, 'less busty, less provocative, and inherently less sexy than before' (McInnes, 2016). McInnes' (2016) comments point to evidence of a changing female representation within the video gaming industry; many gaming critics commented upon the success of *Tomb Raider* (2013) so as to suggest that the change in visual spectacle was not to the detriment of the game's quality. Keza Macdonald stated of *Tomb Raider: A Survivor Is Born* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013) that, 'we see Lara's vulnerability, but she is never disempowered, and never less than totally capable in extreme danger' (Macdonald, 2013). This reading suggests that a more humanised iteration of Lara Croft is evident within the game, characterised by Croft's capacity to display vulnerability. Critical reception enforces that this feminised softness doesn't compromise Croft's efficacy as an action heroine- she is still capable of physical prowess though this is often demonstrated as a more survivalist approach to violence.

The dissimilarity between the sexualised action babe, as presented by Jolie's Croft, and the contemporary muscular action heroine, as evidenced by Vikander's Croft, are crucially framed within

promotional material such as exclusive backstage footage and interviews released prior to the films. Pre-production material highlights the process behind the acquisition of the 'fit' body, as this often becomes the central marketing ploy utilised to titillate the general public. A primary example of this is the 'Training Featurettes' material for both films. The behind-the-scenes video for *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) frames a series of clips from dance studios, gyms and gun-firing ranges. These environments frame training within multiple disciplines including weight training, gymnastics, military weapons training (courtesy of an SAS trainer), body toning through Pilates/yoga and fight training consisting of kickboxing and full-contact karate. The extensive team involved highlights the extent of the blockbuster's budget and also suggests that Jolie is eager to authentically perform her own stunts in order to give the impression of a physically conditioned action heroine. However, this presentation is sullied by the fact that the training itself seems a choreographed performance, intended to be viewed by audiences. Additionally, Jolie is presented with no physical signs of exertion despite commentary suggesting that the training is arduous and draining. This transformation connotes stardom in that there's a certain unattainable perfection about Jolie's physical embodiment of Croft. Subsequently, most spectators won't identify with Jolie's impossible combination of femininity and athletic ability nor Jolie's methods of attaining them- this disconnect forces audiences to gaze from afar. The training featurette merely supports a reading of Jolie's Croft as a scopophilic pleasure, glamourised by the exclusivity of access to specialised resources and skillsets.

In contrast, the training featurette for *Tomb Raider* depicts a minimalistic approach from the outset - Alicia Vikander enters a humble gym studio, accompanied by her personal trainer Magnus. Whilst Jolie was depicted with a sizeable team of professionals, Vikander is equipped with just one man. Additionally, the use of an ordinary gym as opposed to a plethora of site-specific training areas suggests that the training is accessible and somewhat attainable (if to be replicated) for the average viewer. Spectators are shown Vikander ferociously pounding the treadmill, squatting large free-weights (balanced against her collarbones), delivering precise un-assisted pull-ups, gracefully repeating an aerobics routine with the sun setting behind her, as well as marking out the fight choreography for her MMA sparring scene within the boxing ring with cameras framing her movements. Sound bites from *Tomb Raider* "Alicia's Training" Featurette (FilmsNow Movie Bloopers & Extras, 2018) reveal that Vikander's training began three months prior to the film being shot and that her main intention for the training was to present Lara Croft as, "a strong, physical girl" This is reflected by the arduous exercises

shown within the video and the punishing nature of the regime - whilst Jolie's training compilation offered ample opportunity to view her as a sexual commodity, Vikander's experiences highlight her physical exertion by capturing the determination on her face and sweat dripping from her body. Most importantly, Vikander also identifies the gendered preconceptions about weight training and acquiring strength: "I really felt it being very empowering erm- and I- I still feel I have a physique which is, you know, I feel extremely feminine and yet I've gained five kilos" (FilmsNow Movie Bloopers & Extras, 2018). Vikander draws upon anxieties pertaining to excessive musculature on the female body essentially signifying the death of femininity, as outlined by Tasker (1993), yet addresses that the training has instead reinforced her personal sense of femininity. Traditionally, the heroine's acquisition of an excessively muscular body is considered a masculinising act, often accompanied by other gendered elements of performance including overt aggression. However, the extremity of Vikander's musculinity performance is neutralised by a naturally petite frame and modest demeanour which automatically reinforces her femininity, despite the acquisition of a hardened body. In comparison to Jolie's transformation, audiences are more likely to connect with Vikander's iteration of Lara Croft in that she demonstrates positive values of fallibility and determination, allowing for audiences to see her as more than a commodity. There's substantial emphasis placed upon the impressive and extreme physical transformation undergone for the film- whilst this emphasis upon bodily aesthetic may serve as a scopophilic pleasure, overt sexualisation of the female form is replaced by an appreciation for its capacity for strength.

The introductory scenes of both filmic adaptations further reinforce Jolie's Croft as scopophilic visual spectacle and Vikander's Croft as a contemporary, muscular visual spectacle. In Simon West's *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, audiences are thrown into the middle of an action scene, where the first visual impression of Jolie's Croft is her shapely body suspended upside down, supported by ropes. Jolie delivers a suggestive smile as she looks ahead, her costume clearly establishing her as the iconic action heroine from the video games with clothing signifiers consisting of gun holsters, biker shorts and a plain t-shirt all in hues of green and grey. The camera zooms in to highlight Croft's focused expression as she assesses the landscape, which consists of dusty ruins, and then she falls down, somersaulting through the air and landing like a feline on her feet. The confidence with which this movement is executed suggests that Croft is professional and experienced. She walks through an ancient vault and hesitates as she notices the disintegration of a pillar at her side. A robot punches through the pillar and Croft is plunged into an altercation - she destroys the robot and

therefore completes her 'mission', though it is revealed that the entire fight scene is a simulation which Lara Croft trains within from the comfort of her large and extravagant manor. This facility is operated by Bryce (a male programmer) who designs scenarios to keep Croft fit in-between jobs whilst Croft's butler Hillary overlooks, offering critique. The superficiality of this scenario, the way in which it has been artificially staged to serve as a practice run for real adventures, depreciates Croft's capabilities as there is no real sense of danger. Additionally, the theatricality of this performance characterises Croft as a woman who enjoys performing for those who voyeuristically gaze upon her. Dissimilarly, *Tomb Raider's* opening scene establishes the film as an origin story by briefly outlining the narrative arc: the voice of Lara Croft's absentee father narrates the mythological tale of Japanese sorceress Himiko, said to have been buried alive by disloyal followers under her rule (this draws notable comparisons to the storyline from the video game). Following a blackout, audiences are presented with *Tomb Raider's* image of Lara Croft who reverts back to the traditional tropes described by Tasker (1993) wherein 'the hardness of the muscles goes against a history of representation- visual and verbal- in which the female body is imagined as soft and curvaceous' (Tasker, 1993: p. 142). Vikander's Croft stands in the centre of a fighting ring within an MMA gym, a woman with a spectacularly lean, muscular stature (accentuated by a film of slick sweat) and hair plaited back into practical pigtales. Her costume is ordinary gym wear, a black sports bra which stops at the end of her ribs and baggy khaki shorts which obscure her figure as opposed to clinging to it- crucially there are no attempts to accentuate the female form in terms of exaggerated cleavage or waist-line. Vikander's Croft is being punched repeatedly by another woman as a male training coach shouts words of encouragement from the side. The hand-to-hand combat is brutal in nature and connotes a 'no holds barred' attitude, with both fighters pummeling each other aggressively throughout the scene. The regular use of the close-up during this fight evidences Croft's vulnerability and exertion- she's worn down by her opponent, slammed into the side of the ring and held in a choker hold. Despite being told by her coach to 'tap out' and accept defeat, Croft holds on for a dangerously long time before eventually conceding and falling to her knees. This loss highlights several important attributes about Vikander's modernised Croft- firstly, she is fallible and therefore a relatable figure to viewers of the film; secondly, the character is gritty and physically able as opposed to heavily enhanced by CGI in post-production stages or replaced by a stunt double during intensive action scenes. Vikander's Croft trains as a recreational hobby whilst Jolie's Croft delights in the prospect of performing her role as an action heroine, gloating about the ease with which

she destroys the robot (much to Bryce's disdain as he must once again create a new challenge). These opening scenes demonstrate considerable differences between the protagonists with Vikander's Croft being presented in an origin story format (which suggests her confidence as a heroine will be acquired during the narrative of the film) and Jolie's Croft clearly already established as a confident, performative heroine.

The extent to which the filmic Lara Croft iterations are gazed upon the films by their male peers onscreen, as well as the ways in which the iterations interact with men, reflect a crucial change in feminist attitudes between the early noughties when *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* was released and the decade of the twenty-tens when *Tomb Raider* emerged. *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* incorporates a shower scene a mere six minutes into the movie. The purpose of this scene is to present Jolie's Croft as a sexual commodity, yet the latter part of the scene also portrays her as a seductive, sex-positive figure (the epitome of raunch culture). Simon West utilises a series of lingering, intense close-ups to capture Jolie as she stands under the shower, the water running over her upper body and face. On the one hand, this scene shares a direct comparison with Gard's original game prototype as Croft fails to command the gaze and subsequently becomes the victim of objectification. However, Jolie's Croft then reclaims control upon leaving the shower. Croft covers her body in a small towel (which barely conceals her breasts or upper legs) and Hilary enters the room with a dress on a hanger. Croft laughs off his clothing suggestion to which Hilary replies: "I'm only trying to turn you into a lady". Croft drops her towel, walking away from the butler with her body fully exposed. The butler barely responds as though he's become desensitised to such acts and simply says, "A lady should be modest", to which Croft purrs "Yes" before looking over her shoulder, "a lady should be modest". This dialogue simultaneously serves two purposes which relate to Levy's theory of raunch- firstly, Jolie's unabashed stance transcends the parameters of the screen and projects a sense of sexual availability to viewers of the film. Levy proposes that notions of 'hotness requires projecting a kind of eagerness, offering a promise that any attention you receive for your physicality is welcome' (Levy, 2006: p. 33); therefore, by choosing to remain unclothed and by drawing attention to the subversive nature of this action, Croft is hereby presented as a sexualised 'hot' heroine. Secondly, the dialogue frames Hilary as a father-like figure who attempts to refine Croft as a woman, by trying to protect her modesty and thus bind her to traditional notions of reservation around men; Croft's response strongly resists this. Levy states of the motivations that lead women to turn to sexualising themselves;

It's in fashion, and it is something that has traditionally appealed exclusively to men and actively offended women, so producing it or participating in it is a way both to flaunt your coolness and to mark yourself as different, tougher, looser, funnier- a new sort of loophole woman who is "not like other woman," who is instead "like a man". (Levy, 2006: p. 96)

Jolie's Croft rejects gendered norms in that she is unashamedly naked and purposefully provocative, this serves as a direct rebellion against the original gameplay (within which she was silenced and seen only from behind) as well as against older feminisms which have strived to conservatively restrain expressions of sexuality. Jolie becomes an emblem of postfeminist rebellion by reclaiming a personal sense of sexual agency, however in doing so, she also perpetuates Mulvey's traditional notion of the scopophilic gaze.

Whilst Jolie's Croft is depicted in the nude and toying with an uncomfortable Hillary, Vikander's Croft is characterised as a more relatable everywoman figure who is less sexually boisterous in her interactions with men. Vikander's Croft shares a platonic and competitive camaraderie with her male peers at a low-paid courier job, they respect her and goad her on in a friendly manner yet don't view her as a sexual object. When her international adventure begins, her friendly rapport with captain Lu Ren provides a glimpse into her potentially romantic interaction with men (though Vikander's Croft has no explicit 'love interest' role outlined). Upon first meeting captain Lu Ren, Croft asks for his assistance in navigating her way to Yamatai (supposed resting place of Himiko). Lu Ren insists it is far too unsafe to embark on this journey due to potential stormy waters and meets Croft's confidence (in her own physical abilities, as she insists she can help with the labour on-board) with cynicism. Despite his reservations, Lu Ren eventually concedes and a short montage, narrated by Croft's father, shows the two working aboard the boat with Croft attempting to decipher the clues left by her father and Lu Ren attending to domesticities. With time, Lu Ren grows to appreciate Croft's determination and initiative as evidenced when she's seen to be tugging on the ship's rigging and navigating the boat. During this scene, Croft is clad in her generic outfit consisting of a grey vest which clings to her figure, khaki trousers and boots. Croft is framed in the foreground and the camera pans to Lu Ren in the background, he is captured gazing upon Croft's body however he watches on with newfound admiration as to her strength, as opposed to invasively running his eyes over her assets. Ren respectfully averts his eyes after a moment, despite the fact that Croft is unaware as to the fact she's being watched. Within the diegetic scene, Ren

is reluctant to view Croft as a sexual object and therefore suspends the gaze when he becomes self-aware as to the fact he's actively using it. Mirroring this, directorially, Uthaug doesn't use the camera as a tool with which to accentuate any aspect of Croft's physique with lingering close-ups. In comparison to Jolie's Croft, Vikander's Croft is empowered through a visual representation that doesn't revolve around her scopophilic potentiality.

Amidst grueling combat and action scenes, Jolie's Croft and Vikander's Croft are depicted in substantially different ways. Jolie's Croft remains a sexualised visual spectacle in a highly choreographed altercation in her manor. Jolie's Croft is sensualised in all-white clothing with only one button done up on her loose-flowing, long-sleeved shirt; she's suspended from a trapeze in the foyer of her home and swings across the space to classical music as a 'recreational' night-time activity before a group of armed men ambush the manor, forcing Croft to engage in combat. She moves fluidly as though every scenario had been rehearsed and as Croft makes her way around the house, retrieving hidden weapons, spectators are drawn to the clinical and sterile feel presented by the phallic guns, flashy sports cars and labs which are featured as part of the mise-en-scene. Croft's adoption of a functional and masculinised environment as a home, equipped for such combative encounters, further allows for her to, 'mobilise a symbolically transgressive iconography' (Tasker, 1993: p.132). In her dominant approach to fighting off the assailants, Jolie's Croft epitomises the alpha male and proceeds to perform the role of protector and fighter for the Croft establishment. In comparison, *Tomb Raider's* actions scenes depict a more survivalist Croft who resorts to violence only as a means of self-defence and unlike Jolie's Croft, Vikander's Croft never actively seeks to perform as an action heroine for voyeuristic pleasure and instead acts out of primal instinct. Vikander's Croft struggles and audiences are subjected to scenes which depict her grunts and sighs as she's being hit by opponents or her exhaustion after running away from antagonistic men chasing her through uncharted forests. Having escaped from antagonist Vogel at the archaeological site, Croft creates a temporary shelter in a forest where she is awoken from her sleep by one of Vogel's men. This results in intensive hand-to-hand-combat, with both fighters struggling to overwhelm the opponent. Croft is visibly exhausted by the encounter, grunting with exertion as she suffers a series of jabs to the body. Eventually, Croft kills the assailant and yet, her response is far from victorious. The consequences of such violence take a visible toll upon the protagonist- she sobs beside the body, clearly stunned by her own actions and privy to remorse, shame and shock. This sense of genuine mourning for the life she has taken distinguishes

her from typical lead females within the action genre - whilst they are motivated into violence by a sense of trauma or pursuit of justice, Croft is presented as the everyday woman who resorts to violence as a matter of self-defence. The implications of violence are profound and the response to death is humanised. This is a sensitive and nuanced portrayal which demonstrates both a reengagement with as well as subtle departure from Yvonne Tasker's 'Musculinity' figure. The fundamental difference between Vikander's Croft and muscular action heroines who have preceded her is this significant effort to emphasise the potentiality within all women to encompass strength as well as vulnerability. In the face of adversity, Vikander's Croft wears a face which depicts fear as opposed to coyness and in doing so, spectators are encouraged to root for her as opposed to marvel from afar at the sheer visual spectacle that is her body.

In summary, Jolie's Croft is presented as the ultimate fantasy action babe heroine in that her physique is inherently sexualised yet also possesses the capability to engage with demanding, specialised skillsets such as handling weaponry and hand-to-hand combat. West (2001) directs Jolie's Croft with an eye for aestheticism- despite the seemingly impossible nature of her physical capabilities, for example flying from pillar-to-pillar whilst suspended mid-air (simultaneously knocking out multitudes of men equipped with weapons), she always looks good doing it. Despite the potential for Jolie's personal qualities as a notoriously outspoken woman and philanthropist to empower her portrayal of Lara Croft, spectators are left with the tried-and-tested formulaic blockbuster, brandishing an overtly sexualised action heroine. *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* subsequently becomes a generic example of raunch culture's profound influence within the film industry- paradoxically empowering yet disempowering to the integrity of the action heroine; the movie simply repeats what has been done before and makes financial profit in the process. To this extent, Jolie's Croft serves as a reminder that despite its superficial statement as an empowering movement, 'Raunch culture is not essentially progressive, it is essentially commercial' (Levy, 2006: p. 29). This is further evidenced by Levy's sentiment that, 'The glossy, overheated thumping of sexuality in our culture is less about connection than consumption' (Levy, 2006: p. 31). In reducing opportunities for spectator identification with the protagonist, Jolie's Croft becomes the object of the gaze, to be consumed rather than celebrated as an empowered woman in film. Problematically, despite scenes which demonstrate her strength and humour, Jolie's Croft is entrapped by an obligation to constantly satisfy scopophilic audiences. In stark contrast, Uthaug makes an active effort to highlight the contemporary iteration of Lara Croft as a physically strong yet emotionally complex

and vulnerable protagonist. Innovatively, distinguishing Lara Croft from the initial wave of masculinity heroines as described by Tasker, producers have sought to nuance her portrayal with feminine aspects other than overt sexualisation. As an origin story, *Tomb Raider* documents Lara Croft's first adventures as she develops from the everywoman into the confident and experienced figure with which we are all familiar from the video game franchise and previous filmic iterations. Vikander's Croft navigates the narrative as an independent woman who is kind yet simultaneously determined, constantly challenged by her environment to physically adapt and overcome. The contemporary *Tomb Raider* demonstrates that it is possible to engage audiences with humanised action heroines that don't perform an overt sexualisation. Through delicate characterisation and a resistance to the binary of exclusively masculinised (through masculinity) or overtly sexualised female bodies in action film, Vikander's Croft serves as a contemporary glimpse of the wholesome combination of strength and femininity. Most importantly, Vikander's Croft signifies that the traditional male gaze can be allayed within contemporary action films. Screenplays which provide action babe heroines with opportunities to demonstrate that they are physically strong protagonists and simultaneously complex, multi-faceted and emotional subjects of the action narrative.

CHAPTER 2: *WONDER WOMAN*

In 2017, Warner Bros. released a contemporary adaptation to kick-start the reboot of the Wonder Woman franchise, introducing her to new audiences a whole forty years following the TV series starring Lynda Carter and seventy years after the original Wonder Woman was initially unveiled in comic books worldwide. This chapter acknowledges anxieties pertaining to the historically hypersexualised representations of Wonder Woman and argues that the contemporary remaking of *Wonder Woman* (2017), as directed by Patty Jenkins, depicts a nuanced and significantly less sexualised iteration of the titular character. This assertion opposes that of acclaimed film director James Cameron, who voiced his disappointment with Patty Jenkins' contemporary *Wonder Woman*, claiming that the protagonist continues to perpetuate the tradition of sexualised action heroines. In an interview with the *Hollywood Reporter* (2017), he spoke of Gal Gadot's casting as the iconic superheroine,

I mean, she was Miss Israel, and she was wearing a kind of bustier costume that was very form-fitting. She's absolutely drop-dead gorgeous. To me, that's not breaking ground. They had Raquel Welch doing stuff like that in the '60s. It was all in a context of talking about why Sarah Connor — what Linda created in 1991 — was, if not ahead of its time, at least a breakthrough in its time. I don't think it was really ahead of its time because we're still not [giving women these types of roles].
(Masters, 2017)

I argue that Cameron's focus on sexualisation within his review of the *Wonder Woman* film is inherently reductionist and that within his reading of the film, he neglects other positive, empowering attributes of Gal Gadot's performance as the iconic superheroine. This chapter evaluates the ways in which Allan Heinberg and Patty Jenkins effectively deemphasise the salience of to-be-looked-at-ness within their characterisation and visual representation of Wonder Woman, finally offering an alternative, progressive iteration of the iconographic figure.

Cameron's anxieties regarding the historical sexualisation of action heroines onscreen correlate with other anxieties around the persistent sexualisation of superheroines within comic books. The troublesome, hypersexualised canon of superheroine representation cannot be disputed. In 2005, Jessica H. Zellers utilised the SILS (The School of Information and Library Science) collection at the University of North Carolina (UNC) to launch a small-scale inquiry into the disparities between male and

female representation within comic books. The SILS collection consisted of, 'some of the most successful of the graphic novels currently in print' (Zellers, 2005: p. 5) and subsequently mirrored collections likely to be found within public and school libraries. Zellers randomly selected eighteen comic books (equivalent to 10% of the 178 comic books available) and created a tally system to monitor three factors: 'Sex of Protagonist', 'Perpetrators of Physical Violence' & 'Sexual Suggestiveness of Attire'. Overall, her findings suggested, 'Of all the males, 6% were suggestively clad, partially clad, or naked; of all the females, 38% were suggestively clad, partially clad, or naked' (Zellers, 2005: p. 34). Such findings outline clearly the disparities between the sexualisation of male and female protagonists in comic books. Additionally, the findings reinforce Edmunds' notion that the comic book industry is governed by a male readership which perpetuates a sexualised portrayal of most, if not all, female protagonists, including superheroines. The representation of such iconographic, sexualised superheroines is further problematised by the way in which these characters are visually translated to the silver screen for major blockbuster revenue.

The stereotypically gendered representation of superheroines has also been noted by T. Keith Edmunds (2014) who argues that, though superheroines are acknowledged as powerful individuals, they have been persistently hyperfeminised, '...to avoid undermining the fantasy of the male readership' (Edmunds, 2014: p. 205). Edmunds acknowledges the potentiality for empowerment, in that superheroines are depicted as powerful beings, however, also draws upon the centrality of the male readership and the consequent implications upon the visual representation of superheroines. Edmunds additionally asserts that,

Superheroines have, from almost the beginning, been objectified. With revealing costumes, eroticized body types, and overt sex appeal, most, if not all, female characters are primarily defined by their sexuality. [12] (Edmunds, 2014: p. 205)

Edmunds refers to the 'hyperfeminised body' which is characterised by recurring tropes such as the accentuation of a large waist to small hip ratio and the embellishments of figure-hugging costumes, often minimal in style, so as to give the impression of being scantily clad (or seemingly filling the outfit to the extent of falling out of it). Edmunds critiques the centralisation of the male viewer, something which leads to the subordination of the fictional superheroine, supporting the reading of her as a 'fantasy', a commodity to be consumed. This dynamic enforces the male as the active demographic of

the comic book industry, displacing the needs and wants of other readers, including women. Edmunds outlines what is essentially the male gaze yet applied to the way that superheroines are imagined and subsequently objectified within comic books as opposed to film.

Wonder Woman has a rich iconography which has evolved continuously since her inception in 1941- she's been systematically re-branded and appropriated by comic book artists to suit changing audience demographics throughout her legacy, enduring major costume alterations and modifications to elements of her characterisation along the way. Initially intended to be an icon synonymous with themes of female empowerment (values her creator intended to embed within the heart of her characterisation), Wonder Woman became an icon of transgression within a traditionally male-dominated comic book industry. Echoing the rise of the feminist movement, other superheroines such as the Invisible Girl, The Wasp and Marvel Girl were introduced by Marvel Comics over the 1960's to follow in Wonder Woman's footsteps. However, Joseph Darowski comments that the aforementioned superheroines only existed in subordinate roles (in comparison to their dominant male peers), which highlighted the comic book industry's fixation with presenting 'limiting, domesticated portrayals of women' (Darowski, 2014: p. 192). Thus, Wonder Woman is an unusual example of a superheroine that has effectively prevailed as the dominant subject within a narrative; she's become an emblem of mainstream success and a fan favourite.

There are various iterations of Wonder Woman; however, this chapter will particularly note three popular adaptations preceding the release of Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* in order to reflect upon the ways in which she has been characterised. Chronologically, I will deconstruct key aspects of William Moulton Marston's original depiction of Wonder Woman in 1941, then consider the way she was changed to suit the platform of TV when portrayed by Lynda Carter during the early-mid 70's and finally, I will explore the fundamental changes employed by George Perez during his stint as writer (between 1987-1992) for the revised Wonder Woman within *Wonder Woman, Volume 2: Gods And Mortals* 1987-1992 (DC Comics, 2019).

Initially, Wonder Woman was devised as an empowering figure for young boys and girls by William Moulton Marston. The psychologist wanted to, 'create a hero who would battle with love rather than fisticuffs, to inspire girl readers to stand up for themselves and achieve their true potential and inspire boy readers to admire that kind of girl' (Frankel, 2015: p. 28). Marston acknowledged gender disparity

and sought to allay this with the introduction of a strong, empowered female who could encourage young girls to challenge societal bounds in order to achieve their true potential. Designed to incite utopian values of peace and justice in young audiences, Wonder Woman was constructed as a universally attractive figure for both boys and girls. Original images of Wonder Woman were released in 1941, as dictated by Marston and illustrated by H.G Peter within *All Stars #8* (Wonder Woman Fandom, 2019). However, despite Marston's intentions to create an example of an empowering superheroine, there were problematic aspects to his creation evident from the outset. Whilst Marston's vision of Wonder Woman was substantially less sexualised than the iterations that were to follow, Wonder Woman's characterisation relied heavily on gendered stereotypes. The implications of this remained somewhat counter-productive to his core objective when devising Wonder Woman- the perpetuation of such stereotypes subsequently presented the opportunity for the scopophilic gratification of audiences. The first representation of Wonder Woman is described as a character who 'shows skin, but seems more sweet than seductive- a girl wearing an acrobatic outfit for adventures rather than to show off her flesh' (Frankel, 2015: p. 39). The first edition of her costume was characterised by a patriotically red bustier (with an eagle emblazoned on top) with a blue, mid-thigh skirt covered in stars. Wonder Woman also sported short black hair to her shoulders and wore embellishments such as a gold headband and wrist-cuffs. Mike Madrid describes Peter's illustrations of Wonder Woman as being particularly apt in displaying her as an athletic figure, noting that the general tone of the depiction supported the notion that her purpose as a superheroine was to 'appeal to young girls, not to titillate men' (cited in Frankel, 2015: p. 40). Nevertheless, there is a fundamental disparity between Marston's intentions and the overall impact of the costume. The description suggests that the costume was primarily designed to appear pragmatic; nonetheless the form-fitting outfit emphasises the accentuation of the female body and the exposure of skin, as though the aesthetic for this child-friendly figure still unsettlingly revolves in some part around scopophilic pleasure for general audiences.

Secondly, Wonder Woman is exoticised as a mythological Amazonian goddess who is equipped with fantastical abilities such as super strength and facilitated by weapons inspired by her Themiscyran culture. As opposed to equipping Wonder Woman with a series of phallic instruments, the type which can enact acts of gratuitous violence, Marston and Peters opted for the 'lasso of truth' which could produce dialogue as opposed to end it prematurely. Such accompaniments to the costume are suggestive as to her unique Amazonian heritage and femininity; for instance, the lasso of truth is

regarded, '... an extension of herself- her smile and words of persuasion' (Frankel, 2015: p. 41). The symbolic power of the lasso, the metaphorical extension of Wonder Woman which reaches out to others and unearths their deepest truths, highlights her dominance over others and this can be read as an empowering trait. However, problematically, Wonder Woman's appeal as a superhuman and otherworldly foreign figure encodes her as a scopophilic pleasure to men. Her otherness, signified by her unique costume stylisation and subversive non-phallic weaponry, further present Wonder Woman as a sexualised foreign commodity.

The way Wonder Woman is characterised within Marston's original comic books is additionally troublesome; this is firstly evident in the way that Wonder Woman becomes an alter ego to Diana Prince in the same way that Superman is for Clark Kent. There's two opposing identities living within one female body- Diana Prince is the subservient, pure woman who conforms amongst the people whilst Wonder Woman is the active, desired force who protects them. This dichotomy doesn't allow for Wonder Woman to be a cohesive composition of both. Moreover, the presentation of two legible identities reflects Marston's paradoxical conception of Wonder Woman. On the one hand Wonder Woman is presented as a figure who encourages young girls to be independent and achieve their true potential, yet at the same time she is disempowered as a figure in that she inspires young girls to acknowledge that the end goal is still to win the approval (and admiration) of their male peers.

Another way in which Marston's Wonder Woman could be considered paradoxical, presenting both an example of empowerment whilst catering to scopophilic audiences, is the depiction of the sexualised violence done to Wonder Woman within the comics. Zellers' observation that, 'The high-impact power of visual art has the potential to readily emphasize violence and sexual disparities and stereotypes' (Zellers, 2005: p. 3) highlights the role that visual art (such as comic books) plays in perpetuating disparities amongst the sexes, particularly those of a violent nature. A recurring trope within comic books is to present Wonder Woman as being bound- this is a metaphorical representation of females being bound to a patriarchal system but simultaneously draws allusions to/with, as well as enables, sexual fetishisation for voyeuristic viewers. In this depiction, Wonder Woman, despite her otherworldly powers and mystical weaponry, is submissive to mortal men, though temporarily. Frankel observes that, 'Wonder Woman always breaks free, emphasizing her power to break others' bonds, however, she is tied up a startling amount of the time' (Frankel, 2015: p. 46). On the one hand, the repetition of this act

illuminates Wonder Woman as a self-sacrificial martyr who recognises that her capacity to individually emancipate herself from the patriarchy is purposeless if her female peers remain entrapped. Her plight to encourage other women to seek the same liberation allows her to be read as an emblem of hope for a sisterhood in that she facilitates independence and defuses the stereotype of women needing to rely upon dominant men. Yet the unnerving prominence of the scopophilic gratification granted by the recurrence of the act suggests otherwise. The damaging repercussions of this repetitious trope have led to the image of a bound Wonder Woman becoming ingrained within her earlier iconography, her appearance as a bound scopophilic pleasure overshadowing her efficacy as the woman who unshackles herself from the oppressive bonds of the patriarchy. In summary, despite his objective to create an impelling empowered superheroine, Marston's imagining of Wonder Woman is problematic, yet reflective of accepted gender norms at the time of his writing. Aspects such as the final costume design, narrative reliance upon a romantic lead and recurring subjugation of the protagonist through sexualised shackling evidence that despite the intended audience of children, Wonder Woman as a construct was fundamentally shaped by adult men and their scopophilic needs.

In the sixties, Denny O'Neil and Mike Sekowsky's comic books presented a disempowered iteration of Wonder Woman. Within the narrative arc, she relinquishes her powers (and thus her name Wonder Woman, assimilating by the name Diana Prince instead) as a stoic gesture and abandons Themiscyra, pledging allegiance to mortals. More particularly, Diana Prince actively picks a life with Steve Trevor over home and family, taking up a job and living within a small apartment within a cityscape. S Lillian Robinson refers to this character as a, 'startlingly pathetic depiction of a modern woman' (Hanley, 2014: p. 169). This development was ferociously challenged by avid fan Gloria Steinem, a crucial feminist and activist who wrote on several occasions to DC Comics directly. She challenged the extreme shift in Wonder Woman's characterisation- once, Wonder Woman had emerged as a subversive and independent superheroine and yet in this comic book iteration, she had been quashed and normalised, stuffed into the subservient role of working woman whose entire life purpose revolved around the service of her love interest. Wonder Woman's status as a feminist icon was cemented in 1972- following success in the form of Wonder Woman's powers being written back into the narrative arc, Gloria Steinem adopted Wonder Woman as a poster-girl for second-wave feminism by placing the traditional image of the superheroine on the front cover of *Ms Magazine* (Kilkenny, 2017). Wonder Woman was

enlarged upon the cover, depicted running through a city with one hand clutching her lasso of truth and the other hand outstretched, a tiny disintegrating fighter plane falling from the sky before her.

The popular, televised Wonder Woman of the seventies then presented an opportunity to resurrect and preserve the spirit of Marston's original Wonder Woman. On the one hand, the series achieved great success and the image of Lynda Carter's Wonder Woman is a dominant one which overpowers that of predecessors- Robinson remarks that, 'To most, their knowledge of Wonder Woman is limited to memories of Lynda Carter's spin change and bullet-deflecting bracelets' (Hanley, 2014: p. 241). However, elements of Lynda Carter's portrayal were simultaneously read by spectators as being both disempowering (in her perpetuation of gendered stereotypes) and empowering (she portrayed an independent fantasy superheroine who was an emblem of sex-positivity). Carter's portrayal was a relatively comedic and playful adaptation of the iconic superheroine and, in comparison to her visual predecessors in the comic book form, Carter's portrayal allayed Wonder Woman's powerful stature through an increased emphasis upon sexualisation. Clad in a revealing costume resembling a swimsuit, the gimmicky portrayal of Wonder Woman contributed towards a successful displacement of other unique attributes, such as her rich cultural history, that Marston had originally embedded. A major emphasis was placed upon the romantic relationship between Wonder Woman and Steve Trevor; this narrative arc essentially perpetuated O'Neil and Sekowsky's prioritisation of Wonder Woman's romantic relationship over her superpowers. Additionally, this representational change markedly prioritised scopophilic gratification for audiences and presented a commercially viable, classically attractive iteration of the iconic superheroine. Allowing a powerful female protagonist the platform of her own television show signifies progression; subsequently, Carter's portrayal can be contextualised as a major popular culture icon and a poster-girl for sisterhood within feminism (given the ubiquity of the second-wave feminist movement in the seventies). Problematically (and particularly with retrospect), Carter's visual representation of the icon suggests that gendered stereotypes continued to influence portrayals of Wonder Woman during the seventies. Most importantly, the televised iteration of Wonder Woman became known as a polarising subject due to her characterisation which was read by some to be empowering and by others as a non-progressive, disempowering visual spectacle.

The next significant iteration of Wonder Woman following Lynda Carter's TV depiction was provided by George Perez during his stint as the main writer for *Wonder Woman, Volume 2: Gods And Mortals* (DC

Comics, 2019) between 1987-1992. Perez's reign marked the beginning of an era which heralded significant change for the readership and subsequent portrayal of Wonder Woman. Indicative of a progression towards a more nuanced portrayal of Wonder Woman, Perez modified several key aspects of her characterisation. Firstly, Wonder Woman's physicality was radically altered- where once the emphasis was placed upon her womanly figure, illustrations during Perez's reign as writer emphasised her, 'toned and muscular body, her determined expression, and her functional costume' (Emad, 2006: p. 974). In terms of her outfit, Wonder Woman retained her symbolic wrist-cuffs, the bustier with an eagle embellishment, shorts (with starry detail) and the patriotic colours which adorned her costume. Such attributes clearly established her as a familiar iteration of the iconographic Marston original, whilst also displacing some of the revelatory aspects adopted during Carter's reign in favour of pragmatism. Perez's change in visual representation was reflective of the musculinity trend which had begun to shape lead heroines in action films, as reflected by the inception of strong female characters such as Sarah O'Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991). By humanising her appearance to the extent of removing exaggerated tropes such as the tiny hip-waist ratio, Perez created a new prototype of the character which reconstructed Wonder Woman and distanced her from the exaggerated caricatures of femininity that some of her predecessors, such as Lynda Carter, had embodied. Wonder Woman's representation was one, 'that aligned femininity with physical power' (Emad, 2006: p. 974) and this was subsequently an inspirational aesthetic for a female readership, in that the image of Wonder Woman became an aspirational body project. Moreover, Emad comments that within this iteration, 'Her face and body convey a specific "ethnic" identity rather than a general superhero identity' (Emad, 2006: p.974-975). This emphasis upon the ethnicity of Wonder Woman distinguishes her from previous iterations in that her otherness, particularly her foreign origin, becomes a normalised aspect of her identity. Perez respectfully addresses a diversified readership and encourages readings of Wonder Woman as a mythological warrior, promoting feminist values of intersectionality.

Secondly, in contrast to Carter's portrayal of Wonder Woman, Perez's rebranded Wonder Woman was offered a narrative less concerned with the superficiality of a domineering romantic interest in Steve Trevor. Perez's version of Wonder Woman instead focused upon emphasising her platonic relationships with female peers and familial relationships with Themiscyran. An active effort was made to value female readership by accentuating storylines and representations more centred around the relatable female experience. Perez's narrative arcs reflected an emphasis upon intersectionality and humanity,

with the frequent use of arcs which explored classic issues such as depression and suicide. Such arcs invited dialogue and a furthered sense of connection between modern readers and the material. In essence, 'Wonder Woman's human friends kept the series grounded and relevant to a modern audience' (Hanley, 2014: p. 231).

Finally, the progression highlighted within the pages of the Wonder Woman print was also mimicked in the production of the comic book series as the ethos of gender equity was reflected within the technical production of Perez's comic books. Karen Berger was the executive editor during this period and as a result, 'Women were involved at every level' (Hanley, 2014: p. 231). Some notable names include Mindy Newell, Jill Thompson, Colleen Doran, Cynthia Martin, Tatjana Wood and Nansi Hoolahan (Hanley, 2014: p. 231). Significantly, an astounding number of female illustrators, colourists and pencillers were involved during Perez's era- indicative of a changed dynamic in the comic book industry, wherein the male-dominated norm had at least been temporarily shifted. In summary, Perez's iteration of Wonder Woman represented a more progressive and transgressive stance than that of Lynda Carter's portrayal within the TV show. Perez significantly lessened the protagonist's once overtly sexualised appearance and diminished the precedence of romantic relationships within the narrative arc. This subsequently encouraged spectator identification with the iconic superheroine and the result of this was improved female readership.

The *Wonder Woman* film also departs from earlier sexualised portrayals of Wonder Woman, sharing many similarities with Perez's design. Unlike Lara Croft, Diana (as she is referred to within the movie) is neither overtly sexualised nor excessively masculinised as a protagonist within Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman*. Upon release, some critics, such as Hermione Hoby, noted the successful way in which *Wonder Woman* catered to older fans of the icon as well as new; she claimed, 'It's progressive yet crowdpleasing, faithful to the tenets of the genre yet wise to its own absurdities' (Hoby, 2017). Patty Jenkins establishes that Wonder Woman is more than a commodity to be consumed by scopophilic audiences and in doing so, departs from the troublesome predecessors within the Wonder Woman canon who capitalise upon the gimmicks of revealing costumes and narrative arcs which revolve around whimsical relationships. Wonder Woman's hyperfeminised appearance isn't negated; however, Jenkins diminishes the dominance of overt sexualisation by realigning the viewer's gaze to facets of Wonder Woman's personality such as vulnerability, humour, kindness and impressive strength. The movie

allows spectators to marvel at Wonder Woman as a fantasy figure yet also offers the opportunity for audiences to connect with her as a figure who embodies a hybridity of traditionally feminised kindness/dialogue as well as masculinised strength. This iteration serves as an ode to Marston's original vision of an empowering superheroine- Jenkins aims to preserve the positive qualities of Wonder Woman, as she was initially depicted, whilst simultaneously reinventing the way in which she is visually translated to the screen. In response to James Cameron's anxieties: Wonder Woman's appearance may not break ground but the way that she is characterised within the movie does.

When considering the evolution of Wonder Woman as a superheroine of the comic book narrative, it is alarming to note that the empowered female figure 'was created by a male, and every writer working on the Wonder Woman comic was a male until 1998' (Edmunds, 2014: p. 207). The modern adaptation is no exception to this rule- the long-awaited *Wonder Woman* adaptation was penned by a team consisting of three men, led by Allan Heinberg. This male governance over narrative reflects a continued gender disparity within film production; a film boasting themes of empowerment for women has been, once again, formed by the minds and pens of men. Yet the fact that Wonder Woman as an iconographic figure has been granted an origin-story film in her own right is significant, given the male-dominated arena of superhero films. Another significant attribute of the recent adaptation, which distinguishes *Wonder Woman* from predecessors in the superhero genre, is that it is the first superhero film produced by American studios to be directed by a woman.

Similarly to *Tomb Raider*, *Wonder Woman* is an origin story which seeks to reintroduce the iconic superheroine to modern audiences and portray Diana's journey into self-actualisation as Wonder Woman. The narrative arc is partially adopted from Wonder Woman's first recorded appearance within comic book publication All Star Comics #8 (2019), originally published in 1941, within which the premise was to document Wonder Woman's venture, for the first time, from the safety of her all-woman, paradise island Themiscyra to mid-War Britain. Steve Trevor's abrupt arrival in Themiscyra serves as the catalyst for events which define Diana's fate irrevocably.

Diana's scopophilic potentiality is rooted within her exoticised appearance, particularly her iconic costume and the way it emphasises the form of her strong, yet womanly, physique. Aware of the cultural significance held by Wonder Woman's costume, Lindy Hemming (costume designer for the production), outlined her inspiration for the contemporary outfit during an interview with Katie Rosseinsky of *Grazia*

(2017). Whilst there is some basic resemblance to older iterations, Hemming's main source of inspiration was historical imagery related to Greek warriors, in keeping with Themiscyra's culture as outlined within the comic books. Hemming claimed, 'There is hardly any reference to women's armour through history, but it did exist and it did follow the form of the body, often made of leather with gold plate' (Rosseinsky, 2017). The emphasis on form once again draws attention to the way in which bodies are considered in a dual respect- Gadot's outfit is inspired by a style which was informed both by practicality and aestheticism. Hemming's final creation bears a resemblance to traditional Greek warrior ensembles in that it consists of a sleeveless red armour-plated chest piece which is cohesively attached to a blue skirt with a gold belt that highlights the Wonder Woman logo. Additional embellishments, including a headband, thick bracelets upon the arms and boots, are all gold, in keeping with the Grecian influence. Most importantly, aspects of the costume within *Wonder Woman* correspond with the original Marston Wonder Woman. For instance, the 'Bracelets of Submission' are seen in both Marston's Wonder Woman and within the film; these are a symbolic aspect of the attire worn by Amazonians in order to demonstrate their enslavement to goddess Aphrodite- should the wrists be chained together by a man, Amazonians risk losing their powers altogether. Other details from Marston's initial designs, such as a leather harness with a hook for a lasso and a sword holster, are also translated to the screen within Jenkins' adaptation. Within *Wonder Woman*, the protagonist's legs are completely liberated and the panels of her skirt, though seemingly fixed in a solid structure, possess a malleability in that there are lines in between panels of armour which enable flexible movement. This is evident in many of the scenes as Wonder Woman retains full mobility whilst wielding her sword in combat, running across battlefields and leaping from one building to another. Hemming acknowledges the revelatory aspects of the outfit by stating that she tried to stay consistent with the nature of the Greek men's outfits which concealed only the head, chest and midriff, leaving the arms and legs exposed. Amongst her search through traditional Grecian war armour and contemporary designer pieces, Hemming was informed by the aesthetic of sportswear, 'as the Amazons are meant to be healthy, sporty and fit rather than over sexualised' (Rosseinsky, 2017). Hemming crucially respects the source material from which the characters have been plucked and also strives to avoid unnecessary, exploitative hypersexualisation.

The romantic potential of Diana's relationship with Trevor is featured, showing some progression from complete frigidity (suggested by Perez's previous iteration), yet significantly underplayed in comparison to narrative arcs featured within Lynda Carter's televised portrayal of Wonder Woman. This relationship

is clearly established as a sub-plot within the narrative and allows for Diana's identity to be shaped by the experience of romantic love yet not exclusively governed by it as a dominating plot device. The power dichotomy between the couple regularly shifts- in Themiscyra, Diana assumes a protective role over Trevor and this is evidenced when he first arrives upon the island. Trevor's plane falls from the sky and Diana dives to his rescue, establishing her figure as a saviour and reversing the archetypal 'damsel in distress' role. However, when Diana arrives in Britain to begin her quest against Ares (the orchestrator of the 'war to end all wars'), she finds herself bewildered by the dizzying pace of London, almost being run over by a horse-and-cart as she emerges from the docks with Trevor by her side. Trevor performs the role of courteous gentleman when Diana is cat-called by a group of unassuming men- this serving as the first instance of objectification that Diana will ever have personally encountered. Her response is to stand dumbfounded as Trevor sweeps in, taking her hand and telling the men, 'Gentlemen, eyes to yourself. Thank you so much.' He then turns to Diana and pulls her along. In capturing this encounter without the invasive use of intimate close-ups to accentuate Diana's assets, and without the involvement of humour or a feisty retort from Diana in response, Jenkins distinguishes this version of Wonder Woman from her predecessors by refusing to actively sexualise her. Instead, she consciously seeks to highlight the sordid nature of the objectification Diana has faced by forcing audiences to serve as witnesses to the scopophilic gaze within the diegetic scene. This self-reflexive gesture emphasises that Diana is not a sex object and by watching the men ogle her, the audience have to acknowledge the uncomfortable nature of serving as secondary participants to the male gaze.

Heinberg and Jenkins highlight the fixation around Wonder Woman's appearance by showing the response of others around her, particularly males, who seek to constantly place their gaze upon her and subsequently forge Wonder Woman into an object of desire. To this extent, we are reminded as spectators of our irrational need to reaffirm Wonder Woman as a scopophilic pleasure even when she is not directly presented as one. Diana is a nonchalant woman who derives power from the fear she induces without actively being aware of her sexualised power, this is particularly prominent within her relationship with Trevor, who harbours a general anxiety about her appearance and subsequent difficulty to assimilate within Britain. The aforementioned analysis of the harassment from onlooking bystanders indicates that Trevor is anxious to witness Diana's potentially explosive reaction to provocation. Trevor is simultaneously anxious to serve as a medium between those oppressive men, to whom daily misogyny is deemed a normalised practice, and Diana who is an emblem of female

independence. Trevor's anxiety stems from his comprehension of Diana's true identity as a liberated and empowered Themiscyran and her subsequent incompatibility with the limitations of a patriarchal war-torn Britain. To this extent, Diana is viewed as a visibly attractive entity whose natural allure draws attention, yet she becomes a liability in that cannot be controlled by men and therefore becomes a threat. When walking through the streets of London, Diana's cloak begins to unfurl which exposes part of her legs and her outfit beneath. Steve instantly stops Diana in her tracks and tries to tie the cloak back together, explaining, 'You're not wearing any clothes!', much to her confusion. Realising that her 'otherness', suggested predominantly by her clothing, results in Diana standing out considerably from the conservatively dressed civilians on the street, Trevor decides to firstly address ways to integrate Diana into 1917 London and subsequently nullify Diana's cultural identity.

Diana's stylistic tendencies are often presented as being pragmatic, particularly when posited against that of a subservient character Etta Candy (Steve Trevor's British secretary). As they walk past mannequins propped up within the shopping mall, Diana expresses disdain at some of the styles platformed:

Diana Is this what passes for armour in your country?

Etta Candy It's fashion. Keeps our tummies in.

Diana Why must you keep them in?

Etta Candy Only a woman with no tummy would ask that question.

Candy is a product of the patriarchal, capitalistic society in which she resides and therefore, she serves as a mouthpiece for women in war-torn Britain, caught up with budding feminist politics and yet avid consumers of beauty and fashion ideals. In contrast, the language used by Diana connotes warfare and practicality, the latter being a quality Nathan Miczo (2014) deems to be positive when considering the evolution of other superheroine costumes within the comic book industry. In tracing the radical alterations to Carol Danvers' (a.k.a Ms. Marvel's) costume, Miczo observes that, 'it appears that "being practical" is being viewed as a positive characteristic... An interesting polarity is thereby established between practicality and sexiness' (Miczo, 2014: p. 171). Diana's stance, favouring clothes that will allow her to physically fight over clothes that will make her look good, posits the contemporary Wonder Woman as an empowered female who considers her active, dominant role over the option of superficiality and aestheticism. Demonstrating agency, Diana refuses to pander to the male gaze and

seems entirely uncomfortable with the notion of sexualising herself. However, the intrinsically revelatory nature of Diana's armour and the sculpted form of her physique already establishes her as a scopophilic pleasure, drawing comparisons with Marston's original sketches. Therefore, the contemporary iteration of Wonder Woman is simultaneously empowered by qualities of pragmatism/agency yet disempowered by a recurrent emphasis upon her scopophilic potentiality.

Older iterations of Wonder Woman emphasised Diana's willingness to abandon her Themiscyran identity and adopt the cultural norms of the west. In contrast, the contemporary Wonder Woman proves to be initially resistant to adopting a Westernised perspective, however this is only evidenced by her open disapproval as to Western beauty standards and the trappings of the fashion industry. This is prominent when Diana challenges Etta's suggestion of an elaborate lacy, purple frock which accentuates her waist. Candy states, 'It's lovely' to which Diana responds, 'It's choking me' which clearly evidences her discomfort when restricted by the literal and symbolic limitations of British fashion. Miczo considers the way in which the toxic male gaze affects women's perceptions of themselves and each other:

Females internalize the objectified perspective, self-objectifying and subsequently coming to devalue their own subjective experiences in favor of conforming to societal standards of beauty; further, they also turn this adopted male gaze upon one another. (Miczo, 2014: p. 171-172)

This crucial scene evidences the problematised relationship between Candy and Diana in that Candy mimics the male gaze whilst Diana, hailing from a female only Themiscyra, is impervious to the notion of objectification. This interaction, though comedic, highlights Diana's liberation from the superficiality of beauty standards which are implied to be uncomfortable, impractical and limiting to the female form. Eventually, Diana's resistance dissipates when offered a more practical clothing ensemble; however, she retains the 'God-killer' (a sword which has accompanied her along the journey to Britain) which signifies her allegiance to her true identity. This self-reflexive interaction forces female spectators to reconcile with the superficiality of contemporary beauty standards and empowers the notion of subversion from such ideals.

Unlike Marston's iteration which emphasised the differences between Diana Prince and Wonder Woman, the contemporary *Wonder Woman* opts to present a cohesive characterisation, encompassing

both traditionally active/masculine attributes as well as passive/feminine traits. This balance is an ambitious feat, especially considering the sexualisation embedded so deeply throughout Wonder Woman's iconography. Miczo alludes to the ways in which a superheroine might successfully overcome the obstacles of objectification and sexualisation, he states,

A superheroine's femaleness need not be a liability; however, she needs to be placed in situations that allow her to effectively and creatively use her superpowers, while deemphasizing the salience of how she looks. (Miczo, 2014: p. 172)

Miczo suggests that superheroines should be validated with scenes which emphasise their fantastical superpowers or relatable humanised qualities, effectively allowing for 'to-be-looked-at-ness' to be superseded. *Wonder Woman* is one such example of a movie which dispels sole emphasis upon the protagonist's appearance, highlighting other empowering and entertaining facets of the protagonist's personality such as empathy and vulnerability. A scene which evidences this is when Diana is led through the trenches of no-man's land. Diana's peers (including Steve Trevor) seem genuinely unmoved due to desensitisation; they continue their private conversations, un-phased by the horrific state of catatonic soldiers and devastated bystanders. Diana slows down, absorbing the chaos of the war. Her previous notions of war as being a definitive split between good and evil are suddenly problematised by the realisation that the atrocities committed affect not only those actively engaging in combat, but the innocent civilians who are caught up in the consequences. When she comes across a vulnerable woman cradling her child, Diana is motivated by a moral compass and inherent pursuit for justice- she aspires to put an end to suffering on both sides of the line. Diana confronts Steve, who simply states, 'We can't save everyone in this war'. Noting his apprehension and the limitations of men in 'no-man's-land', Diana responds, 'No... but it's what I'm going to do' and commands the situation. Diana approaches a ladder and removes her obscuring cloak; this reveals her Amazonian armour beneath. The camera pans to Diana's lasso, then her golden boots on the ladder rungs and, finally, her hand on the top of the ladders. The camera's emphasis is upon notable aspects of her costume, as opposed to anatomy; this accentuates her iconography and strength as opposed to sexualising her. Jenkins captures Diana's humanity in that she is spurred into action by the injustice of war and selflessly acts, using her innate powers to establish peace.

Jenkins not only highlights Diana's humanity but also Diana's self-actualisation as Wonder Woman, the fantasy figure with superhuman abilities that fundamentally distinguishes her from her peers. Jenkins grants some element of scopophilic pleasure for audiences in that she utilises the close-up (mainly to capture the determination on Diana's face) and slow motion to highlight the proficient ease with which she deflects the bullets. Diana is framed at the centre of the shot with the barren landscape of no-man's land behind her; she begins a slow walk towards the German opposition, using her cuffs to deflect stray bullets. Her male comrades await her command, static with fear whilst sheltering themselves from the shower of bullets, and Diana begins to pick up the pace as the gunfire intensifies. She charges into action wielding her shield against the onslaught ahead. Her glamourised appearance, including perfectly coiffed hair, isn't in anyway compromised by the action of the shot. However, the main objective of this scene is to highlight Diana's femininity as a means of differentiating her from her male peers and efforts to do this extend beyond her visual representation within this scene. Miczo suggests that,

A superheroine needs to balance her masculine strength with a set of competencies that highlights her feminine qualities if she is to be accepted in a (fictional) world that may just be "inherently masculine". (Miczo, 2014: p. 175)

The fundamental difference which separates Diana from her DC peers such as Batman and Superman is her capacity to destabilise violence as opposed to actively engage with it. Whilst male heroes are 'always predisposed to fight first and ask later' (Berns, 2014: p. 214), Diana considers the implications of violence upon all affected, as opposed to mercilessly inflicting her capabilities upon those who are considered to be 'other'. This empathetic motivation is crucial for Wonder Woman in that, 'it is her capacity for reflection and self-questioning that gives her power and takes her away from being a generic hero' (Berns, 2014: p. 212). This is evidenced by her approach within the no-man's-land scene as Diana deflects bullets headed in her direction (saving those behind her, in the trenches) but, upon reaching the other side, destroys large weaponry to prevent it being used. She doesn't kill soldiers from the other side, rather nullifies their attempts to cause more devastation.

Patty Jenkins strongly maintains that the action heroine's credibility is forged by an authentic portrayal of daedal womanhood. She tweeted, in response to James Cameron's comments, of the contrast between reception of *Monster* (2003), a movie she had previously directed, and that of *Wonder Woman*,

If women have to always be hard, tough and troubled to be strong, and we aren't free to be multi-dimensional or celebrate an icon of women everywhere because she is attractive and loving, then we haven't come far have we. I believe women can and should be EVERYTHING just like male lead characters should be. There is no right and wrong kind of powerful woman. And the massive female audience who made the film a hit it is, can surely choose and judge their own icons of progress. (Jenkins, 2017)

Jenkins identifies the double standard in that her biopic movie exploring the life of rugged and damaged real-life killer Aileen Wuornos garnered critical acclaim. In stark contrast, *Wonder Woman*, platforming a feminine and attractive superheroine, was reduced to the status of formulaic blockbuster by Cameron. According to Cameron, women are burdened with the weight of scopophilic potentiality and the only way to be visible without being objectified is to completely eradicate sexuality. This is not a viable solution in that it subjugates women by forcing them to repress sexuality in order to be perceived as empowered.

Jenkins' response highlights that there is room for nuanced superheroines within the action genre and that they are indeed box-office viabilities, with the potentiality to impact audiences all over the world. With her contemporary adaptation of *Wonder Woman* Jenkins provides possibilities for presenting superheroines as something more than a sexualised commodity. *Wonder Woman* is revisited as a figure who effectively straddles the stereotypically masculine attribute of active strength with multiple stereotypically feminine qualities such as humour, compassion and beauty. This contemporary iteration of the iconic superheroine is a nuanced portrayal that doesn't rely solely upon overt sexualisation. Heinberg and Jenkins depart from previous iterations such as that of Lynda Carter's *Wonder Woman* and seek to illuminate positive, empowering facets of the character which have been neglected or otherwise unexplored. By demonstrating the multi-faceted potentiality of superheroines, and having this representation successfully received by audiences, Jenkins paves the way for more diversified, empowered and nuanced portrayals of superheroines in future feature-films.

CHAPTER 3: *RED SPARROW*

In an interview with Jack Giroux of *Slash Film* (2018), director Francis Lawrence acknowledges the way in which the femme fatale and sexuality are intrinsically linked yet argues that with his 2018 film *Red Sparrow* he sought to portray 'the brutal world of espionage, not the sexy, glamorous world of espionage' (Giroux, 2018). *Red Sparrow* presents Dominika Egorova (portrayed by Jennifer Lawrence) as the brooding central protagonist who is recruited as a spy specialising in the art of sexpionage (the art of using seduction to acquire sensitive information). Fundamentally, Egorova serves as a contemporary femme fatale who possesses attributes from both classic and postmodern fatale predecessors. Francis Lawrence's objective to depart from the sexy and glamorous portrayals of the femme fatale in *Red Sparrow* is problematised by an unsettling conflict between Lawrence's intentions and the historical visual representation of the femme fatale spectacle. Elisabeth Bronfen (2004) states that historically, the femme fatale is synonymous with notions of hypersexualisation and glamourisation. Typically, the fatale, '... gains power over the *noir* hero by nourishing his sexual fantasies' (Bronfen, 2004: p. 106) and therefore, the deviant femme fatale gains a crucial sense of empowerment from commanding the scopophilic gaze; she recognises the persuasive power of her sexualised body and utilises this as a means of entangling her victims, exploiting them in order to advance her personal objectives within the narrative. According to Bronfen, hypersexualisation is observed as an imperative attribute of both classic and postmodern iterations of the femme fatale.

This chapter evaluates the extent to which *Red Sparrow* can claim to successfully distance itself from previously hypersexualised iterations of the femme fatale, noting the positive nuances and intricacies of Egorova's characterisation as well as the troubling paradoxes which hinder her status as an empowered femme fatale. The iconography of the contemporary femme fatale is dissected through comparative analysis, primarily through positing Egorova's attributes against the characterisation of her postmodern femme fatale predecessor Catherine Tramell as portrayed by Sharon Stone in the blockbuster *Basic Instinct* (1992). Within this analysis, the inherently performative nature of the femme fatale is deconstructed- the systematic dehumanisation and conditioning undergone within the Sparrow School, as well as the taught notion of seduction, make explicit the mythos and allure of the contemporary spider woman. Additionally, the obfuscation of the victim/oppressor dichotomy is explored. Finally, this chapter unpicks the way in which *Red Sparrow* draws upon the brutality of

gratuitous sexual violence against the protagonist, yet problematically fails to address the traumatic implications of sexual violence.

A filmic adaptation of Jason Matthews' debut novel of the same name (2013), *Red Sparrow* is clearly established as a somber spy-thriller film from the outset. Visually, *Red Sparrow's* cinematography enhances the mise-en-scene of urban cities, which appear bustling by day and are transformed into lamp-lit crime-havens, which facilitate intense pursuits and stakeouts, by night. The narrative arc further supports this by incorporating noir sensibilities, characterised by themes of deception, espionage and unreliable characters who facilitate a pivotal 'twist' within the plot. Janey Place (1998) notes that, 'The detective/thriller genre, whose subjects are generally the lawless underworld, the fringes of society, crimes of passion and of greed, is particularly well suited to the expression of film noir themes' (Place, 1998: p. 50). *Red Sparrow's* Egorova technically serves as a subject of the lawless underworld in that she is coerced into involvement with a corrupted and salacious national intelligence organisation. Her role is cemented as a civilian who lives on the fringe of society in that she is subjected to unlawful coercion by the officials who govern the organisation yet she is simultaneously protected from sanctions pertaining to her actions as a sexpionage expert, as her involvement is systematically concealed by the same organisation. Egorova is the contemporary femme fatale, whose embodiment and characterisation present an amalgamation of classic noir and postmodern femme fatale iconography.

Unlike the preceding chapters, *Red Sparrow's* relationship with the action genre is perhaps less apparent- the action babe heroine and superheroine are easily located within the action sensibility due to their repeated appearances within blockbusters of the popular canon. The femme fatale is less explicitly tied to conventional action blockbusters yet the femme fatale melds together an alluring combination of visual spectacle and societal transgression. *Red Sparrow* was selected due to its proposed centralisation of the femme fatale (the trailer suggested the film was from the perspective of Egorova), which demonstrated an empowerment for this character archetype. This filmic choice seemed to present the potentiality to provide a contemporary remake of the femme fatale as a significantly more powerful iteration than her classic and postmodern predecessors. Stylistically, aspects of the film (such as elements of ultraviolence, romance and deception) can be accredited as signifiers of the noir sensibility. However, this vast diversity of facets within the movie also reinforces its status as a contemporary action film. Tasker (2015) argues that there's no universal criteria as to what

constitutes an action movie in that 'Action can be comic, graphically violent, fantastic, apocalyptic, military, conspiratorial and even romantic' (Tasker, 2015: p. 2). Therefore, the action sensibility accommodates genre hybridisation, meaning that elements of other stylistic genres can be incorporated within action films easily. To this extent, female protagonists can exhibit nuanced qualities such as humour or potential as an ultraviolent fighter, if the salience of to-be-looked-at-ness is de-emphasised and protagonists are offered the opportunity to evidence other positive traits.

According to critics Fay & Nieland (2010), the classic femme fatale has become the poster-girl for noir in that she is emblematic of the social anxieties, residual trauma and general depression observed following the devastation of World War 2. The iconic 'spider woman' became representative of a generalised anxiety towards the emerging agency of women. In the absence of their husbands during the war, women gained financial independence whilst continuing traditionally feminised caregiving roles. The image of the nuclear family, traditionally maintained by the domesticated housewife and financially supported by the breadwinner husband, had been irrevocably destroyed. The return of deployed soldiers signalled the return to lives of subservience for women and this provoked a powerful resistance from those who sought to retain autonomy in a patriarchal society. This palpable tension between the sexes was translated to the screen- the deviant women who would continue to advance themselves by whatever means necessary became the foundation for the femme fatale trope (Fay & Nieland, 2010: p. 148). Popular examples of classic noir titles include *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Killers* (1946), both of which brandished glamorous femme fatales as enigmatic protagonists who persistently challenged the authority of men through cunning and manipulation. This subversion of the status quo, with femme fatales representing sexual dominance and deviance, evoked both a sense of fear and desire in men. The role of the femme fatale can be considered to be 'a figure of male fantasy, articulating both a fascination for the sexually aggressive woman, as well as anxieties about feminine domination' (Bronfen, 2004: p. 106). Subsequently, a recurring trope in classic noir films became the fatalistic end, or severe punishment, of the transgressive classic fatale, as evidenced within examples such as *Scarlett Street* (1945) and *Detour* (1945), wherein the female protagonist with the upper hand is murdered brutally for her insolence. Place (1998) suggests that noir films typically portrayed this ending in order to allay the anxieties presented by the femme fatale, stating that, 'it is clear that men need to control women's sexuality in order not to be destroyed by it' (Place, 1998: p. 49). Through the

destruction of the femme fatale, or the placation of the fatale, through marriage or motherhood, the defiance that the femme fatale embodies is also extinguished.

The second dominant iteration of the femme fatale within noir films is that of the postmodern fatale, observed during the 90s within postmodern noir titles such as *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Body of Evidence* (1993). The postmodern femme fatale encompasses the traditional, iconic elements of classic fatale characterisation but is stylistically appropriated to postfeminist undertones. Of the femme fatale's unique capacity to remain relevant within film repertoire, Bronfen states of the character's allure that she 'forces the spectator to decide whether she acts as an empowered modern subject or is simply to be understood as the expression of an unconscious death drive' (Bronfen, 2004: p. 114). This is particularly evident within postmodern noir films of the 90s, with major examples of the femme fatale garnering a polarising reception as both a sexually liberated, empowering icon for some spectators and an easily accessible, scopophilic sex symbol for others. Whilst classic noir featured femme fatales as subordinate characters, in that the male protagonist remained the subject of the narrative, postmodern noir further empowered femme fatales by allocating them more control over the narrative, in the form of voiceover and general perspective within film. The most crucial difference between classic noir fatales and postmodern iterations is the postmodern's heavy emphasis upon the ambiguity of the femme fatale. The extent of the femme fatale's motivations can usually be ascertained only at the conclusion of the film and throughout the narrative a series of deceptive ruses obscure her 'true' identity. This deception is exemplified by Sharon Stone's performance in *Basic Instinct* as Catherine Tramell. Susan Knobloch (2001) describes Stone's flair for lying to both characters within the film and to audiences. Of Stone's nuanced and captivating performance, Knobloch states that, 'To represent moments whose "truth" is forever unknowable, Stone works with both realist and antirealist signifiers at once' (Knobloch, 2001: p. 134). Knobloch describes Stone's acting style as being anti-naturalist in that she actively draws attention to the performative nature of her actions in a self-referential manner. She speaks in a physically reserved manner, often monotonously with a hint of a sardonic tone, whilst answering invasive questions about her sex life, never failing to turn her lips up into an amused smile as she's interrogated as a key suspect in a major violent crime. Stone's Tramell serves as a compelling yet anxiety-provoking protagonist who entices and disarms audiences. This effect is further amplified by Stone's embodiment of a more explicitly vulgar and hypersexualised iteration of the femme fatale. Tramell represents an unabashedly, sex-positive attitude, characterised by boasting of conquests. With her utilisation of

euphemistic double entendres and sexually charged conversations, the domineering nature of the postmodern femme fatale is highlighted through scenes which undermine men. Tramell frequently reclaims power through inviting the scopophilic gaze and verbally challenging authority. *Basic Instinct* is also an example of postmodern noir's tendency to centralise eroticism. This is seen in the opening scene of the film, wherein a man is tied to his bedframe and a woman, fully naked, dominates him in sexual intercourse. From the outset, *Basic Instinct* satisfies the scopophilic gaze and establishes sex as a key visual theme at the heart of the movie. In summary, the postmodern femme fatale incorporates elements of the classic fatale iconography. However, postmodern iterations further emphasise notions of sex-positivity through explicit portrayal of sex acts and additionally exhibit ambiguous performances that obscure the motivations of the femme fatale.

Lawrence signposts *Red Sparrow* as a departure from the hypersexual and glamourised tones of erotic thrillers and emphasises his intention to depict the gritty and brutalist world of espionage. Lawrence divulged that, 'The mission from early on was to be uncompromising, but the idea was never to make an erotic thriller, and the idea was never to titillate' (Giroux, 2018). Being 'uncompromising' in this context is related to visually translating sexual assault from the literary source into the film without creating scopophilic potentiality and subsequently titillating audiences. There are disparities between Lawrence's intentions for the movie and the promotional marketing for the movie, as well as the critical reception upon the movie's widespread release. Such disparities highlight the difficulties in attempting to remake the femme fatale as well as the way in which directorial intentions can be quashed by promotional marketing.

Firstly, Francis Lawrence specifically outlined his intention to avoid titillating audiences and yet he paradoxically cast acclaimed Hollywood actress Jennifer Lawrence in the leading role. The young actress' reputation is exemplified by her inclusion in *Time Magazine's* prestigious 'Top 100: Most Influential People' (2013) list at the tender age of twenty-two. This accolade, to be added to the 'annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world, from artists and leaders to pioneers, titans and icons' (2013), signifies Jennifer Lawrence's global impact. Additionally, her status as an A-list sex symbol is evidenced by her acquisition of the Sexiest Woman in the World title (Leon, 2014) which acknowledged her real-life success as a commercialised source of scopophilic pleasure. On the one hand, this extra-textual stature bolsters Lawrence's authenticity as a contemporary femme fatale in that she effectively

translates her exterior status as a sex symbol into the interior landscape of the film. However, the puissance of her sexualised reputation also makes it increasingly difficult for spectators to view her as anything other than a scopophilic pleasure.

Secondly, whilst Francis Lawrence emphasised *Red Sparrow's* departure from the glamourised portrayal of espionage, the marketing campaign of the movie seemed centralised around the inherent sexualisation of its star. The official trailer (20th Century Fox, 2018) preserves the archetypally sexualised femme fatale, with intensive close-ups of Egorova's face throughout. Spectators are introduced to the highly stylised and glamourised scopophilic pleasure that is Egorova's body through the incessant gaze of the camera which is directed upon her body clad in a symbolically red dress. The scenes extracted from the movie connotes the hypersexuality of the character she plays. Egorova's relationship with a man is implied to be highly concupiscent; Egorova questions, "Are we going to be friends?" to which the man responds, "Is that what you want?". The next shot is of Egorova's legs engulfing the man's waist as she perches on a kitchen unit, implying a sexual relationship. Finally, the trailer concludes with the camera panning to yet another close-up of Egorova's face as the flash of a camera goes off and another character's voiceover mutters, "We can't trust a word that comes out of her mouth". The tone of the trailer is sultry and depicts the protagonist in an exclusively bodily manner, perpetuating the stereotype of a glamourised femme fatale within a stylistically erotic thriller. Francis Lawrence's intentions to present the brutality of espionage fail to be conveyed from the outset due to questionable casting choices and a troublingly misleading promotional campaign for the movie.

Upon the widespread release of the film, critical reviews suggested that Francis Lawrence's 'uncompromising' approach to depicting the brutality of espionage effectively consisted of portraying the physical and emotional disempowerment of Egorova. Within her feature piece for *The Guardian*, Simran Hans (2018) wrote in her scathing review of *Red Sparrow* that the film 'busies itself with the grim surface pleasures of ogling its central character as she is degraded in every way possible'. Hans reads the movie as another example of the masochistic, misogynistic degradation of a female protagonist. Historically, other postmodern femme fatale iterations, including Sharon Stone's infamous portrayal of bisexual, underwear-less Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*, drew similar critical responses. Paul Verhoeven's erotic thriller was deemed entertaining though nonsensical, with many critics acknowledging the vulgar ultraviolence (including sexualised violence) and overtly sexualised

performance of Stone's icy postmodern femme fatale. Peter Travers wrote for *Rolling Stone* that, 'The film is for horny pups of all ages who relish the memory of reading stroke books under the covers with a flashlight' (Travers, 1992), highlighting the way in which the movie gratified a predominantly male spectatorship. In terms of her impact upon spectators, Stone's portrayal of Catherine Tramell became conveniently condensed into a fervent talking point for filmgoers due to the infamous interrogation scene (to be touched upon, later). *Basic Instinct* thus became a generic example of an erotic thriller seeking to titillate audiences by gratifying the male gaze, with the hypersexualisation of the female protagonist taking precedence over all other aspects of characterisation. *Red Sparrow's* impact upon film reviewers suggests that, to this extent, the sexualised and glamorous presentation of Egorova is indeed typical of erotic thrillers.

The adaptation process determines that there are crucial disparities between Matthews' literary characterisation of Egorova and Francis Lawrence's visual mimesis of the character. Within the novel *Red Sparrow*, Jason Matthews uses an omniscient narrator, allowing access to different perspectives (including that of Egorova). The tone of the novel is generally clinical and mundane, with extremely descriptive passages depicting the stark reality of surveillance, the disturbingly corrupt state of politics and the world of espionage. Charles Cumming (2013) of the *New York Times* stated in his review of the novel that, 'I have rarely encountered a nonfiction title, much less a novel, so rich in what would once have been regarded as classified information' (Cumming, 2013). Though a central character, passages pertaining to Egorova's personal experience are limited and dispersed amongst the general world-building of Matthews' *Red Sparrow*. In contrast, *Red Sparrow* is from Egorova's perspective, alluding to *Basic Instinct* wherein Catherine Tramell (a writer) controls the narrative of the film. This is a major subversion from the tendency for femme fatales to serve as subordinate characters in relation to predominantly male protagonists. Bronfen noted the role of the disempowered femme fatale and posed the question, 'what if, rather than treating her as a fetish, projection, or symptom, one were to treat her instead as the subject of her narrative?' (Bronfen, 2004: p. 114). In displacing the male narrative and centralising that of the femme fatale, Francis Lawrence empowers Egorova as an autonomous protagonist.

Lawrence focuses heavily upon Egorova's journey from professional dancer to sexpionage expert and this differs substantially from the novel's plot, wherein Russian intelligence operatives begin to suspect

the presence of an American CIA mole amidst their ranks and Ivan Egorov (who works directly for Vladimir Putin within the novel) opportunistically recruits his feisty niece Egorova as a sexpionage operative to gain further intelligence. In an interview with CNN Entertainment presenter Christiane Amanpour, Francis Lawrence outlined his reasons for some of the drastic differences between the narrative arc as outlined within the novel and the nuances of the screenplay. Particularly of the decision to omit the masculinised and political landscape of the novel in favour of an attempt at an emotionally charged, personalised female account, Lawrence commented, 'I didn't set out to make a political film in any way. I was really drawn in by the character that Jen plays and her journey' (Vonberg, 2018). The impact of this decision is an alignment with the spectators, offering the opportunity of connection with a humanised femme fatale. Lawrence outlines his intention to provide an intimate portrayal of Egorova's journey, implying the attempt to explore facets of her personality that would be typically overshadowed by the emphasis on the femme fatale as visual spectacle.

Additionally, the novel explicitly characterises Egorova as a violent and destructive young woman whilst, conversely, *Red Sparrow* omits all childhood experiences from the narrative and depicts Egorova only in the present tense, contributing towards an air of mystery around her childhood history and origins. Matthews (2013) presents Egorova as a volatile and explosive character, with many instances of manipulative and deviant behaviour evident from childhood. For example, as a young girl, Egorova is examined by a psychologist who relays his prognosis back to her parents: 'Your little girl is prone to *buistvo*, define it as you like, temper, mischief, a short fuse' (Matthews, 2013: p. 35-36). This instability is recognised as a child's temperament and is systematically concealed as Egorova grows up; however, occasional traces of her hidden identity leak into the narrative. For instance, as an adult, Matthews (2013) notes of Egorova's persuasive influence over her uncle Ivan that, 'Dominika gave him a smile that only recently she had come to recognize had an effect on people' (Matthews, 2013: p. 43) which connotes some sense of intention and calculation when interacting with others. Equipped with a cunning sense of manipulation and a fiery temper, it is clear to readers that despite her composition, Egorova possesses an uncanny ability to flip suddenly to more violent tendencies.

Within the film, spectators are constantly subjected to contradictory presentations of Egorova which obscures a consistent reading of her characterisation and motivations. This successfully empowers Egorova as a contemporary femme fatale in that she can effectively command and deceive spectators'

impressions of her. This controlled performance of different roles is symptomatic of postmodern femme fatale characterisation. Postmodern fatales are often portrayed as malleable women, who shift their personalities and tendencies as appropriate to their situation. Gledhill (1998) comments on the objective of the postmodern femme fatale's ambiguous characterisation, stating that, 'not only is the hero frequently not sure whether the woman is honest or a deceiver, but the heroine's characterisation is itself fractured so that it is not evident to the audience whether she fills the stereotype of not' (Gledhill, 1998: p. 31). This capacity to flit from one personality extreme to the other allows the femme fatale the ultimate power to further conceal the truth of her identity, contributing to 'the ever-deceiving flux of appearance and reality' (Gledhill, 1998: p. 31). The ambiguity of Egorova's characterisation is evident from the outset. Egorova is initially introduced to audiences as a professional ballet dancer. Traditionally, ballet connotes aestheticism, grace and the gentle, all attributes of archetypal femininity. However, the art also emphasises values such as discipline and control, with the aim to present audiences with arduous performances as though they were effortless. This choice of profession is apt as it suggests about Egorova an inherent sense of theatricality and stamina, qualities which are also intrinsically valuable for sexpionage. Additionally, aesthetically, ballet dancers strive to enhance their appeal in terms of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' and this predisposition, or natural comfort in being gazed upon, further equips Egorova for her future career in sexpionage.

Egorova's ability to seamlessly shift from one identity to another blurs identities and makes it difficult to identify when, or if, Egorova is powerless or actively in power within scenes. A primary example of this is when Egorova's violent primality emerges within the movie. Whilst dancing a duet during a live performance with her peer Konstantin, Egorova's leg is badly broken and this serious physical injury abruptly ends her career. The injury is regarded the result of an accident for many months until Ivan Egorov (Egorova's uncle who is an intelligence operative) intervenes, evidencing otherwise. Sound recordings reveal Konstantin's intentions to hurt Egorova intentionally, as instructed by his secret lover Sonya (who conspires to take Egorova's place as head dancer). Egorova's strategic and vindictive approach to achieving some sense of justice in this situation where she's been wronged outlines her dangerous capabilities as a femme fatale. Egorova follows Konstantin and his mistress after a dance rehearsal (in which Sonya has replaced Egorova) and then severely beats them, catching them off-guard mid-coitus. She repeatedly hits them with a golf club, leaving them bloodied, battered and naked on a shower floor. The gruesome nature of this act, and the repercussions it has for Egorova's

reputation, seem contradictory to her general façade of caring, innocent dancer. However, spectators are then further misled by Egorova's confused response to the cathartic yet violent act of passion. Egorova rides the bus home and it becomes evident that she is affected by the brutality of her actions as she looks at her bloody hands quivering on the back of a bus-seat. She then abruptly stops the driver, runs off the bus and calls the police to report her own crime. Egorova's reconciliation with the consequences of her actions and the phone call to the police promote anxiety within spectators because it is so difficult to ascertain the authenticity of her actions. The suggestion of trauma and remorse distinguishes Egorova from the postmodern Catherine Tramell whose characterisation consists of an emphasis on her status as a sociopathic, innately programmed femme fatale.

Bronfen acknowledges the way in which the traditional femme fatale empowers herself through the gratification of the noir hero's sexual needs; however *Red Sparrow's* fundamental flaw is its depiction of a rape which problematically frames Egorova as a victim and disempowered scopophilic pleasure. The portrayal of sexual assault is graphic and exploitative, the effect of which is the subsequent degradation of the protagonist. This disrupts Egorova's otherwise confused oscillation between victim and oppressor in that she's completely, undoubtedly disempowered within this scene. Egorova is not presented as a conventionally empowered fatale; instead, she is mauled as though a mere commodity.

The scene depicting sexual assault opens with Egorova wearing a red dress, adorned with silver embellishments and this fitted costume accentuates her cleavage, as well as her curves. The outfit is significant in that it represents the glamourisation of Egorova and serves as a dissociating costume of sorts, another explicit element of performance woven into the narrative. The imagery also conjures associations with the archetypal femme fatale, a primary example of this being Ava Gardner's performance as Kitty in *The Killers*, where she is seen in a form-hugging dress that outlines her hourglass figure. After dinner with Dimitri Ustinov (earlier introduced at the ballet performance), Egorova escorts him upstairs to his bedroom suite. Dimitri assumes dominance as he demands that Egorova removes her dress. He repeats this and a dumbfounded Egorova obliges; the camera pans from Dimitri, perched on the end of the hotel bed, to Egorova stood against the backdrop of the bathroom doorframe. As she removes her clothes, the audience are reduced once again to the status of voyeur, perceiving Egorova's body through the lens of the male gaze in the same way that her oppressor does. The passivity of her response suggests she's not comfortable with this situation and an anxious glance at

the phone on the bedside table also connotes distress. Egorova approaches Dimitri as he extends his arms towards her, initially he lifts her leg onto the bed and nestles his head softly against her thigh. However, any trace of romanticism is abandoned when he suddenly grabs at her body, aggressively pulling her resistant body to him. Her black panties are torn from her body in an animalistic fashion. She says 'slow down' repeatedly, but instead Dimitri proceeds to gag her, punch her in the face and penetrate her, as Egorova lays immobile with fear and resignation. The scene clearly depicts rape and highlights Egorova as a victim lacking agency or control. The scene concludes with an even more violent intervention as a masked saviour strangles Ustinov to death as he looms over Egorova's body. As his neck is spliced open, blood is symbolically spilt upon Egorova's bra as she lays on the bed. By being rescued by a man, Egorova assumes the passive stance of 'damsel in distress' as opposed to active, femme fatale who assumes control over her situation. Posited against her confident and cool appearance during the final scene of the movie, the aftermath of the sexual assault exposes a fragility within Egorova that is scarcely seen in other depictions of classic and postmodern fatales.

The effect of the rape scene is problematic in that it essentially traps the viewer, implicating them as a voyeuristic, 'bystander who bears witness to the graphic rape but cannot intervene' (Spallacci, 2019). This experience is highly uncomfortable and simply perpetuates a fetishisation of the contemporary femme fatale, primarily through the invasive and persistent use of the close-up on various aspects of Egorova's body. The scopophilic potentiality evident within this scene is worrying in that 'Overtly sexualizing and highlighting the victim or survivor's nudity in a rape scene may titillate certain viewers' (Spallacci, 2019). It is as though viewers are temporarily aligned to the perspective of the oppressor Ustinov in that we bear witness to his sexual gratification as he roughly molests her, regarding Egorova as though she were a doll. Additionally, audiences are not presented with a depiction of the repercussions following the rape scene- the narrative remains linear and we are never shown the extent of Egorova's trauma in that she never refers back to the event, within diegetic dialogue or through visual flashback. This is not a realistic portrayal of the aftermath of rape- with no interior insight as to how Egorova is handling the impact of the violence, much remains a mystery and this further obfuscates a nuanced characterisation of Egorova in that audiences fail to fully identify with her plight as a victim of sexual violence. This outlines another fundamental flaw in Francis Lawrence's depiction of sexualised violence- in his attempt to incite empathy from spectators, he neglects the obligation to truthfully portray the realities of trauma. Spallacci (2019) argues that 'The prevalence of rape scenes in mainstream

Hollywood cinema over representations of rape *trauma* creates the standard that the burden of proof falls onto the survivor' (Spallacci, 2019). Indeed, the only witnesses to the event are Egorova, Ustinov (who is killed moments later) and the voyeuristic spectator who is reduced to a role of practical invisibility/powerlessness. This forces Egorova into action as the only person who can provide testimony as to the sordid nature of the act that was done to her. Spallacci (2019) declares that though the viewer may seek to watch Egorova prosper in her quest for revenge, this is 'based on the generic expectations of the narrative rather than on a moral approval of the character' (Spallacci, 2019). This is to say that spectators are so vehemently outraged by the act that they condone Egorova's mission for vengeance, despite the fact that the audience barely know her and therefore generally can't relate to her as a woman. The impact of this connection with the protagonist could have been substantially bolstered by a sensitive and humanised depiction of Egorova's subsequent trauma however; Lawrence's misguided depiction of rape reinforces, rather than destroys, the notion of Egorova as a disempowered, fetishistic pleasure.

Red Sparrow portrays Egorova's disempowerment through systematic dehumanisation at the Sparrow School. The militarised conditioning process undergone within the institute draws comparisons with army boot camps and industrialised factories- people enter whilst unfeeling, highly performative Sparrows (sexpionage operatives) leave. Kate Stables (1998) argues that the role of the femme fatale is 'a timeless fantasy, a cross-cultural myth, but also a historical construct, whose ingredients vary according to the time and climate of her creation' (Stables, 1998: p. 165). *Red Sparrow* dismantles the mythos of the innately demonised femme fatale and instead, spectators witness the formulaic construction of the contemporary fatale. From the onset, Egorova is aware as to her constant surveillance within the school- upon her arrival at her assigned bedroom suite within the school, she comes across an incongruously large mirror and realises that this is intentionally placed, stating, 'The silver smokiness of a two-way mirror. Welcome to Sparrow School' (Matthews, 2013: p. 102). The mirror connotes duplicity and makes it difficult to distinguish what is real and what is unreal. Janey Place (1998) suggests that the symbolism of mirror imagery is notable as, 'this motif contributes to the murky confusion of film noir: nothing and no one is what it seems' (Place, 1998: p. 58). Egorova summarises her approach to mentally and physically surviving the Sparrow School experience,

This school, this mansion secluded behind walls topped with broken glass, was an engine of the State that institutionalized and dehumanized love. It didn't count, it was physical sex, it was training, like ballet school. (Matthews, 2013: p. 104)

Egorova likens the school to an 'engine of the state', using clinical language to envision the mansion as one of many cogs in the national machine. She additionally outlines her ambition to succeed simply out of spite, a means of showing her resilience to those in power. The act of loving is deconstructed in a similarly reductionist fashion, with Egorova noting the similarities between the performative nature of ballet and sex. The intimacies and intricacies of human relationships are broken down as though entirely formulaic- *Red Sparrow* shows the students at the Sparrow School being conditioned to understand the nuances of human desire through the excessive consumption of specialised pornography, with each student assigned an individual computer screen within a booth with headphones attached. The inclusion of violent pornography and its role in shaping the deviancy of Egorova is particularly relevant here- as a self-reflexive gesture, the sheer abundance, accessibility and aggressive tone of pornography highlights the deeply troubling reality of the sex industry of the modern day. The range of fatales/sexpionage experts depicted demonstrates a diversified face of sexual allure- there are male and female cadets, all versed to accommodate for a plethora of sexual needs including different sexualities and extreme, niche sexual fetishisation such as S/M. Egorova is essentially trained as an adaptive pornstar and any trace of authentic intimacy or innocence is finally abolished through the repetitious submersion she must face within these classes. She embodies the modern twenty-first-century femme fatale fantasy- the woman who can flit from dominatrix to submissive doll, tailoring herself personally to the whims of each man she meets. In this respect, Egorova serves as an ode to classic noir fatales who are regarded as the 'cynosure of imperiled masculinity' (Fay & Nieland, 2010: p. 148-p.149) on account of the fact she is both feared and desired simultaneously, making her the ultimate threat to masculinity.

The transformation undergone by Egorova as a result of Sparrow School is profound- in refining her ability to seduce, Egorova comes to understand the power of sexuality as a weapon. This narrative trope is simultaneously observed in movies of the aforementioned 90's resurgence. Kate Stables comments that, 'While postmodern cinema expresses and reproduces dominant ideologies, its polysemic nature allows films to accommodate and privilege radically opposing discourses at the same

time' (Stables, 1998: p. 166). Stables argues that postmodern films with noir themes often replicate notable symbols of classic noir yet also simultaneously interrogate/subvert these in order to realign the style to contemporary audiences. A key element of postmodern films with noir themes is that they seem to offer female protagonists the opportunity to reclaim their sexuality and thus reclaim the gaze. However, Stables remarks of the iconic *Basic Instinct* scene, wherein Sharon Stone uncrosses her legs in order to reveal her lack of underwear to captivated detectives, that, 'Even where her sexual display is aggressive, such as Catherine Tramell's brazen show for a room of discomfited police, she is still the object of our, and their, hungry gaze' (Stables, 1998: p. 174). Stables therefore suggests that even whilst exhibiting agency, femme fatales are inexplicably bound to serve as scopophilic pleasures due to the inherently sexual nature of their appearances within noir films. *Red Sparrow* perpetuates the same paradoxical dichotomy in that sexuality is still performed and thus Egorova still serves as a scopophilic pleasure, regardless of the agency she may display in commanding the gaze herself. A scene which demonstrates this is when Egorova is given the opportunity to reprimand a fellow classmate who had previously tried to assault her in the showers. She fights the assailant off, beating him on the floor yet her act of self-defence is considered a threat. After attending a meeting with the bruised oppressor and people overlooking the programme and having to justify her actions as a defence against the prospect of rape, Egorova is accused of potentially depriving Russia of a promising cadet. As a result of this defiance, the matron demands that Egorova sexually satisfy the assailant within class ('give him what he wants'), in front of all of their classmates. This task encourages a confident performance and despite the potential for Egorova to be ashamed or traumatised by this scenario, she actively assumes control. The male cadet asks Egorova to turn around; however, she refuses to turn and stands before him, beginning to remove her own clothing. The male cadet glances over at the matron nervously yet Egorova responds sharply, 'Don't look at her! I want to watch you do it. Look at me. Look at me. I said, look at me!'. In this time, she's fully undressed and sits down on the table in front of him with her legs spread widely apart. The camera captures the silhouette of the male cadet's body framed between Egorova's legs, with her face visible above his shoulder. 'Well? What you waiting for? I'm ready- are you going to fuck me or not?' she goads as the male cadet attempts to penetrate her. He fails to maintain any state of arousal with her constantly pressing him. Egorova is quick to comment, 'Nothing? Shame'. The male cadet zips his pants up, mutters 'bitch' under his breath and then promptly walks away, leaving Egorova sprawled on the desk, fully on display to the whole class.

Egorova has no qualms about this and simply turns to the matron, returning to the objective of the exercise and stating, 'Power. That's what he wants'. The matron commands Egorova to get dressed and she calmly gets off the table to do this. This scene draws comparison with the aforementioned interrogation scene from *Basic Instinct* wherein sociopathic Catherine Tramell is detained due to her suspected involvement with a major murder investigation. She sits on her chair within the police station, looking up at the mirror and toys with the drooling male detectives who watch on as she spreads her legs (to reveal she isn't wearing any underwear). This blatant power play, in which Tramell establishes herself as the dominant figure and the male detectives as being the submissive figures under her control, cements her status as the woman who commands the gaze. Both aforementioned scenes simultaneously symbolise a superficially transgressive empowerment and a disempowerment- the femme fatale is intrinsically enslaved by the male gaze and despite her assertive command of the gaze, she remains a scopophilic pleasure.

The cinematic finale of *Red Sparrow* invites some sense of resolution by finally revealing that, throughout the entirety of the film, despite her set-backs, Egorova has been implementing an arrangement to have her uncle framed as the double-agent, disgracing him nationally. Subsequently, Egorov is shot down by a Russian sniper for his unpatriotic act as Egorova watches on. In silencing him and personally orchestrating his demise, Egorova gratifies her need for vengeance but also cements her status as a femme fatale who has mastered the art of deceiving both characters within the film and spectators, alike. Egorova defies a fatalistic ending, which serves as a major subversion from previous femme fatale narratives. Place (1998) notes that typically film noir is not deemed to be progressive on account of the fact that, 'it does not present us with role models who defy their fate and triumph over it' (Place, 1998: p. 47). With the fatal destruction of the man who attempted to control and repress her complete, Egorova's performance is finally over and the femme fatale returns to the satisfaction of her old life, governed by herself. The contemporary femme fatale, in this instance, is redefined as an independent woman who reclaims subjectivity in her own narrative and obliterates those unlucky men who stand in the way.

In conclusion, *Red Sparrow* self-reflexively draws upon the inherently performed nature of sexuality and does this through highlighting the construction of the contemporary femme fatale. Francis Lawrence highlights the Sparrow School as an institute which systematically dehumanises cadets, mechanises

sex and teaches notions of performed intimacy. The contemporary femme fatale is therefore outlined as a product tailored to personally gratify deviant sexual whims of an increasingly disconnected and sadistic society. With her consistently controlled performance, Egorova captivates and confuses audiences, presenting elements of powerlessness and vulnerability whilst simultaneously orchestrating her revenge. Drawing comparisons with Catherine Tramell within *Basic Instinct*, Egorova's empowerment is predominantly forged by her successful mastery of deception, which enables her to prevail at the end of the movie and ominously reinstate a new equilibrium.

In conclusion, Francis Lawrence's attempt to present a nuanced portrayal of the contemporary, empowered femme fatale exemplifies a changing prerogative within the Hollywood industry. However, his delivery of this is problematic and I would argue this is predominantly due to the graphic portrayal of rape, which only perpetuates the disempowerment of the femme fatale despite her successful vengeance within the cinematic finale. In failing to provide means of subversion, subsequently reinstating the fetishisation of misogynistic violence, Ustinov's attack upon Egorova contributes to an unsettling canon of damaging rape portrayals in film. Lawrence's further failure to convey the extent to Egorova's trauma following this event further reduces the act to a gratuitous visual spectacle as opposed to a realist portrayal of violence.

In addition to this, *Red Sparrow* highlights the difficulties in divorcing contemporary iterations of archetypally sexualised characters such as femme fatales from their predecessors. Directorially, Lawrence imbues Egorova as the subject of the narrative, signifying an attempt to centralise and empower her perspective yet the overall impact of this is nullified by the salacious eye of the camera, which is drawn to Egorova's hyperfeminised body throughout the movie. Egorova is a visual spectacle and nothing more in that audiences are denied the opportunity to forge a personalised connection with the protagonist. Spallacci outlined that spectators would aspire to witness Egorova achieving her vengeance simply because this was a generic expectation of the narrative's conclusion, given the injustice of her sexual assault. However, this emotional impact could have been exponentially heightened by humanising Egorova to a furthered extent, portraying the intricacies of her very complex identity.

Finally, Egorova's glamourised appearance particularly serves as a titillating marketing ploy within the film's official trailer, suggesting that the interests of the corporate film industry inherently clash, and

overpower, that of Lawrence's intentions. If *Red Sparrow* truly sought to resist classification as an erotic thriller, the film trailer would have avoided splicing together only the hypersexualised scenes from the movie. *Red Sparrow's* promotional campaign highlights that the commercial Hollywood industry relies upon the subjectivity of its sex-symbol stars to lure in spectators and subsequently achieve box-office success. This reliance upon the scopophilic potentiality of actresses is indicative of what has become a normalised emphasis upon the sexualisation of the female body within marketing. Overall, this indicates that despite the progressive intentions of filmmakers, the emancipation of action heroines from the male gaze will only truly be possible when the female body ceases to serve as a profitable commodity.

CONCLUSION

The Geena Davis Institute of Gender in Media was established in 2004 with the primary aim to, 'expose gender imbalance, identify unconscious bias and creatively remodel content to achieve gender equity' (2019). Observing a blatant disparity between the representation of men and women on-screen, actress Geena Davis was inspired to highlight the glaring differences in order to force radical change within film and TV industries. Research conducted into gender representation onscreen in 2014 concluded that despite an increased emphasis upon inclusion and diversity, a startling disparity between male and female representation within the film industry prevails. '*Gender Bias Without Borders*' by The Geena Davis Institute of Gender in Media analyses film industries from over 10 different countries, looking at gender discrepancies amongst filmmakers (directors, writers, producers etc.). Of the production teams involved, the study determined that, 'Out of a total of 1,452 filmmakers with an identifiable gender, 20.5% were female and 79.5% were male. This translates into a gender ratio behind the camera of 3.9 males to every 1 female'. Such statistics support the notion that film industries (of which Hollywood is but one example), continue to support overwhelmingly male-oriented production teams. More recently, Martha M. Lauzen's '*It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top Grossing Films of 2018*' summarises that, 'Females comprised 35% of all speaking characters in 2018 (see Figure 4). This represents an increase of 1 percentage point from 34% in 2017. Males accounted for 65% of speaking characters' (Lauzen, 2019). Evidently, there is some sense of progress when considering previous years. However, the repudiation of feminism, the belief that it is now an anachronistic movement, is challenged by an embarrassingly large disparity between male and female representation onscreen. This is not helped by the alarming multitude of women whose voices have been persistently undermined, silenced or outright buried when trying to address the very tangible issue of sexual harassment off-screen.

The correlation between a male-dominated Hollywood industry and the prevalence of male-dominated narratives (which subsequently perpetuates the male-gaze) is unsurprising. Manifestly, there have been efforts to provide more progressive, diverse and inclusive roles for women in film and this is reflective of a changing landscape within Hollywood. Trailblazers such as actress Reese Witherspoon have used their positions within the film industry to challenge the status quo- in her speech at the Glamour Awards 2010, Witherspoon discussed her production company *Hello Sunshine* which was established as a

response to Witherspoon's anxieties regarding the Hollywood film industry's failure to offer dynamic roles to women. According to its website, Hello Sunshine considers itself, '... a media brand anchored in storytelling, creating and discovering content that celebrates women and puts them at the center of the story'. The centralisation of female voices and an increased effort to empower women within the film industry is indicative of a positive change within attitudes, and an increased effort to interrogate, as well as overcome, the normalisation of a male-dominated Hollywood.

This thesis determines that dominant modes of female representation within film can be changed over time and can reflect a changed set of ideologies within society. Previous presentations of women in action films have been concerned with perpetuating the modes of either overt sexualisation or a masculinisation of the body. However, indicative of a changing attitude towards the all-encompassing and independent modern woman, some contemporary action heroines demonstrate that it is possible to destroy the polarity of pragmatic masculinity versus overt sexualisation.

Tomb Raider and *Wonder Woman* demonstrate that it is possible to retain some fidelity to iconographic predecessors whilst also reinventing the archetypal visual spectacles of the action babe heroine and superheroine. Within *Tomb Raider*, audiences are introduced to an upgraded version of masculinity with an action babe heroine who maintains the aesthetic of a hardened body but resolves to defy an overtly masculinised performance as the lead protagonist. The result is Alicia Vikander's portrayal of a vulnerable yet adept Lara Croft embarking upon her journey to self-actualisation; the film evidences that strength and femininity are not mutually exclusive terms, that action heroines possess the capacity for duality. This filmic progression mirrors major changes within the video game industry: McInnes (2016) suggests that *Tomb Raider* (2013), 'can also serve as an example for future games with the inclusion of content that redefines the way women are portrayed in the industry' (McInnes, 2016). The revised image of Lara Croft signifies hope for the representation of women within the gaming industry. Successfully rebooting Lara Croft, a virtual babe so intrinsically synonymous with overt sexualisation within both video games and filmic adaptations, indicates that it possible to save female protagonists from the trappings of the male gaze.

In the context of the contemporary superheroine, the titular character is presented as a hybrid model within *Wonder Woman*. The protagonist represents the destruction of an exclusive polarity between pragmatic musculature and hypersexualised femininity by combining elements of both. *Wonder Woman*

is a fantasy figure yet humanised through characterisation that seeks to diminish the salience of sexualisation through emphasising other previously overlooked positive attributes such as vulnerability and humour. *Wonder Woman* evidences the fact that superheroines can be presented in a nuanced fashion whilst also serving as credible box-office successes. As a trailblazer, *Wonder Woman* has profoundly affected filmic representations of other notable comic book heroines. The trend of emerging powerful superheroines is corroborated by the success of the recently released *Captain Marvel* (2019) origin film which has broken financial and critical records upon its release. In his review of the movie for Rolling Stone, Peter Travers (2019) discusses the merit of Brie Larson's casting as the titular character, stating, 'You see how she has lays [sic] the foundation for a character who defies male objectification and becomes akin to what Joni Mitchell called "a woman of heart and mind."' (Travers, 2019). There are further implications beyond the film industry- within the comic book industry, the centralisation of diverse female voices (particularly women of colour) is being further amplified by rumours that the Black Panther (2018) spin-off will place Shuri (the sister to the protagonist T'Challa) as the subject of the narrative, detailing her ascension to the throne in her brother's absence (Gustines, 2018).

Red Sparrow serves as a stark reminder that contemporary examples of iconographic visual spectacles can't always be emancipated from the trappings of the male gaze. Historically, the femme fatale's characterisation is intrinsically sexualised and this is supported by an extensive canon of filmic titles featuring overtly sexualised visual spectacles. The gratification of the scopophilic gaze is paramount to the noir sensibility and attempts to deviate from this are subsequently problematic. Francis Lawrence tries to empower his protagonist by situating Egorova as the subject of the narrative and allowing her to prevail victoriously at the end of the movie. However, a series of inconsistencies within the screenwriting result in a lack of cohesive characterisation, obfuscating the potential of Egorova as a feisty and commanding protagonist. Additionally, *Red Sparrow* still problematically conveys the punishment of the female protagonist through graphic violence. Lawrence seeks to draw sympathy from audiences with a highly uncomfortable depiction of rape, yet in failing to portray the effects of such trauma, the potentiality to evoke a resonance beyond the spectacle of the movie is limited. *Red Sparrow* invites dialogue around the concept of consent and seeks to change the way we regard the femme fatale but ultimately demonstrates that she remains inexplicably bound to performing as a scopophilic pleasure.

In conclusion, there are elements of progression reflected by the successes of 2 out of 3 selected films within this thesis. Close textual analysis suggests that despite the dominant modes of representation governing the action genre, it is possible to present female protagonists as more than sheer visual spectacles. The box-office successes of titles such as *Tomb Raider* and *Wonder Woman* evidence that contemporary action films starring lead action heroines can be financial viabilities. The critical reception of such films also suggests that, despite some minor flaws, more nuanced heroines can be formulated through characterisation which allows the exhibition of alternate female identities. The consequence of this is hopefully more attempts at filmic productions which star empowered female protagonists, visually captured without the oppressive and archaic glare of the male gaze permeating the lens.

The interrogation of gendered representation discourse within film has implications on a wider scale. In *Interrogating Post-Feminism* (2007), Tasker and Negra assert that 'the transition to a postfeminist culture involves an evident erasure of feminist politics from the popular' (Tasker & Negra, 2007: p. 5) however, I would argue that in the wake of the Weinstein scandal and several other high-profile political events, there's been a profound reversion to collectivism and subsequently a resurgence of interest within feminist texts and culture. Sharing commonalities with other women's experiences has not destabilised the concept of the neoliberal, independent woman and has rather positively enforced the notion that the individual identity is not compromised by being part of a larger, collective identity.

Tasker and Negra additionally state that 'popular culture blithely assumes that gender equality is a given' (Tasker & Negra, 2007: p. 12) however, I would posit that the significant examples of political threats towards the agency of modern women have forced a retaliatory response. The Women's Day marches have grown exponentially in size and we are seeing women from across the globe demanding real consequences and real accountability for those oppressive forces who continue to perpetuate gender disparity (within the context of the workplace, the home and the public). The development of movements such as Time's-Up and #MeToo are symbolic of a historical crossroads wherein women are rallying together to speak out against disparity. This unity is evidenced by the mission statement for Time's Up, as extracted from the organisation's website, 'The clock has run out on sexual assault, harassment and inequality in the workplace. It's time to do something about it' (Time's Up, 2019). The motto strongly suggests the active force of united women and promises to deliver solutions- this is no longer a mere dialogue; it is a call to arms and a confident stance against oppressors within the

Hollywood industry. Importantly, the aforementioned movements constitute vigilant activism and indicate that women are not only aware of disparity but are actively seeking ways to overcome such disparities through protest. This gesture connotes hope in that Tasker and Negra imply 'postfeminism has become so installed as an epistemological framework that in many ways our culture has stopped asking the kinds of questions that it appears to "settle"' (Tasker & Negra, 2007: p. 6). Evidently, global protests and a surge in activism (uniting intersections of women) indicate that feminist critique does continue to exist and is achieving its objective to bring female oppression to the foreground of discussion.

In conclusion, there have been cataclysmic changes within the Hollywood industry- the ripples of the Weinstein scandal have forced deep reflection and subsequent discussion around the inherently sexist discourse at the heart of filmmaking. The sexualised female body remains a crucial marketing ploy and is problematically embedded within most commercial Hollywood productions. However, the Weinstein scandal has served as a stark reminder that there is much work to be done with regards to the equity of actresses and the diversification of the roles they should be offered to play. With the ferocious force of Time's Up and the internet ablaze with instantaneous, damning evidence against those who exploit their roles within Hollywood, it feels as though we are on the precipice of great change. Speculation as to the future representations of action heroines once seemed resigned, as though inevitably female protagonists would succumb to stereotypically gendered roles and fetishisation. However, we are increasingly seeing examples of alternate action heroine identities emerge and this is symptomatic of a positive shift within representation. The complete erasure of the male gaze is an impossibility, for we must acknowledge that it has been so inherently embedded at the heart of Hollywood. Yet it is possible to toy with the conventions of traditional characters and align them to modern audiences, as well as seek to empower them with nuanced screenplays that allow us to explore more complex and alternate identities of women.

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