

HOT GIRLS KICKING:

Violent Women and Genre Hybridity in Postmodern Action Cinema

by

LINDSAY JOAN STEENBERG

B.A. (honours), Queen's University at Kingston, 1999

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Film Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

June 2005

© Lindsay Joan Steenberg, 2005

ABSTRACT

The spectacle of sexuality and violence embodied on screen by the character of the deadly woman has caused simultaneous and alternating fascination and alarm in spectators. While violent women have been represented in a large number of films since the 1970s, in recent years there has been a significant shift in their characterizations. Rather than the vixens of exploitation cinema or the muscular heroines of 1990s blockbusters, the contemporary action heroine is informed by the global popular imaginary and by postmodern genre hybridization. This thesis examines the transnational and hybrid nature of these texts by grouping together similar films based on the character of the professional female fighter – which I have titled, *Hot Girl Kicking*, in order to sum up her distinct combination of violence and the erotic.

Over the course of the thesis, patterns of structure, functionality and spectacle emerge in *Hot Girl Kicking* films due to their postmodern emphasis on surface, fracture, and cross cultural genre hybridization, and their ultimate function: rupturing the systems which hold them. This thesis first examines the onscreen construction of the aggressive female body in contemporary U.S. action films, followed by the addition of stylized fighting inspired by Asian genres in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Lee 2000), and finally the exaggerated self reflexive uses of genre and violence in *Kill Bill Volumes 1 and 2* (Tarantino 2003/4). Widening the site of rupture from a preoccupation with the body of the heroine to the global stage highlights the emancipatory potential of cross cultural and genre hybridization. The proposed hybrid sub-genre of the *Hot Girl Kicking* represents new ways of blurring boundaries and challenging the ordering systems of classical Hollywood film form, U.S. cultural imperialism, and patriarchy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
CHAPTER I: Methodology and Generic Outline	1
CHAPTER II: The Body of the <i>Hot Girl Kicking</i>	28
CHAPTER III: The Transnational <i>Hot Girl Kicking</i>	51
CHAPTER IV: The <i>Hot Girl Kicking</i> Kills Bill	70
CHAPTER V: Ruptures and Ramifications	89
Works Cited	100
Filmography	102
Bibliography	105

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to acknowledge the support of the faculty and staff at UBC Film Studies, especially the advice of Dr. Brian McIlroy and the assistance of Richard Payment at the film library. Further acknowledgement is due to Jane and Neil Steenberg for their unwavering pride and encouragement.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to my thesis advisor, Dr. Lisa Coulthard, who has been both attentive and inspiring and whose contribution to this thesis has lead me to consider her as my Mr. Miyagi.

CHAPTER I:

HOT. GIRLS. KICKING.

Methodology and Generic Outline

"Silly Caucasian girl likes to play with Samurai swords."

-O-Ren Ishii, *Kill Bill Volume 1*

There is a trend in recent cinema which represents powerful and violent women at the centre of their own spectacle oriented stories. Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2003/4)¹ and McG's *Charlie's Angels* (2000) are two extremely popular examples of this tendency and the focus of subsequent chapters of this thesis. The well dressed detectives of *Charlie's Angels* and the revenge hungry samurai in *Kill Bill* are characterizations of violent women which differ from previous incarnations not only in their narrative position, but also in their representation as professional warriors and their hybridization of elements of global popular cinema. These characters, and the many others like them, are the iconic lynchpins of a new postmodern hybrid sub-genre proposed by this thesis. I have dubbed this postmodern hybridization of the action cinema personified by the action heroine, the "*Hot Girl Kicking*" film because this epithet best sums up the erotic and violent spectacle exhibited and personified by the female warrior. Over the course of this thesis, I will establish the conventions, iconography and syntax of this postmodern hybrid sub-genre of the action film; provide an analysis of the functions and effects of its representations of warrior women, and situate this cinematic phenomenon in the wider context of genre history, feminism and postmodern film theory.

What is at stake in the bloody stories of the female warrior? What effect do these shifts in representation have? Is the *Hot Girl Kicking* merely an extension of the *femme fatale* or she is a new kind of character entirely? These central questions are dealt with over the course of this thesis, and take into account the action cinema of contemporary Hollywood, recent Asian martial arts films and exaggerated postmodern offerings such as *Kill Bill*. Attempts to find answers to these questions suggest the possibility of breaking restrictive boundaries, such as patriarchy, genre structures that support the dominant ideology and the division between Eastern and Western popular culture. In showing a female protagonist in a violent struggle towards her goals, at the centre of her own narrative, the shift in representation becomes more than an extension of past forms but something altogether different. This phenomenon pressures structuring systems and, as the films analyzed in this thesis suggest, is beginning to fracture those systems.

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to establish the salient existing scholarship regarding representations of violent womanhood and to construct a methodological model using genre, feminism, transnational and postmodern theory. The initial function of this model is to explain that in their postmodern hybridization of multinational genres these films can be grouped together. This group of films offers spectacles of violence which are both disruptive (to the narrative, for the spectator) and subversive (of Classical Hollywood form, traditional gender definitions and the stability of genre boundaries). Although the *Hot Girl Kicking* films I have grouped together represent a shift away from previous violent women, they do rely heavily on the influence of female fighters from other genres. The three traits which have had the most impact on contemporary representations of violent womanhood are: a combination of deadly and sexy, a close relationship to the monstrous, and a professional motivation. What follows

lays out influential films and relevant scholarship according to these three main traits in order to clarify what has been established by other theorists about certain characteristics of the *Hot Girl Kicking* character and, from there, to extrapolate based on new characteristics.

PRECEDENTS

Starting from the 1970s² there has been an increase in the number of films representing women as the perpetrators of violence. The films which feature these violent women occur across several genres and in various countries, and show female fighters performing the roles of sidekick, love interest and (less frequently) protagonist. Recently, however, the popular cinema's representations of violent womanhood have developed certain common characteristics, stylistic traits and conventional stories which I conclude to be defining features of a new postmodern hybrid sub-genre. Drawing inspiration from the *femme fatale* of film noir, the heroines of comic books and video games, and Hollywood action cinema, contemporary action films tend to show women's violence as interconnected and inseparable from sexuality. Both anxiety and fascination are attached to the danger of unbridled female sexuality of deadly female characters, as seen in recent Japanese and American horror films featuring female monsters and punished victim/heroines. In addition to the patterns inspired by genres with established violent female characters, heroines of these new films can be seen adapting traits from male characters. Inspired by the professional western gunslinger and the muscle man of the 1980s action cinema, recent violent women in action films are shown displaying their ripped bodies and pursuing professional (rather than defensive) violent goals. As early as the 1960s and certainly in the 1970s, violent women have been informed by the

cinematic language of independent and B movies, from the titillating vigilantes of exploitation, to the fast-talking urbanites of blaxploitation and fists of fury of Asian action films.

In the last ten years, there has been a proliferation of films featuring violent women which seem to set themselves apart from these past images and suggest a new direction for women warriors. Characterized by a central female protagonist whose violence is professionally motivated [for example, the assassin in *Elektra* (Bowman 2005)] and artistically performed [as in the balletic sequences of *Hero* (Zhang 2003)] these films access cross cultural popular culture to create hybrids composed from the traits of different genres and genders. The observed group of films also demonstrate a postmodern emphasis on surfaces, pastiche, fracturing and self reflexivity. These significant differences merit analysis and, in order to do so, I will contextualize what I have labelled the *Hot Girl Kicking* films in terms of precedent images (introduced above) and expand upon their relationship to transnational postmodern culture.

Sexy and Deadly: The Hot Girl Kicking is Dangerously Attractive

Violent womanhood has most often been interrogated in terms of its combination (and confusion) of female sexuality with violence. The 1996 comic book adaptation *Barb Wire* epitomizes this conflation. In his article, "Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness: The Bad Girls of Action Film and Comic Books", Jeffrey A. Brown pays close attention to the sexual dynamics represented in *Barb Wire* (Hogan 1996). He describes the film as "reveal[ing] the adolescent fear and desire of female sexuality that is exercised through the figure of all action heroines" (50). The fear and fascination upon viewing Brown's bad girls can be seen in the characterizations of many other recent films: Trinity (played by Carrie Anne Moss) the body suited hacker from *The Matrix* (Wachowski 1999), fits with

this model, as does Karen Sisco (played by Jennifer Lopez), the mini-skirt clad, shotgun wielding U.S. Marshall in *Out of Sight* (Soderbergh 1998). They are both dangerous fighters and sexualized objects. In Tough Girls: Woman Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture, Sherrie A. Inness uses the title "Tough Girls" to describe these women. She outlines the eroticisation of the female warrior as a way of containing the threat of her violence and supporting the patriarchal status quo. Inness' tough girls, like Brown's bad girls, are represented as the exception rather than the rule, i.e. they are considered unusual even in the story world of the film. Moreover, despite their use of violence and usurpation of traditionally "masculine" roles, the action heroine's "toughness is often mitigated by her femininity, which American culture commonly associates with weakness" (Inness 5). Trinity may be able to operate in the same world as Neo, but is confined for most of the *Matrix* trilogy to her role as "girlfriend". Likewise, a character such as the spy/housewife Helen Tasker in *True Lies* (Cameron 1994) is emphasized as being the perfect (sexy/deadly) partner for the action hero, rather than a heroine in her own right.

The sexy and deadly conflation in contemporary films featuring tough and bad girls represents the influence of the sexploitation film of the 1960s and 1970s. Films such as *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (Meyer 1965) and *Barbarella* (Vadim 1968) utilize the hyper-exaggeration of feminine signifiers and represent female sexuality as a weapon to be wielded against mostly male victims/opponents. Likewise contemporary action heroines are shown using a performance of femininity and sexuality to deceive and destroy their enemies. However, recent films such as *Charlie's Angels*, reveal this as illusion because they deploy their sexual weapons when they are role playing and undercover. *Charlie's Angels* is influenced by the erotic and violent representations of sexploitation cinema, but

in demonstrating that the violent performance of sexuality is a fantasy, and the function of a costume change, the film draws attention to the artificiality of its construction.

Another sub-genre of exploitation cinema representing the sexy and deadly combination is the blaxploitation cinema of the 1970s. The heroines of films such as *Black Belt Jones* (Clouse 1974), *Cleopatra Jones* (Sharrett 1973) and *Foxy Brown* (Hill 1974) demonstrate an interpretation of cultural forms from outside of the U.S. mainstream. Upon release, these films were unique in their portrayal of a sexually virile black manhood complemented by a hip and aggressive martially trained model of black womanhood. Yvonne Tasker in *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*, claims that (like the white female action heroine), the black hero(ine) of blaxploitation is constructed through fantasies. She claims that the characters of blaxploitation are inevitably created "through a history of stereotypes which originate in desiring and fearful white fantasies (39). The one liners thrown out by the blaxploitation heroine, her attention to fashion and her use of violence as humour have made a lasting impression³ on the action cinema, most directly in *Kill Bill* and *Jackie Brown* (Tarantino 1997), films which directly borrow from and parody this sub-genre of cinema. Blaxploitation films are also one of the first instances linking black urban sub-culture to Asian martial arts genre cinema.⁴ Thereby demonstrating an early process of hybridization in which one marginalized cinema borrows from the traditions of another.

The more recent (global) exploitation cinema combines the race issues of blaxploitation and the anxiety around sexuality considered by the sexploitation film. Many representations of violent Asian women realize what Leon Hunt in his book, *Kung Fu Cult Masters* calls the "Deadly China Doll Syndrome".⁵ Essentially, the deadly China doll represents not only Brown's concept of an adolescent fantasy of deadly sexuality, but a

Western view of the Asian woman as deadly but also delicate and exotic. As examples, Hong Kong films such as *So Close* (Yuen 2002) and *Naked Weapon* (Ching 2002) tell the stories of lethal female assassins who use their considerable feminine charms to disarm and delight their unsuspecting targets. Charlene in *Naked Weapon*⁶ and Lynn in *So Close* are symptomatic of Hunt's deadly China doll syndrome while simultaneously presenting manifestations of Brown's bad girls and Inness' tough girls. The hybrid nature of these films, and their heroines, has a subversive potential. It is this potential that later action films have played with in their (re)combinations of the elements and storylines of these types of films.

Despite the consistent portrayal of sexuality and violence as symbiotic, the postmodern action heroine (my *Hot Girl Kicking*) differs in the manner in which her character performs them. Brown theorizes that the effect of representing hysterical versions of femininity in films such as *Barb Wire* upsets traditional ideas of gender. He claims:

that modern action heroines are transgressive characters not only because their toughness allows them to critique normative standards of femininity but because their coexistent sexuality (epitomized in *Barb Wire*) destabilizes the very concept of gender traits as mutually exclusive (50).

More recent films, such as the archaeological video game fantasy, *Tomb Raider* (West 2001) and the prostitute run dystopia of *Sin City* (Rodriguez & Miller 2005) likewise demonstrate that the borders between masculinity and femininity are not stable, especially in their presentation of female perpetrated violence. To Brown's argument I add that by using hybridity (of genres, genders, cultures) and pastiche (informed by the cinema of exploitation, blaxploitation and martial arts cinema) the figure of the postmodern action

heroine disrupts not only traditional gender dichotomies, but the concept of genre as a stable category and the perceived unity of the film's structure.

Sexy and Horrifying: *The Hot Girl Kicking's* Relationship to the Monstrous

Another example of the disrupting force of the dangerously violent woman occurs in the horror genre (and its sub-genre, the slasher film). Barbara Creed's seminal work, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, considers representations of violent women as horrifying. Her psychoanalytic approach attributes "the *difference* of female sexuality as a difference which is grounded in monstrousness and which invokes castration anxiety in the male spectator" (2). Creed goes on to say that despite the active role of the female monster in horror films such as *Carrie* (De Palma 1976), *The Brood* (Cronenberg 1979) and *The Hunger* (Scott 1983), she is not necessarily "liberated". Similar to the bad girl, the tough girl and the deadly China doll, the monstrous-feminine is "more about male fears [and fantasies] than about female desire or feminine subjectivity" (Creed 7). Creed's work theorizes possible ramifications in associating women with such awe-inspiring destructive power over men (in the films and in the audience). The influence of this cataclysmic power is present in the contemporary action genre (and its sub-genres). Films whose heroines navigate the border between sexy and horrifying are part of the postmodern hybrid sub-genre put forward here. Selene, the vampire heroine in *Underworld* (Wiseman 2003) is an example of this monster. Although she is marked as monstrous in her representation as a vampire, she is also shown as a sympathetic character in her quest to avenge her family's murder and her fight against more monstrous adversaries. A less clear cut example is the Bride in *Kill Bill* whose bloody revenge is informed by the

iconography of the slasher sub-genre and whose gratuitous maiming of victims represents a horrifying excess.

Another character type of the horror genre informing *Hot Girl Kicking* films is Carol Clover's "Final Girl". Where Creed's monstrous-feminine represents the aggressor of horror films, Clover's final girl is the victim-heroine-survivor of the film. In Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film, Clover discusses this figure in terms of her transgressions across gender boundaries and her embodiment of both masculine and feminine traits. Where Brown's bad girls rupture the ideas of "masculine" and "feminine" through an exaggeration of feminine signifiers, Clover's final girl renders porous the division between hero/male and victim/female because she is coded as both boyish and girlish; both male and female spectators are able to identify with her through her gaze. Indeed, the final girl's "triumph depends upon her assumption of the gaze" (Clover 60). It is the gaze of the final girl that has the most impact on the figure of the postmodern action heroine who looks at danger without fear and who is represented as being the subjective focal point for audience identification, irrespective of gender. This is manifest in the character Ripley in *Alien* (Scott 1979) and its subsequent sequels, who is a prototype for the postmodern action heroine and whom Clover has classified as a final girl. Ripley as final girl assumes an active violent role in the film; not only does she survive to kill the monster like other final girls, she also takes command. Over the course of the film(s), Ripley becomes a capable expert and fighter on whom other characters depend for their survival. Due to this shift, Ripley's characterization exceeds the scope of Clover's work on the horror genre. Since the first *Alien* film, Ripley has become an "alien consultant" brought in at various times in order to aid in understanding and defeating the aliens. She is a qualified expert whose services offer the possibility of survival for those

who depend upon her. Ripley is also an expert due to her hybrid status. She does not simply understand the aliens by observing them, but also by becoming one of them through her impregnation, in *Alien*³ (Fincher 1992), and hybrid cloning in *Alien: Resurrection* (Jeunet 1997). It is Ripley's professional and hybrid status which influences later action heroines, and makes her prototypical of the *Hot Girl Kicking* character put forward by this thesis.

Sexy Lady and Man's Work: *The Hot Girl Kicks Professionally*

The characterization of Ripley in the *Alien* series has also been analysed in terms of action cinema tropes. Yvonne Tasker investigates Ripley, and likewise Sarah Connor in *Terminator* (Cameron 1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (Cameron 1992), as part of the "muscular cinema" of the 1980s and 1990s. Tasker highlights the inscription of the female body with signifiers of masculinity. She uses the term "musculinity" to describe "the extent to which a physical definition of masculinity in terms of a developed musculature is not limited to the male body within representation" (3). The heroines of muscular cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, such as Sarah Connor, Ripley, Private Vasquez in *Aliens* (Cameron 1986) and Jordan O'Neill in *G.I. Jane* (Scott 1997), take on physically robust masculine traits. It is primarily their ripped bodies that get them the respect of their peers and allow them to defeat their enemies. These muscular heroines provide the foundation for most later representations of women warriors in action films and many theorists⁷ in addition to Tasker have dealt with their masculine traits, at times even accusing the action heroine of being a man in drag. However, to assume that a woman is really a man because she has muscles or guns, disregards alternative versions and readings of femininity. The action heroine of the 1980s and 1990s is less a woman in men's clothing, than a hybrid recombination of feminine and masculine traits. The

ramifications of representing violent womanhood as a hybrid of male and female qualities highlights the artificiality of drawing strict borders between the two. Tasker's work brings attention to the action heroine as distinct from the male action hero and has been crucial to constructing a methodology which considers genre history and structural organization as contributing factors to the cinematic construction of violent womanhood.

ESTABLISHING A HOT GIRL KICKING HYBRID SUB-GENRE

One of the most important features separating recent representations of violent women from previous characterizations is the process of genre hybridization. In scavenging from the iconography of global popular culture, the recent action cinema distinguishes itself from the action cinema of the past and from other representations of violence. Genre theorist Janet Staiger in her article, "Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History", reinforces the impossibility of static genres. Staiger insists that "Hollywood films have never been pure instances of genres" (186). Yvonne Tasker agrees with Staiger, asserting that it is always difficult to distinguish "the raiding, reference and allusion taken by some critics to typify the contemporary American cinema, from the recycling of images in which popular cinema has been engaged throughout its history" (57). Following Staiger and Tasker, this thesis asserts that genres are not separate, stable categories and the practice of borrowing is hardly new. Hollywood genre cinema, and genre categories in general, are unstable and porous. Hybridization is not only a possibility, but a probability.

Moreover, hybridization is not simply part of the action cinema's history, but is manifested in the characterization of the woman warrior. Contemporary action heroines are able, in some part, to escape the limits of any specific genre (or gender characteristic) by a re-combination of many. The action heroine taps into the strength offered by

samurai films, Chinese swordplay films (known as *wu xia*), blaxploitation films, westerns and action films, yet is not limited by their tropes. The image of this hybrid heroine is differentiated from that of other violent women also in its negotiation of a porous border between male/female gender traits and between the several genres' iconographies and conventions. This process is layered in films often to excess. For example, *Underworld* incorporates conventions of the horror film and the action film to show the centuries long conflict between werewolves and vampires. The film visually quotes other films in costuming (the tortured heroine wears Neo's trench coat) and in setting [the city space is strikingly similar to *Batman's* (Burton 1989) Gotham]. In borrowing iconography liberally, *Underworld's* representation of Selene highlights the process of *performing* gender and genre. Action films such as *Underworld* do not simply recycle, or parody, Hollywood conventions but also access the transnational generic imaginary. They borrow from the cinema of Japan, China, Taiwan and Hong Kong and present the combination of several truly different, unusual elements – such as a combination of Hong Kong kung fu and blaxploitation.

Staiger's insistence that "pure" genres do not exist is followed by her critique of the term "hybrid". She believes that a hybrid should be, by necessity, cross cultural - a Bakhtinian case of a "dialogue between the two languages" (195). She claims that no such cross cultural dialogue takes place in Hollywood hybrids. Taking Staiger's assessment into account, the action films discussed here re-assert their claim to hybridity. They combine forms from several different countries and the genres of their films and literature. Their status as true transnational hybrids, rather than an "inbred" recombination of other Hollywood genres, marks a distinct departure from previous Hollywood genre films.

The process of hybridization, so key to distinguishing these films, is an element of larger theories of postmodernism. Postmodernism, with its emphasis on fragmentation, difference and the collapse between high and low cultural forms is the primary framework for identifying the (transnational) forces at play in the contemporary action cinema. While there are many theorists who deal with postmodernity, I define the term according to two theorists who have been most influential in film studies: Linda Hutcheon's Poetics of Postmodernism and Frederic Jameson's Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. There are three key terms in their works which are applicable to my analysis of the contemporary action cinema featuring warrior women. These concepts are: the critical distance of parody according to Linda Hutcheon, the stylistic re-combinations of pastiche, and the excessive spectacles of the hysterical sublime based on Jameson's theories. Jameson describes pastiche as symptomatic of an addiction to pure image and spectacle; it is an almost pathological nostalgia which worships the simulacrum and the surface. The image becomes the ultimate commodity and the past loses its referent and becomes a pure experience of pastiche-image (Jameson 16). Pastiche is easily identifiable as a visual quotation, especially in the genre iconography of a film.

Hutcheon's definition of pastiche is tied, almost interchangeably, to her concept of parody. Hutcheon's distinction from Jameson's idea of pastiche is in her assertion that the "collective weight of parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (26). Parody differs from pastiche in that it provides a commentary on what is represented rather than an empty visual quotation. Parody also depends on conventions of intertextuality and self-reflexivity. Films using postmodern parody have intertextuality as

a “deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect”(Jameson 20) allowing for criticism of wider structures and models (of genre and representation).

The hysterical sublime is the euphoric, terrifying and exhilarating experience of the postmodern world. Jameson states, “[t]he world ... loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density” (34). This hallucinatory delight in surface informs the excess which is the key factor in the films discussed here and makes visible the process of hybridization. The use of pastiche, parody and the hysterical sublime are the primary (visual) differentiating factors in establishing the postmodern action cinema, featuring the *Hot Girl Kicking*, as a new category worthy of analysis.⁸

Postmodernity is not the single classification factor for the body of *Hot Girl Kicking* films I have grouped together. My approach considers genre, and its postmodern mutations, to be another significant factor for investigating the relationship between women, violence and transnational culture. Jacinda Read, in her research on the “Female Avenger” in the rape-revenge cycle, described in *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, is extremely suspicious of a generic approach to violent femininity. She believes that the “desire to locate (and contain) cinema’s violent women within a traditional generic home” (45) is oversimplifying the matter and not giving enough attention to the historical pressures at the time of release and reception. She adds to this a critique of Creed’s analysis of the monstrous-feminine and Clover’s treatment of the final girl. She believes that these psychoanalytically focused arguments rely on “an unconvincing genre argument and a universal and ahistorical notion of the castrating woman” (45). Read’s issues with a genre-based model are justifiable; however, I believe her complete refusal to consider genre does a disservice to a comprehensive

analysis of violent women, especially to those who are not motivated by rape. My approach does not consider genre to be without historical connection, especially given the emphasis on hybrid forms and the importance of global popular culture.

Genre theory has always been haunted by issues of definition and teleology, and Read's critiques of Clover and Creed are representative of some of the failings recognized by scholars regarding genre studies. Theorists such as Rick Altman in Film/Genre, Andrew Tudor in his article "Genre" in The Film Genre Reader III and Steve Neale in Genre and Hollywood have pointed to an over-emphasis on categories at the expense of analysis. Identifying the structure and characteristics of a genre does not make any conclusions; rather, genre analysis needs to be taken a step further towards pointing to ramifications and the effects of patterns. Tudor and Altman also highlight the identification double bind in which classification takes place using traits which cannot be established until after the film has been classified, thereby making it extremely difficult to establish borders around genres. A final shortcoming is the often generalizing nature of genre arguments and their sometimes superficial (or non-existent) relationship to historical context. The postmodern action film's emphasis on hybridity which questions genres as exclusive categories allows for a genre analysis to bypass some of the shortcomings of genre studies as outlined above. An analysis of the representation of violent women can address functionality and effect without being bogged down by issues of classification through concentrating on hybridity, the surface excess of postmodernity and transnational culture *in combination with genre*. This distinct (hybridized) approach seems appropriate given the fact that the films I am grouping together use genre not only as an outer structuring form, but as part of their stories, characterizations and visual styles.

Drawing on the methodology and theories presented by Will Wright in his book on the western genre, Six Guns and Society, I am using a structural focus to lay out the salient features of the contemporary woman warrior and the films in which she appears. I am revisiting Wright's 1975 approach to genre with more recent postmodern and genre theories in mind in order to stress the importance of genre recognition to the process of hybridization. Without a basic understanding of the genres which are being combined, the impact of their recombination is lessened. Moreover, a reworking of Wright's framework supports the fact that the hybrid-sub genre defined by the *Hot Girl Kicking* does not completely eliminate old systems, but reconsiders them as places for contestation. Wright's structuralism also allows clarity in classification and overview. His method of arranging characteristics and narrative segments according to lists is especially valuable. While the lists in the section below may seem to be an over simplified outline of these films, they are specific enough to establish trends. As in Wright's study, I place an emphasis on functionality, and draw from a large number of films to observe shared characteristics and patterns from which to extrapolate effect and ramification. I have established six elements which are the most important in differentiating the postmodern action heroine (or the *Hot Girl Kicking*) from other genres and previous incarnations:

1. She is at the centre of the story
2. She is skilled in martial arts (or artful/choreographed violence)
3. She is a professional
4. The films access transnational popular culture and genre cinema
5. The films combine several genres
6. The films are postmodern using parody, pastiche, self reflexivity, a focus on fragmentation and an emphasis on surfaces

With these six key elements in place, more specific patterns can be approached and examined clearly. In order to do this for the *Hot Girl Kicking* film, I will describe, the iconography (common visuals, objects or sounds), the conventions (common techniques,

themes and types of narratives) and the syntax (the ways in which the film is resolved through the use of convention and iconography). This method of breaking down the defining characteristics of a genre (or sub-genre) is common to genre studies and is used in seminal works such as Wright's Six Guns and Society and Steve Neale's Genre and Hollywood.

Who IS that girl? Iconography

The defining feature of the hybrid sub-genre I am proposing is the character of the *Hot Girl Kicking*. She is the physical and martial equal of all her opponents and allies. She is trained in perpetrating violence; it is her life's work and art, rather than a defensive or maternal gesture. Her costume is an exaggeration of masculinity and femininity (often to the point of fetish) and its excesses complement an elaborate fighting choreography. By highlighting the performative aspects of gender, her costumes also create a dissonance for the film as a whole, self-contained system. Just as she controls the violent spectacle, she controls the narrative of the films in which she appears. The process of her construction, as warrior and as woman, is highlighted throughout the film and by the film itself. The action heroine is (self) made, rather than granted supernatural powers or pushed to violence through violence. It is always her professional choice to engage in violence.

In choosing the spectacle of violence, these films share similar visual elements. Although it may be controversial to define a genre by its visual style, it is unavoidable in this case given the postmodern emphasis on slick surface style in both the content and the form of these films. Certain iconic stylistic techniques (mise-en-scène, cinematography and editing patterns) form significant parts of the spectacle of these films. At times, these

techniques are used as pastiche (such as the wipes and split screens of *Charlie's Angels*) and at others they are part of the spectacle of the fighting [such as the wire work in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Lee 2000) and the slow motion gunplay in *Tomb Raider*].

The stylistic qualities that unite these films include a self-reflexive integration of past and present genres. Action films in postmodernity are aware of themselves and their cultural status and demonstrate this through their cinematography, by using visual quotations as inside jokes between themselves and the audience. Mark Gallagher, in his hybrid centred article, "I Married Rambo: Spectacle and Melodrama in the Hollywood Action Film," claims that these postmodern techniques merely mask a greater ideological project of male mastery. He claims that the action genre, specifically in 1980s Hollywood,

incorporate[s] postmodern self-reflexivity and generic irony to assure viewers that they are 'in on the joke,' that the genre's distortions of gender, race, politics, and so forth are whimsical devices intended to gratify audiences (204).

Naturally, this project of white male mastery is complicated (although not resolved) when substituted with white female mastery. However, this self-reflexivity retains its intertextual function of offering inside genre-jokes for the spectator. The visuals of *Hot Girl Kicking* films are the primary method whereby the spectator is privy to these jokes. While Gallagher asserts that self-reflexivity is an illusion which allows the audience to gloss over the fact that films are supporting a patriarchal view of society, the *Hot Girl Kicking* films rely on these jokes while simultaneously undermining a patriarchal system through their representations of women in active subject positions.

The cinematic style of these postmodern films upsets stable concepts of spatial orientation and temporal consistency in the name of violent spectacle. Time in these films becomes a function of visible speed in the rhythmic editing of fight sequences and in the punctuation marks of slow and fast motion. Time and the experience of it are functional rather than constant and known. The purpose of time is to highlight the impact of the spectacle and make meaning and significance known to the spectator. For example, during the battle at the House of Blue Leaves at the conclusion of *Kill Bill Volume 1*, The Bride fights not only a mob (The Crazy 88) but also more powerful and narratively significant individuals. The juxtaposition of the fast paced, tightly edited interior mob fight sequence with the quiet and slower paced final fight with O-Ren Ishii in the snow covered garden communicates to the audience the importance of O-Ren's death. This is also true of the Bride's duel with Go-Go, O-Ren's teenaged body guard. This fight is given more time on screen and fewer cuts than the mob scene, thereby highlighting the significance of Go-Go's death as opposed to the nameless, faceless deaths of more disposable minions.

In addition to the stylistic destabilization of temporal progress, these films stress the fluid nature of space. Space, like time, is manipulated in the service of the spectacle. A few examples are the 360° freeze frame and pans characteristic of *The Matrix* and the freeze-frame action poses in *Charlie's Angels*. Space, and the camera's fluid negotiation of it, frames the excess of the violence. Space is manipulated in the service of the spectacle and is often presented to the spectator from the point of view of the characters who are fighting, showing their disorientation or command of space. This spatial accent also further foregrounds the iconic status of the *Hot Girl Kicking* herself as the centre of the story as it gives her visual centrality as well as narrative. Another aspect of spatial representation common to the films is their quasi-fantastic settings. Recent action films

are frequently set in a place that exists outside of classical Hollywood "realist" representation, yet is differentiated from purely fantastic realms. For example, *Charlie's Angels* takes place in an inexplicably well funded detective agency which fights villains using a wide variety of extremely advanced weapons and gadgets and an exaggerated reserve of undercover costumes. *Kill Bill* is set on an international stage littered with miscellaneous and improbable genre icons, such as villains with eye patches and brides wielding samurai swords. *Tomb Raider* takes place in an unspecified aristocratic British world of unlimited trust funds. These places are themselves excessive. They border on the ridiculous and make constant use of intertextuality and pastiche to clarify their functions. Iconography is constructed through a postmodern retrofit of previous genres. The world of the films is almost exclusively recycled and highlights the process of its re-construction as part of the inside joke with the spectator. These jokes, in the form of scavenged iconography, provide another rupture in the narrative of the films and offer up yet another opportunity for critical commentary.

Why is she kicking?

Convention

A primary convention common to the action cinema sub-genre proposed here (and one that is extremely problematic over the course of the films) is the explanation of the motivation for violence. In order for a violent woman to avoid being labelled monstrous, as in Creed's model, there must be a reason for violence other than an un-localized psychotic rage. According to linear Classical Hollywood form, violence must be explained and justified by legitimate motivation. It is here we can bring up not only Clover and Read's rape-revenge cycle, but also the revenge and professional variations of the western outlined by Wright. Where Read's female avenger is a fantasy of female

empowerment who transforms herself into a force for vengeance, the avenger of Wright's western is a hero who is "directly involved with the villains through his desire for revenge" (69). This involvement with the villainous separates him from society and marks him as different and special. Likewise, Read's avenger is also marked as outside society due to her vengeance quest. While different in representation, the vengeful cowboy and the female avenger's resolution of these violent desires has similar functions in maintaining society's equilibrium by either reclaiming or punishing the hero(ine). Wright's professional cowboy is also marked as outside of society because of his special skills. He is grouped together with other talented outsiders in an elite new society. Characters such as the detectives in *Charlie's Angels*, the assassins in *So Close* and the samurai prostitutes in *Sin City* belong to elite professional groups similar to those of Wright's professional gunfighters.

The *Hot Girl Kicking* films frequently use the revenge structure; however, due to the heroine's professional status, personal revenge is never an exclusive motivation for the *Hot Girl Kicking*. This results in a distance from rape as a threat. While female fighters can be victims of rape, as is the Bride in *Kill Bill Volume 1*, it is never the exclusive motivation for her violence and therefore it is never as immediate a threat as in rape revenge films. This theoretical/generic treatment of rape in no way suggests that the violence and trauma of rape can be rendered unimportant or resolved; however, it does point to the possibility that the female action heroine is not limited to her role as rape victim, because even when victimized she is still a professional with a job to complete.

Another convention offered up as motivation comes in the form of the "origin story", a staple borrowed from comic books. The origin story, such as that of O-Ren in *Kill Bill Volume 1* and each of the women in *Charlie's Angels*, offers background

information (often stylized and brief) of the reasons for choosing violence as a profession. In addition, over the course of the film, the protagonist is repeatedly asked versions of : "what's a nice girl like you doing in a violent job like this?". Spectators and supporting characters alike are fascinated by the answer to this question, which hangs over the structure of the films as well as their narratives, suggesting that the drive for legitimate motivation, as in more "realist" representations of violence, is still part of the action film in postmodernity. With the motivations of the heroine under constant scrutiny, it makes sense that another convention of these films, and in most action and martial arts films, is the training sequence. This sequence, frequently shot in flashback, shows the heroine in the process of her construction as warrior woman. These sequences will be examined in detail with respect to individual films in later chapters, but the important conventional element is that the training sequence explains the motivations behind the violence of the *Hot Girl Kicking*. She is constructed. She builds herself, as in *Tomb Raider*, she trains, as in *Elektra*, or she is scientifically engineered, as in *Resident Evil* (Anderson & Howes 2002). The training sequences of these films are visual signifiers of this construction process and function to expose the process to closer inspection.

Working It Out: Syntax

The narrative structures common to the films rely on serialization and fragmentation. Rather than organizing the action into a large character-driven classical Hollywood narrative, the postmodern action film structures itself episodically. The episodes, broken down by inter-titles in the *Kill Bill* films, are a key factor to structural organization. The segmentation of classical Hollywood narrative is also inspired by patterns based on comic books, television programmes and video games. This way of

telling the story of violent womanhood complements the spectacles throughout the course of the films.

Distilled down to a very basic pattern, the films can be seen as a triptych of fights. The first fight (or series of fights) allows the heroine to prove herself and surprise those around her. The heroine always wins the first fight and her victory explains her motivations, investigates her psychology and demonstrates her abilities. An example of this occurs in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* when the aristocratic heroine, Yu Jen disguises herself in order to steal the Green Destiny sword from the famous swordsman, Li Mu Bai. Dressed in black, she faces both Mu Bai and his potential lover, Shu Lien, surprising them both with her Wudan inspired fighting techniques. Jen wins the fight and through it we come to understand her restless nature, her desire to be free and her unwillingness to be controlled. This initial victory provides a showcase for Jen's personality as well as her martial abilities. It also sets up the dynamic of the personal relationships between the three principal characters: Mu Bai, Shu Lien and Jen. In another introductory fight, this time in *Tomb Raider*, Lady Lara Croft faces off with a homicidal robot. The sequence showcases Lara's fighting abilities and the archaeological setting communicates her profession (raider of tombs). The fight ends in the revelation that this is simply a training exercise and not a real fight, thereby establishing the parodic tone of the rest of the film.

The second fight is always a loss, or at the very least a Pyrrhic victory. In addition to the obvious spectacle, the function of this fight is to show the weakness (or fatal flaw) of the heroine. It demonstrates the manoeuvre that she has been unable to successfully master, or the one element of her personality that is preventing her from obtaining her ultimate goal. In many cases, the loss of the second fight represents a reversal of fortune

or betrayal. In the case of Lara Croft, her loss of a mystic puzzle piece and the betrayal by her love interest ends in a brief period of convalescence at a Cambodian Buddhist temple.⁹ A function of this midway cycle of fight(s) is to add another element to the spectacle of the heroine: bodily suffering. Rikke Schubart in her article, "Passion and Acceleration: Generic Change in the Action Film", outlines a key change in contemporary action cinema. Whereas the suffering body is the lynch pin of the muscular action cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, the videogame inspired films of the 21st century focus instead on a constant acceleration where suffering no longer carries the same connotations. Firstly, Schubart outlines a Christian masochistic tradition which hinges on the suffering body of Christ. This tradition presents the heroic male body simultaneously as a reviled scapegoat and a revered sacrificial idol. Through the ritual beating of the hero, the spectator witnesses him transcend his physicality and separate himself from it, thus ensuring that "identification is with the hero as victim, not victor" (197). The masochism based structure of suffering leads to redemption, whereas the acceleration based model assures total obliteration. Action heroines such as the Bride in *Kill Bill*, Selene in *Underworld* and Mei in *The House of Flying Daggers* (Zhang 2004), operate under a combination of Schubart's two models of suffering.

The Bride, Selene and Mei suffer as the male action hero suffers, in the name of redemption and transcendence from the corporeal. However, the films featuring these women differ from Schubart's passion model because of their episodic structures based on repetitive spectacle. Although Schubart claims that the acceleration model of action cinema delights in empty movements and will ultimately collapse from exhaustion, the female action heroine appears to be less vulnerable than her male counterparts to spectacle related fatigue. For example, the violent movements of the Bride in *Kill Bill* are

what lead to her goals and she never tires in her pursuit of them. Films such as *Resident Evil* use the accelerated pacing to draw a line between male and female characters: Alice never tires, whereas most of the male characters do.

The accelerated suffering of the action heroines is also differentiated from the suffering of other female characters in several other genres. Because of her role as the controlling force of the narrative and her status as professional fighter, the wounded female body of the action heroine is clearly separated from situations of domestic abuse. Her suffering is not passive. She is not being abused but is involved in a fair (or at least equal) fight from which she learns. The suffering allows her to perfect her martial skills. However, the spectre of domestic abuse cannot totally be separated from the suffering of the female action heroine. An examination of a large cross section of action films featuring female fighters reveals that fights are bound by certain rules to ensure that the spectator does not become uncomfortable with the suffering of the heroine. The fights are always equal matches, unless the heroine is fighting a *female* villain. A male adversary rarely hits or kicks the heroine in the face. The middle, lost fight, is rarely shot in "real time", favouring instead disoriented and stylized fast or slow motion. The suffering of the action film uses excessive stylization to remove the heroine's suffering from its real world referent. When shown with different techniques, the spectacle of a man beating a woman in a losing battle (represented by this second series of fights) disrupts the pleasure of the spectator, facing him or her with images of violence coded as more disruptive than the "cartoon violence" (Gallagher 201) of mainstream action cinema.

After being humbled by the losses of the second fight, the heroine can come into her full power during the final fight. The final fight is the culmination of all earlier fights. It is generally the longest, the most spectacular and the most important. In the final fight,

the heroine tests the lessons she has learned from her victories and her defeats. She faces down a singular villain who stands in the way of her goal. In this final fight, there is more at stake than in previous fights; in this fight the heroine almost dies. This fight also confronts the heroine with her greatest fear or weakness which she proves herself able to conquer. Within each individual fight episode there occurs a basic pattern consisting of:

1. Entrance
2. Pose
3. Fight
4. Pose
5. Exit

While each fight repeats this basic structure, they do so with variation. While the fights are all in service of the overall spectacle of the film, they perform varying functions in the service of the narrative and in providing information about character psychology.

Fighting can also be a substitution for familial resolution, for sex, or for female bonding.

Later chapters offer a close analysis of specific fights and their functions. This structure provides a base for approaching the chapters that follow.

IMPLICATIONS

Over the course of the thesis, I progress from chapter to chapter dealing closely with the structural and functional concepts outlined above. Beginning in chapter II with the postmodern action cinema of the mainstream, in films such as *Charlie's Angels*, *Resident Evil* and *Elektra*, I focus on a pre-occupation with the female body and its construction. The excesses that are part of this manufacture put pressure on the system of classical Hollywood form. While these films, and their gender and genre play, do not offer a vision of femininity free from patriarchal strictures, they do represent a step towards a break with old systems. Chapter III deals exclusively with the film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and offers a close analysis revealing an interconnected matrix of

transnational exchange and cultural translation that has become an integral part of the action cinema in recent years. The addition of martial arts (and Asian genres in general) to the action cinema has shifted the way it represents violence and the female action heroine performing that violence.¹⁰ In chapter IV, I deal with the longest and most exaggerated example of the postmodern action cinema, Quentin Tarantino's two volume *Kill Bill*. I consider the film in light of the body centred discourse of chapter II and the transnational hybridity of chapter III. As the site of female heroism moves outward from the body to the postmodern global stage, the phenomenon of the *Hot Girl Kicking* expands and becomes more than a cycle or a conventional character but an entire hybrid sub-genre. This sub-genre of the postmodern action cinema reconsiders the way the cinema structures femininity, violence and stories which combine the two. Through excesses, the films demand that the spectator critically examine the pleasures and disruptions offered by a cinema of structured spectacles.

CHAPTER II:

THE BODY OF THE HOT GIRL KICKING:

Engineering the Perfect Woman in Popular U.S. Action Cinema

The 2000 action film remake, *Charlie's Angels* (McG 2000) is representative of a recent proliferation of action films featuring female protagonists. Director McG's violent/comedic film combines violence and hyper-sexuality with postmodern parody. This chapter charts the visual process whereby the action heroine is designed and constructed in mainstream Hollywood and addresses the postmodern pressures at play in her narratives. It is my contention that these films are unique and represent a shift in the way Hollywood thinks of gender identity, as realized through its relationship to violence. Violence in these films is a catalyst for commenting on the artificiality of gender boundaries and represents, what postmodern theorist Frederic Jameson would call a *coupure*(1) or rupture with past Hollywood violent women and current action films starring male protagonists. This rupture is written on the body of the action heroine. The following chapter will therefore interrogate the films' representations of the action heroine's unique bodily perfection, and its ramifications.

Different From the Boys:

As a jumping off point the action heroine can be described in terms of what she is not, i.e. in comparing her with her male action hero counterpart and with prototypical violent women from other influential genres. A comparison offers insight into the functions and effects of her presence onscreen and can aid in separating the action

heroine from violent women and men in other films. An examination of representations of the heroine's perfect body also strengthens the heroine's status as a distinctive postmodern hybrid assembled from elements of other violent male and female characters. This postmodern hybrid uses its constituent parts in excess in order to produce the image of a female body whose violent make-over is the central concern of the narrative. These excesses draw attention to the process of making a woman's body and to all the ways in which that process can be contrived, faked and imitated. Essentially these films are unique in their simultaneous investment in (and subversion of) ideas of female bodily perfection.

In emphasizing the body-centred construction of womanhood, I do not mean to suggest that the male action hero exists independent of discourses centred on the body but rather I wish to reinforce the different functions of the male and female body in the Hollywood action genre. In general, films about warrior women are more erotically charged, scavenge from several genres for their iconography and rely more heavily on the conceptual framework of postmodernism (including fracturing, pastiche, parody, difference, self reflexivity and intertextuality). The body of the warrior woman is excessive on more levels than that of the male warrior – erotic, generic, as well as violent. While the naked display of tortured masculinity, as described by Yvonne Tasker¹¹, suggests an "I can take it" mentality of the Christian masochist tradition, the body of the woman is always already sexualized, objectified and suffers not only from the tortures inflicted by the story of the film, but by those who layer her suffering with fetishization.

Postmodern action heroines represent not only a departure from the male driven action cinema, but also from previous genres starring violent women, such as the erotic thriller or the *femme fatale* of film noir. Earlier films provide the language of pastiche

informing postmodern films such as *Charlie's Angels*, *Tomb Raider* and, most recently, *Sin City*. These films layer on signifiers of femininity to such an extent that womanhood borders on the monstrous or comedic and in all cases, excessive. The women of these films are uber-glamazons and this excess is reflected in the films: their bodies, and the spectacle of them visiting violence upon enemies, are hyper eroticised and fetishized through close up and slow motion.

Different From the Rest of the Girls

Sherrie A. Inness in *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*, describes a phenomenon of "semi-tough" (31) women from the 1960s and 1970s, such as the original *Charlie's Angels* series and *The Avengers* (1961-1969). Inness sees these programs as "multivalent texts, which, paradoxically, encourage women to adhere to traditional roles and also to challenge them" (32). The main female characters in films such as *Resident Evil*, *Charlie's Angels*, and *Tomb Raider* have a lot in common with Inness' "semi-tough" women. However, the films in which these women appear differ significantly in their self reflexivity, their hyper-exaggeration (to the point of parody) of femininity and their hybridization of genre. The threat of the "semi-tough" woman of the 1960s and 1970s is contained through an "emphas[is on] the importance of femininity and sex appeal for women" (32). The semi-tough action heroine in postmodernity is more difficult to contain, as she borrows from several genres' ruling structures and uses their conventions and iconography in excess in order to break or at least bend the rules. Likewise, the postmodern action heroine uses signifiers of both masculinity and femininity in excess to draw attention to those elements as arbitrary.

However, the legacy of Inness' semi-tough woman has not been completely exorcised. The preference for traditional feminine signifiers is still present in the postmodern action film, despite boundary transgressions. Inness draws attention to the ways in which semi-tough women are held to traditional heterosexual and feminine signifiers, such as Emma Peel's retirement from espionage upon the return of her husband. Similarly, Alex, one of the next generation of *Charlie's Angels*, takes a break from going undercover as a dominatrix and sensual masseuse to make a soufflé for her action hero boyfriend. Even as parody, the reinforcement of traditional feminine roles undermines a truly revolutionary *coupure* with violent women of previous genre films. Alex is genuinely upset at her inability to bake and to create a domestic space for herself and her boyfriend. Just as hybridization allows the action heroine the liberty of exploring the advantages of several genres, it leaves her vulnerable to those genres' shortcomings. Self reflexivity, hybridization and exaggeration do not necessarily break down the semi-tough paradox; however, these tools aid in opening up further possibilities for the action heroine to become the subject (rather than the object) of the action narrative. These excesses also draw attention to themselves as artificial and force a questioning of the stability of genre rules and unity of gender identities.

In order to understand the process of constructing the perfect female warrior, and the difference between *Charlie's Angels* of the 1970s and *Charlie's Angels* of 2000, it is necessary to examine the effect that postmodernity has had on the process of eroticisation and objectification present in films with action heroines. The emphasis on surface in postmodernity focuses extra attention on the bodies of the action heroine and the fracturing of identities creates an unstable (if existent) subject. The result is that the

characters in a film, such as *Tomb Raider* are defined to a greater extent by their surfaces - body, costume and function.

BUILDING THE PERFECT BODY

Building a perfect violent body is accomplished in a variety of different visual ways: genetic engineering, tapping into ancient wisdom, and martial training. At the end of this process and with the aid of tools, the final product emerges as a feminine, powerful, erotic, wealthy, (almost always) white woman whose performance overwhelms the narrative of the film. Inness' semi-tough women "acted tough but also supported society's gender norms" (42); likewise the image of the eroticised violent white action heroine in the 21st century has not broken with society's gender norms but, through an exaggeration of those norms and a combination with graphic violence, put pressure on the systems which regulated them previously. This pressure is starting to create gaps and fissures in the concept of stable gender and genre roles for women. Films such as *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon* and *Kill Bill* have taken this pressure to the breaking point because of their accelerated use of the excesses of pastiche and genre blending and are discussed in further detail in later chapters. The violent and erotic spectacle-driven films of this chapter are the first step towards what *Kill Bill* is able to accomplish: a subversion of classical Hollywood cinema and by extension its imagining of violence and womanhood.

If this perfect body is the site for contestation, how do films such as *Charlie's Angels* accomplish this? And what does it look like? There are certain patterns present in several films belonging to this postmodern hybrid featuring women in active and violent roles. The postmodern action heroine is at the centre of her own story. Her body is often marked by an excess of feminine signifiers, such as long styled hair, high heels and large breasts. She is wealthy enough that she never wears the same outfit twice and has a

mentor or staff to support her violent pastime or profession by providing her with instruction, moral support and high tech gadgets. The postmodern action heroine's body is not masculinized in the same way as the muscular action heroines of the 1980s outlined by Yvonne Tasker in Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema. They are not dressed in military fatigues with muscles bared, but are eroticised by an (over) use of feminine clothing and smaller physiques. Like her male equivalent, the postmodern action heroine is playful. She throws out intertextual one liners to villains and victims, yet unlike the action hero she plays with the performance of gender, toying with the expectations of those observing her. The postmodern action heroine depends upon intertextuality and difference, using discrepancies in identity and performance from previous films and hero(in)es as a joke for the audience alone.

Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle (McG 2003) demonstrates the use of intertextual jokes through the costuming in a brief C.S.I. (Zuiker 2000 -) inspired sequence in which the Angels go undercover as crime scene investigators, complete with the theme song from the prime time television series playing in the background and handy subtitles to help identify the reference. The bodies of the undercover Angels are layered with the iconography of other texts. The representation of the heroines relies on intertextual knowledge and playfully defies expectation even as it gives the audience the tight clothing and one liners it expects from the genre. The spectator is given these tropes and intertextual jokes at an exponential rate, and the effort required to keep up with the playful visual banter of the film creates further postmodern tension on the overriding system of the film.

Role Playing and Costume

One of the most important factors in creating this tension and to the body centred hybridity of the postmodern action heroine is the use of role playing and undercover work. Postmodern action heroines demonstrate a tendency to go under cover (especially in eroticised roles such as prostitutes and strippers) at a dizzying rate. Representations of male action heroes seldom use costumes in this way. Where the body of the male action hero, as outlined by Tasker, is shown as naked spectacle, frequently topless and tortured, the postmodern female action heroine is dressed up in order to serve her spectacle. Clothing, costume and the performance of other feminine roles are crucial to the narrative of the film and to the heroine's representation of bodily perfection. These costume changes are a way of employing masquerade as a literal game of dress up to defy expectation and use the easy identification associated with costuming to the advantage of the heroine. Inness claims that

Going undercover – masquerading as someone else – shows the constructed nature of identity. All is illusion. The constructed nature of the Angels' identities is highlighted; they are not what they seem to be. Their toughness is brought into question because masquerade forces its audience to question the nature of identity (43).

The postmodern action heroine's use of costumes not only shows toughness and identity as illusions, it undermines the unity of the film through inter-textual references. Costumes are pieced together from the surfaces of other cultural texts reinforcing self reflexivity and revealing the illusion of unified identity.

Costumes are key to the playful parody of gender. The hyper-feminized and eroticised nature of these disguises does not simply objectify the women who wear them, but renders transparent the nature of objectification and demands that closer attention be

paid to this process. This is not to suggest that there is necessarily freedom in the Angels' disguises as strippers, masseuses and schoolgirls, but to assert that these costume changes highlight the important role of costuming and clothing in determining femininity in films starring violent female characters.

Science

Another process rendered transparent through the postmodern action film is the role of science in creating the perfect violent female body. *Resident Evil* and *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (Witt 2004) can be seen as the primary examples of this trend, as their narratives visually demonstrate the scientific creation of Alice as the perfect postmodern warrior woman, hybridized with the aid of a deadly virus. Former fashion model Milla Jovovich plays Alice, head of security at the Umbrella Corporation. She has been deliberately infected with the deadly T-Virus in order to transform her into a perfect weapon. In *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*, she confesses to another character that "they did something to me. I barely feel human." The process of her construction is contrasted with Nemesis, a deformed genetically engineered man who underwent the same infection process as Alice. In the final fight with Nemesis, Alice demonstrates the superiority of her perfect body over his monstrous one. She not only defeats him but turns him to her side by appealing to his pre-mutated manhood. The fight scene which frames Alice's small body next to Nemesis' super human one confirms that victory belongs to the meticulously shaped form performing violence with perfected flair rather than brute masculine strength, and size. The martial victor is shown to be the more beautiful spectacle, rather than the bigger, more muscular body.

The final fight sequence between Alice and Nemesis also draws attention to the role of violence in the construction of the perfect woman. In this case (as in the majority

of the films discussed here) violence is a catalyst for self realization. It sets in motion debates on what it means to be a woman and, because it is an integral part of identity in the postmodern action cinema, it becomes a function of perfected womanhood. The violent woman is not perfect in spite of being violent, but because of her violence.

Frederic Jameson, in his seminal work Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, describes postmodernism as a violent *coupure* with past ways of thinking and doing. The effect of the (graphic) violence in these films is to create a rupture and visualize the possibility of Jameson's *coupure*. Violent women in previous films have never been violent in the same way, at the same pace and for the same reasons as in the films discussed here. However, Claudia Herbst in "Lara's Lethal and Loaded Mission: Transposing Reproduction and Destruction," has noted that it is important not to assume that violence and empowerment are interchangeable. Violence is not simply a direct and unproblematic method for achieving subjectivity, power and narrative control. Herbst asserts that, "[t]he potential for violence and equality should not be equated as violence undermines the structure necessary for equality to flourish" (41). Yet the violence onscreen bares little resemblance, if any, to its real world referent. It is a function driven spectacle in much the same way as a choreographed song and dance number within the musical genre. Despite the dangers (pointed out by Herbst) in assuming that violence always ensures and refers to power, the violence commanded by the female protagonist is the central spectacle of the film. It is a catalyst for her (violent) refusal to belong to traditional femininity and to her (violent) assumption of narrative control and bodily excess.

The symbiotic relationship between violence and science in creating a woman is represented directly in Luc Besson's science fiction film, *The Fifth Element* (1997). LeeLoo,

coincidentally played by Milla Jovovich, is a human shaped alien known as “the fifth element” or, the perfect being. She is sent to Earth in order to use her perfect body to save humanity from a malevolent planet-destroying force. Ultimately her body is a puzzle piece, which fits into a large machine with four other elements to activate a giant weapon. Her body, specifically its status as “the perfect being”, is the trigger mechanism, thus demonstrating the interdependency between perfection and violence. Perfection, in *The Fifth Element*, is inseparable from violence. As a function of her status as the fifth element, Leeloo is able to download information and skills at an accelerated pace. In one sequence, she downloads the “martial arts” section of an encyclopaedia. This is followed by a spectacular fight in which she demonstrates her newly acquired skills. The interface between body and violence is transparent for Leeloo, and she is a clear example of this trend in the postmodern action cinema.

Using science to tamper with womanhood can also backfire and create a monstrous genetically engineered woman, as proven by the homicidal alien hybrid created in *Species* (Donaldson 1995). Sil is a genetically engineered human-alien hybrid created in isolation by scientists. When Sil’s biological clock kicks in, it drives her to sexually pursue men and destroy them in the process of mating. The centrality of Sil’s hybrid body and monstrously aggressive sexuality is an example of the ways in which hybridity can push the boundaries of the monstrous/dangerous and the perfect/attractive. While Alice protects men, Sil destroys them. Like a male hero, Alice is able to use her body in the service of her subjectivity and her sexual desire is complimentary to this process. Sil’s identity is bounded by her body’s reproductive needs, and these aberrant desires eclipse her subjectivity completely.

The central character in the comic book adaptation, *Elektra*, is similarly flawed but not as dangerous. Elektra's troubled psyche is as much an obstacle to her as the villains who chase her. She is haunted by nightmares, unable to complete her training and reluctant to be a member of society. Elektra's misfiring brain limits and contains her in much the same way as Sil's alien sexual drive. However, Elektra is able to fight her demons and overcome the flaw in her design to strive towards perfection. Elektra's protection of teenaged Abby and Abby's father gives her focus and facilitates her reintegration into the social world. Alice, Elektra and Sil are hybrids designed to be perfect, or at least more perfect than the average woman, and they are able to accomplish this with varying success.

Many action films use a design process even if they do not show scientists creating the perfect violent woman in a laboratory. *Charlie's Angels*, *Elektra* and *Tomb Raider* present women who have been enhanced by computer generated graphics. The special effects in action films aid the spectacle of the perfect woman. The action heroine is able to perform feats no ordinary woman (or man) could accomplish. The postmodern action heroine is always enhanced, either through genetic engineering, computer generated graphics or through a process of trans-genre retrofit, in order to create an improved woman who would not otherwise exist in nature.

Ancient Wisdom

Science and spirituality are tools in the creation of the perfect violent woman. They serve the same function, and both play a part in what cyborg theorist Donna Haraway, in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, has called cyborg-subjectivity. The cyborg, like the action heroine, is a hybrid, augmented by scientific and spiritual processes. *The Fifth Element* presents this cyborg-subjectivity in the alien character of

Leeloo. She is able to download information at an inhuman rate, and is (re)constructed by a medical computer. She is a perfect being, a hybrid of alien and human who is able to interface so seamlessly with technology that the point of connection becomes invisible. The surface appears perfect, naturalized, and without enhancement because of the invisibility of the technological/biological interface. Haraway claims that cyborg-subjectivity is dependent on the breakdown of boundaries; Leeloo is a realization of this, as she gives the illusion that there are no boundaries in the first place.

Leeloo is not only scientifically made, but a perfect being born of an ancient alien race. She is a hybrid of both the spiritual/historic and scientific processes of bodily design. Her cyborg hybridity is essential to her construction as the perfect being/fifth element within the film. Tapping into ancient wisdom is a motif occurring over several recent action films. It serves the same purpose as genetic engineering in *Species* or *Resident Evil*. The long distant past, shown only as a postmodern experience of pastiche-image, is a place from which feminine strength can be inherited. *Elektra*, *Catwoman* (Pitof 2004) and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (Kuzui 1992) all represent bodily perfection as tapping into an untraceable and dislocated past. The power and wisdom that is handed down to these heroines is not located in any specific time period or place, but rather draws on "the past" as a repository for power that can be attained with the right skills, luck, training or financial investment. Elektra is revived from the dead by an unspecified Asian marital discipline which teaches her to see into the future. Patience Philips becomes Catwoman when she is resuscitated by an ancient breed of Egyptian cat. Buffy is chosen at birth by an ancient power to save the world from vampires and is bestowed with a potential which must be realized through training.

The spiritual process not only draws on the signifiers of the past nostalgically but draws heavily from Asian genre films that rely on spiritually centred training. The past is a generic convention, determined by surface and instantly recognizable. Spirituality is interchangeable with violent enlightenment, and the postmodern action heroine uses the indexical function of spirituality and historical setting to her advantage. The training sequence further illuminates the process begun by engineering or historical/mystical inspiration. As in Asian martial arts films and Western war films, the training sequence is an opportunity to showcase several types of spectacle simultaneously: the erotic spectacle of a near naked body, violent skills; and the spectacle of generically layered pastiche recalling the conventions of previous training montages. The training sequence is the moment when all of the excesses of the postmodern action heroine are concentrated; so much so, that they stop the narrative and exist outside of it. These montages provide moments of the greatest tension for the system of genre and the stability of violent female identity.

Buffy The Vampire Slayer and *Elektra* both employ training sequences staged in places reminiscent of Asian genre films, such as the samurai film and the Chinese swordplay film. *Elektra*, dressed in a white robe, learns to fight in an isolated compound and *Buffy* learns stake throwing and kickboxing in a hidden warehouse. However, unlike other training sequences in action films starring men (whether Eastern or Western) the postmodern female action heroine enters her training with the process already in progress. Where the male action hero or martial artist comes to be trained by a master with nothing but his tenacity to recommend him, the female martial artist has something more to begin with. This "something more" is the process of scientific and/or spiritual

engineering which is at work building her body as an idealized image of violent feminine perfection.

Alexa, the savvy wilderness guide in *Alien Vs. Predator* (Anderson 2004) is an example of this process. She arrives on the scene as an accomplished survivalist and adventurer. She is the leader of the group of arctic archaeologists who discover an ancient subterranean pyramid-arena housing the war between two alien races, the Predators and the Aliens. Alexa's skills are pre-formed when the story begins. She is set up at the start of the film as more knowledgeable than the rest of her team. Although she perfects her skills through her contact with the Predator she nonetheless arrives on the scene with the ability to survive, unlike the other members of the exploration party. Similarly, Elektra arrives at her training with the raw potential and power to become a perfect warrior. While her training is the final step in achieving perfection of bodily performance, without the power she initially possessed, she would have been unable to train effectively.

Another phenomenon associated with the attainment of bodily enhancement for the postmodern female action heroine is the distribution of personality characteristics over several characters rather than a single protagonist. *Charlie's Angels'* three main characters are the most obvious example. Rather than commit to one image of the heroine, the film multiplies the spectacle and explores several alternatives. As the voice over in *Charlie's Angels* tells the spectator, "once upon a time there were three very different little girls, who grew up to be three very different women". We are able to observe violence fractured across three different bodies, and we are able to view alternative construction processes three different times: Dylan is the heavy metal obsessed rebel, Natalie the fast driving jeopardy champion and Alex is the wealthy athlete and

astronaut. In addition to observing several bodies being built, this diffraction reduces the action heroine to a type – rebel, goofy sex kitten or rich bitch – definable through, and limited by, surface signifiers.

When the perfect female body emerges over the course of the films' narratives, it demonstrates a postmodern over-valuing of surfaces. Showcasing these bodies draws attention to the artificiality and transparency of gender roles. These women are not naturalized; rather, the interface with technology is invisible as in *The Fifth Element* and always already constructed as in *Resident Evil*. By revealing the smoke and mirrors behind the construction process, the postmodern action film demystifies and interrogates the body of the active woman.

MARKS OF DIFFERENCE

In the journey towards bodily perfection undertaken in these films, the body of the action heroine deals with various marks of difference which separate her from her male predecessors and from the rest of the characters in the film. Because of the emphasis on difference rather than otherness in postmodernity¹², marks of difference are not contained by the fact that the action heroine is woman. She is not the "Other" in terms of gender alone, but is marked as different in several ways, such as class, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation. This is not to suggest that all postmodern action heroines are marked with all (or any) of these signs of difference, but that the (re)definition of periphery/margin is central to the narratives and representational issues of the postmodern action cinema.

In terms of class, the postmodern action heroine is almost always a woman of independent means. Without significant financial backing the action heroine could not afford the wardrobe, accessories and lethal gadgets so integral to the construction of violent womanhood. Lady Lara Croft, the obscenely wealthy aristocrat heroine of the

Tomb Raider films, is the most obvious example. She has unlimited money and time at her disposal and this is integral to her success as an action heroine. It allows her the luxury of pursuing “tomb raiding” as a profession, which in turn is what drives the narrative of the film and provides all of its opportunities for showcasing violence and the female body. Yet the wealthy postmodern action heroine also moves in less affluent circles in order to accomplish her violent goals. Her status as heroine requires that she be familiar, if not friendly with the lower classes – they provide her with information and safe passage through the underworlds where criminals hide. Tasker spends significant time describing the status and function of the black informant in action films,¹³ but this informant is also written in terms of class. The action heroine’s gender identity makes for a different relationship with the lower classes and criminal informants. While she is as violent a threat as the male action hero, she is also able to earn the trust of the lower classes through their readings of her body as desirable, fetishized and non-threatening. Read against the underworld of racial and class difference, the postmodern action heroine is still coded as “different” in terms of her gender identity. The action heroine is able to navigate between the centre and the periphery, taking advantage of both, through the marks of difference which are written on her body and by her ability to read those marks on the bodies of others.

Ethnicity is the most visible marker of difference written on the body of the postmodern action heroine and those around her. As stated earlier, the action heroine is almost always white and her whiteness is part of the discourse surrounding the perfection of the body. However, just as the postmodern action heroine must be able to cross class differences in order to pursue her (violent) goal, she must be able to navigate ethnic differences. It is becoming a trend in the action cinema to show action heroines of non-

white ethnicity, such as Alexa, the heroine of *Alien Vs Predator*, Alex in *Charlie's Angels*, Patience in *Catwoman* and Rain in *Resident Evil*. Under the fracturing of postmodernity the action heroine is open to non-white ethnicities. This trend is especially true of those narratives featuring several main female characters. *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* is an example which reads as a commentary on ethnicity and class. The evil Umbrella Corporation is run by blonde, blue eyed men with unspecified European accents, while those left behind in Raccoon City at the mercy of the zombies are all marked as other in some way. The group around which the film centres features two white women, one latina woman, two black men, one Italian/Israeli man and a disabled child. This group navigates the urban hell of plague-ridden zombies for the majority of the film. The film is not subtle in its commentary on the white-run Umbrella Corporation's treatment of those marked as different. The multi-cultural populist group emerges to counteract the evil perpetrated by the Umbrella Corporation in their scientific experimentation. It needs to be stressed that despite this comment on urban otherness, the film revolves around the genetically engineered perfection of Alice's white body – and it is her heroics which save the group from the zombies and the corporation. The postmodern action film cannot quite break the boundaries established by the genre between the centre and the periphery, despite its inclusion of those marked as other.

Another boundary that cannot be punctured in these postmodern films, despite an overloading through excess, is that of sexual orientation. Theorists debating the action cinema, such as Yvonne Tasker and Jeffrey Brown have referred to the negotiation of heterosexuality with respect to the action hero(ine). The action hero (as an erotic male spectacle) has his heterosexuality re-affirmed through the figure of the love interest. This solution does not quite resolve the perceived threat or sexual titillation of homosexuality

for the female action heroine, who exists on a more porous border between sexual orientation(s). The body of the female action heroine is eroticised as spectacle but in a manner not entirely similar to the male action hero. Because she is always already an eroticised object, her heterosexuality cannot simply be re-established through a love interest. Her relationship to spectators (diegetic and non) is open to more readings than her male equivalent. As Tasker notes, part of the appeal of the bodily spectacle of the action heroine is her perceived sexual availability, and for this reason a heterosexual coupling at the end is not always successful at resolving any questions of sexuality and objectification. This can be seen in the fact that the majority of the films discussed in this chapter conclude with their heroines remaining single or in a platonic group, despite the presentation of a love interest of either sex.

Female villains in action films are not bound by the same rules as heroines and their sexuality is therefore more difficult to contain. The female villains of postmodern action cinema are frequently coded as homosexual or bi-sexual and are shown aggressively pursuing the female protagonists. Given the importance assigned to the body and sexuality of the action heroine, it is logical that the villain should attempt to possess the source of the heroine's power: her body.

The lesbian villain's aggressive attempts at owning the action heroine's body is a very common trope in postmodern action films. Tasker discusses the muscular cinema of the 1980s and brings up the example of the fantastic epic, *Red Sonja* (Fleischer 1985), whose titular heroine is sexually threatened by evil Queen Gedren. Tasker claims that *Red Sonja* is one of the first films to "explicitly invoke lesbianism" (29). Recent films have used this stereotyping of villainous homosexuality liberally. In *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* the ex-Angel villain makes repeated sexual advances towards Natalie. Likewise,

Typhoid, a villain in *Elektra*, sucks the life force out of Elektra by kissing her in eroticised slow motion. The “threat” of lesbianism becomes a spectacle for the audience combining violence and sexuality while allowing the heroine to retain sexual availability. This troubling representation of homosexuality as a perverse characteristic of the villain and as a fetishized spectacle reinforces traditional gender norms, while at the same time questions the slippery borders of sexual orientation.¹⁴ As Tasker observes, “[L]esbian desire...represents the voicing of an often unspoken, if central, term in discourses of the action heroine” (Tasker 29). What is left unspoken by the action heroine is the possible subjective freedom to pursue a desired sexual partner.

In addition to using the stereotype of the lesbian-villain, both *Charlie’s Angels* films play on lesbian desire (or at least the performance of lesbian desire) as a spectacle to distract and delight male audiences. The physical interactions between the three women hints at a not quite chaste relationship. They are not represented as having genuine homosexual desire, but use the possibility of this desire as another bodily excess presented for the benefit of their spectators. It is significant to note that the films use this titillation in a self-reflexive manner, presenting the Angels as strippers and belly dancers whose erotic performances reference the homoerotic sub-text of the original 1970s television series and other policewoman films while incidentally serving the Angels’ goals as private investigators. These undercover sequences suggest that the action heroine’s use of the male fantasy of lesbian desire serves her goals (distracts her enemies) but not her sexual desires. Tasker draws a parallel with the male action cinema hero in saying, “like the male hero, it seems that the action heroine cannot be in control of an adult sexuality” (138). Although the postmodern action heroine can use her (homo)sexuality to pursue her goals, she is barred from a fully subjective realization of homosexual desire.

The "evil" lesbian villain threatening the "good" heterosexual heroine is a phenomenon of a genre which overvalues heterosexuality as a stabilizing force. Likewise, the presentation of an eroticised female friendship demonstrates a performance of lesbian desire created not for the benefit of the women, but for the male spectator. While much of the excess of the postmodern action heroine provides a point of tension in the system of traditional gender norms, issues of sexual orientation are still very much in line with the Hollywood status quo.

Class, ethnicity and sexual orientation in the cinema of the postmodern action heroine are significant when considering Tasker's view that a new margin must be established when the marginalized move to a central position. According to Tasker, those marked as different can become the centre of the film in comparison with other characters who are *more* peripheral. Tasker points to the film *Fatal Beauty* (Holland 1987) which establishes margins which are marked as other compared to the black heroine. This periphery has to be less "acceptable" than the new centre and therefore the underworld of *Fatal Beauty* is made up of

a range of grotesque stereotypical figures against which she can then be defined – an overweight white queen who deals in drugs, a naked and insanely giggling Asian worker in a drugs factory, along with a whole array of vicious white punks (37).

The centre-periphery re-alignment in the films of the postmodern action heroine is similar, especially when considering the above arguments regarding ethnicity, class and sexual orientation. The bodily perfection represented by the white female action heroine is pictured against the perverse lesbianism of female villains, such as Madison (in *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*) and Typhoid (in *Elektra*), and also the scientific evil of the European male scientists in *Resident Evil*.¹⁵

This evolving relationship between the centre and the marginalized can be seen in *Resident Evil* with the character of paramilitary soldier, Rain Ocampo, played by Michelle Rodriguez. Rain is defined not only against the new periphery of the zombies but against the male members of the paramilitary team - none of which survive as long as she does. Rain is also contrasted directly against Alice, whose whiteness is part of her genetically enhanced bodily perfection. Rain, a postmodern action heroine, occupies a middle space. She is not as limited as the policewoman in *Fatal Beauty*, but is not able to reach the privileged position granted to Alice. In her article, "Más Macha: The New Latina Action Hero," Mary Beltran describes Rain's survival in terms of the progress of the ethnic action heroine:

Living almost until the end is a sign of progress in a genre in which Latinas formerly were only included as victims to be saved by heroic white male counterparts, or as ensemble members created almost solely for the sacrifice they would offer to the cause held by the (white) survivors (196).

Despite the shift of margin/centre relationship, it is Rain who dies and Alice who lives. Rain's muscular and masculine coded/clothed body is held up to Alice's traditional femininity (and cocktail dress) and suffers for the comparison.

Postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon claims that "de-centring" (57) of postmodernity is not a breakdown of the old order, but a challenge to how we judge that order and its concepts of stability and coherence. Films such as *Resident Evil* do not break with the system of genre, but point out the instability and negotiability of difference in postmodernity. Hutcheon claims that, "[t]he centre may not hold, but it is still an attractive fiction of order and unity" (60). The postmodern action heroine does not dismantle the tropes of "acceptable" femininity as is witnessed in the treatment of ethnic difference and sexual orientation. However, several of these films do bring attention to

the process of construction and thereby demand that the spectator consider the illusion as an illusion.

REPERCUSSIONS

Manufacturing the perfection of the female body through violence and under postmodernity has several repercussions, not only for discourses of feminism but also for the negotiation of genre as a category. The main effect of this quest for the ideal is: if the body is always central and at stake, then the body is always in danger. It is for this reason that the threat and representation of rape is a recurring motif in the action cinema, not only in female-centred films but in the rescue stories of the male action cinema. The body as over-valued subject/object of the narrative is a powerful symbol whose possession is sought by any means necessary by heroine, hero and villain. Jacinda Read in The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle describes films which focus entirely on the threat and reverberations of rape. The postmodern action cinema differs from Read's cycle but is informed by its syntax. Although rapes are rarely shown onscreen, they remain an often unnamed presence. Rape is a constant reminder of what the action heroine stands to lose if she is defeated. Tasker draws a comparison with male heroes, saying:

This is a set of genres, after all, in which the hero is constantly subject to physical violence. For women this physical vulnerability is easily mapped onto the sexualised violence of rape (151).

Essentially, the result of designing and investing in the perfection of the violent female body is that rape is always present; however, the heroine's status as a professional informs her reaction to this threat.

Another conclusion to be drawn is the primacy of surfaces. Under the model discussed above, the surface of the body (its clothing, visible marks of difference, etc.) is the most important determining factor for its perfection. This means that surface is (over)valued and the female subject is judged and limited accordingly. The eugenics at play in the postmodern action cinema judge by facade, disregarding authenticity and originality as incidental and unimportant. The violent woman is a self aware simulacra, a hybrid composition of genre and gender signifiers. Her excessive superficiality is integral to her perfection and the ramifications are that she is judged by surface alone, unable to access complex character psychology and is limited to type.

The narratives of the postmodern action heroine are deeply invested in constructing an image of bodily refinement. This wealthy, beautiful, generally white, straight woman is visually assembled by the film, which in turn draws considerable attention to the process of this construction. Demonstrating white wealthy heterosexual womanhood as perfection is not emancipatory or system-shattering by any means. However, the postmodern action heroine employs excesses and hybridity and plays with intertextuality to such an extent that it causes problems for the system of genre and classical Hollywood style and structure. While this is not the revolutionary postmodern *coupure* imagined by Jameson or the poetics envisioned by Hutcheon, it is a marked step in a new direction – one which offers greater options for female subjectivity.

CHAPTER III:

THE TRANSNATIONAL HOT GIRL KICKING:

Translation and Hybridization in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

"*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a kind of dream of China, a China that probably never existed, except in my boyhood fantasies in Taiwan." – Ang Lee¹⁶

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is Ang Lee's affectionate art house homage to the *wu xia* (or historical swordplay) genre. Its complex plot tells the stories of three principal characters: Yu Jen the aristocrat who moonlights as a vigilante, Li Mu Bai the famous swordsman who would teach Jen the Wudan martial discipline and Yu Shu Lien, owner of a reputable security firm and long time friend and frustrated lover of Mu Bai. The film makes use of many of the conventions of *wu xia*: a secret Taoist manual, a villain with poison darts and the master/student martial arts relationship. The iconography of the film fits the genre as well: a stolen sword, black masks and the film's setting in the *Jianghu*¹⁷ underworld of historical China. However, to categorize or analyze *Crouching Tiger* based only on these surface attributes is an oversimplification. The film is not a re-creation of the *wu xia* genre but a re-interpretation based on cross cultural translations. Lee's film contains elements of swordplay films and also of the melodrama, the western and the women's picture. *Crouching Tiger* does not offer a story belonging exclusively to ancient China, but a postmodern hybrid of Eastern and Western genres. Taiwanese-Chinese-American director Ang Lee's "dream of China" scavenges elements from a global experience of cinema.

Hybridization and Hyphenation: The Misleading Excess of Surfaces

Ang Lee has been consistently addressed in terms of his personal relationship to his film texts. On the one hand, Lee uncovers the tensions of modern Asian families in films such as *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) while on the other he delves into the familial trials of historical America in *The Ice Storm* (1997), *Ride with the Devil* (1999) and the Jane Austen adaptation, *Sense and Sensibility* (1995). In their article "Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee", Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung summarize the Western reception of Lee's Western historical dramas saying, "No article or interview about *Sense and Sensibility* passes without some comment about Ang Lee's difference of identity from the understood identity of the film" (214).¹⁸ It would seem that Lee's ethnicity and nationality are interpreted by the West as tied to his authenticity in telling stories about the past.

Given this attention, it is surprising that Lee's relationship (as Taiwanese-American¹⁹) to his mainland Chinese historical epic has remained, for the large part, unaddressed. Western audiences and critics assume a translation of cultures occurs in an Asian director's perception of the Western past, but not necessarily in the same director's interpretation of the Asian past. This (inadequate) conclusion is based on a surface reading of Lee's films, which confuse ethnic background with generic experience: *Crouching Tiger* is seen as part of Lee's "cultural roots" (Lee, Liner Notes for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) and his authority over the text is naturalized because of this. In making this point I am not assuming a unified Western view of Lee's film, but am interested in highlighting these patterns in order to consider the ramifications of an overly simplified generic reading of a hybrid text. Arguably, Lee's *Crouching Tiger* is as much a cross cultural interpretation as *Sense and Sensibility*. Leon Hunt, in *Kung Fu Cult Masters*,

supports this view in his description of *Crouching Tiger* as "Jane Austen seemingly let loose in *jianghu*" (184). Hunt further discusses the process of multinational hybridization at the industrial level by describing the film as an international effort which combines

an émigré Taiwanese director, a script produced by an ongoing process of translation between Chinese and American writers, two stars and a choreographer from Hong Kong, one Taiwanese and one Mainland star (Hunt 182).

Crouching Tiger is realized through the funding and labour of several different countries. To ignore the processes of retrofit, hybridization and translation erroneously assumes unfractured unity of a postmodern transnational text which is invested in subverting the mythology of wholeness and resolution. It also assumes that because the director is of a certain ethnicity, his or her text must necessarily have origins there. However, Lee's hyphenated identity complicates logic, even in an auteurist approach.

An auteurist examination further supports my assertion that *Crouching Tiger* is more than a swordplay film. Lee's oeuvre shows a tendency to represent tensions between inner drives and outer forms. In his films, structuring and ordering systems are challenged by their members, especially within the system of the family. The appearance of a unified suburban family (in *The Ice Storm*) and the glory of righteous rebellion (in *Ride with the Devil*) are exposed as ephemeral gloss on top of unrest and complexity. *Crouching Tiger* examines the attractive gloss in Jen's aristocratic identity and, likewise, Mu Bai's position as a dashing swordsman. The romance and privilege are only the surface which covers deep unhappiness and resentment, just as in *Ride with the Devil* and *The Ice Storm*.

*Crouching Tiger*²⁰ puts tension between surface and substance in terms of the surface gloss of *wu xia* combined with art film interpretations of melodrama which is, in

turn, echoed by the characters and through plot conventions unfolding in the narrative of the film. On the surface, Jen is an aristocratic lady but underneath are several other identities: rebellious daughter, lover, student and deadly martial artist. Jen's identity cannot be described without hyphenation. She is not "aristocrat" but lady-fighter-thief-student-rebel-sister-lover. The excess of this hybridization overburdens and cracks the narrative of the film, just as the dissatisfied characters of *Ride with the Devil* and *Eat Drink Man Woman* break away from the systems which bind them.

Crouching Tiger highlights the (mis)translation between surface structuring form and narrative subject matter; however, its self reflexive consideration of genre in this process is taken a step further than Lee's previous work. The film's narrative consideration of literature and its misinterpretation forces the audience to be suspicious of the process of adaptation. The genre of *wu xia* and its conventional setting of *Jianghu* are not only represented in the format of the film, but are debated and discussed by the characters. Jen claims that she was seduced by Jade Fox's stories of *Jianghu* adventures and tells Shu Lien that she wishes to be totally free like the characters of *wu xia*.²¹ Shu Lien corrects Jen's romantic view of the honourable criminal underworld of *Jianghu* by bringing her attention to the less exciting elements of it, such as similar social rules and traditions as mainstream society and sub par bathing arrangements. The reality of Shu Lien's frustrated relationship with Li Mu-Bai also highlights the less than romantic reality beneath the glossy surface of the *Jianghu* lifestyle. The film comments on the seductive power of these images, and shows them to be inauthentic.

Leon Hunt proposes that the differences of opinion regarding *Jianghu* held by Jen and Shu Lien are due to their embodiment of different martial arts genre conventions. Hunt views Shu Lien as representative of the patriarchal kung fu film: "She is smart but

'knows her place'; [she is] respectful of tradition and (male) heroic codes" (138). Jen, on the other hand is part of the swordplay genre, "defined by freedom and mobility, or at least a longing for them" (138). These two opposing heroines (as representatives of genre ideals) fight visually for supremacy. However, Hunt's allegorical argument oversimplifies the relationship between the two women and their narrative roles. Shu Lien does not wholly accept the patriarchy of Kung Fu. She not only runs her own security company but is permitted membership in *Jianghu* -- these are rarities within the genre. Similarly, Jen is something more than the "swordplay queen" (138) that Hunt imagines her to be. Her uncontained anger and sexuality, her unwillingness to subscribe to any ordering system, and her ultimate refusal to belong to the diegetic world (by flying off the bridge at Wudan Mountain at the film's conclusion) contribute to a fracturing of the overall unity of film. Shu Lien and Jen do have a close relationship to genre translation and interpretation, but theirs are roles which comment and deconstruct rather than embody or allegorize.

The translation of literary tropes also has much more spectacular and direct relationship to the action of the film. Fencing, we are told by Shu Lien, is very similar to calligraphy. It is this similarity which allows Shu Lien to see through Jen's aristocratic identity and recognize the martial artist and thief underneath. Jen's ability to read and write is not only a parallel to her prodigious martial artistry, it is also the means by which she learned Wudan's martial secrets. Jen's mentor, Jade Fox, was unable to read the Wudan manual she stole from Mu Bai's master, and so was only able to learn from the diagrams -- from the surface images of the martial art. Her student, Jen, was able to learn the deeper meaning of the text and her progress and skill are much greater than that of her mentor. Literacy, and the ability to understand the meaning beneath the

surface of visual spectacle, is a primary thematic concern to *Crouching Tiger*. The film's diegetic investigation of literature resonates with the genre hybridization lying beneath the surface iconography of *wu xia*. The relationship of literacy to fighting, skill and understanding is presented visually in the communicativeness of the fighting sequences. Only those who can read the fights properly truly understand their meaning and significance and only those who can perceive and critically can be unmask the multiplicity of identities beneath a social and gendered surface.

Time, Tradition & Place : An Excess of the Image of "China"

Issues of translation, adaptation and surface readings can also be applied to a cross cultural reading of *Crouching Tiger*.²² Cultural theorist Rey Chow describes the ways in which the West has read, represented and studied the East, specifically China. She points to a tension between those who study Asian studies and who eschew the analytic tools of the West, and those (like herself) who are attempting to analyze the East with Western tools (in Chow's case, psychoanalysis) because these are the models which seem most appropriate – and because cross pollination is impossible to avoid. I share Chow's assertion that cross pollination of Western theory and Eastern subject matter are unavoidable, for good or ill. In fact, this is an important part of the hybrid and subversive potential of a transnational film like *Crouching Tiger*. The genre overload created by the form and content of *Crouching Tiger* presents a space which contests and fractures unified nostalgic images of China, *wu xia* or Western action film form by the very fact that it is all of these at once and because its narrative, its spectacle and its warrior women challenge unified and stable notions of these throughout the film.

In terms of Western reception and adaptation of Asia, Chow has pointed to an "othering" of China. Chow is not, in this instance, referring to an outright Western racist

view of Chinese culture but rather condemning the “positive, respectful, and admiring feelings for the ‘other’ ... rooted in un-self-reflexive, culturally coded perspectives” (Chow 4). This glorifying of the “Other”/China is a surface reading, which overvalues the objects and sees Chinese history and nationality as offering unmitigated access to an ancient truth unavailable in the West. Chow uses the example of a Western reading of the spiritual principles of Taoism which ignore Chinese historical context and its view of femininity as negativity and silence which “allows its coexistence and collaboration with Confucianism’s misogyny” (9). A ying/yang symbol is not interchangeable with Eastern spirituality just as an expertly presented drop kick cannot give audiences an experience of timeless wisdom and honour. Cinematic images of China as presented in the *wu xia* genre film are extremely vulnerable to this overvaluing of surface readings and objects due to their visual and spectacular natures.

This superficial reading can be found in assigning *Crouching Tiger* the label of swordplay/Kung Fu film. In an evaluation such as this, the iconography of the film takes precedent over all other elements. The magic sword or the masked vigilante comes to reductively signify “swordplay” as well as China. The indexical function of *wu xia* iconography places it within the category which Frederic Jameson has called the “nostalgia film ... or *la mode retro*” (19). Jameson’s model of the nostalgia film describes Lee’s film given its elegiac remembering of childhood genres, objects and settings. These items function as pastiche in a manner unlike action films like *Charlie’s Angels* or *Kill Bill*, as they are deeply rooted to issues of time and place. Fitting with Jameson’s nostalgia film (especially with respect to a Western reading) Lee’s film

restructure[s] the whole issue of pastiche and project[s] it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted

through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation (Jameson 19).

As stated in the quotation which heads this chapter, Lee's film recalls his memory of a mythic Chinese past as presented through the stories of his childhood. The nostalgia in the film is not for China or the *wu xia* genre itself, but for an experience of both in combination and this is expressed not only by Lee through the film, but by his characters directly. *Crouching Tiger's* status as a transnational hybrid object representing the Eastern past to a Western audience shifts Jameson's definition from the "emergent ideology of the generation" to the supposed ideology of a nation, China. Lee's nostalgia for a combination of history and genre runs into problems in the translation, where readings can conflate and confuse the surface of place, history and genre.

The film is open to criticism from theorists such as Chow for just such a spectacular presentation of China and Chinese history. According to Chow, China can be fetishized as representative of a spiritual spectacle or a tradition existing outside of time, thereby offering greater access to truths seemingly forgotten in Western modernity. In this way, China becomes a fetishized Other and, in some respects, fills the functions traditionally held by genres. China becomes generic shorthand for a spiritual place outside of time where warriors can fly and enlightenment is attainable through spectacle. Just as Jen is seduced by Jade Fox's tales of the *Jianghu* underworld, the Western spectator is seduced by the generic surface interpretation of the *wu xia* film.

Chow's condemnation of the process which turns China into a fetishized Other uses the example of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987). This film is an adaptation of a Chinese (his)story by a Western director which uses generic tropes belonging to the historical epic and the biopic. However, the international nature of the

director, crew and funding complicates the strict fetishized view of the China presented in the surface of *Crouching Tiger*. The libidinal overvaluing of the surface of China by Western spectators of *Crouching Tiger* is also problematized by the hybridity of the text (it does not tell a Chinese story in a Western framework), and by the function of its women warriors.

Fighting the "Deadly China Doll" Syndrome: "Excesses of Womanhood"²³

Chow's analysis of *The Last Emperor* highlights a process by which the film feminizes the last emperor, Pu Yi. The feminizing of China itself and the crisis of Chinese masculinity in cross cultural interpretations is a concern to Hunt, Anne Cieko and Yvonne Tasker. Piling signifiers of femininity onto those characters who are marked as Other by their ethnicity distances them further from the power of virile white masculinity. As examples, all of these theorists emphasize the lack of love interests for Asian men in action films produced for Western release. Cieko, commenting on the Hollywood films of John Woo, describes this trend in terms of genre: "By rendering his star sexually unthreatening and literally 'generic' and even parodic, Woo enables Western audience identification...that elides race" (227). Cieko concludes that this removal of the Asian man's sexuality allows the "white, male, young" (227) audiences of the West to accept the Asian action hero more readily, since they do not need to be threatened by his sexuality. This is not exclusive to the films of John Woo, as can be seen in the chaste Western crossover films of stars such as Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon* (Clouse 1973), Chow Yun Fat in *The Replacement Killers* (Fuqua 1998) and Jet Li in *Kiss of the Dragon* (Nahon 2001).

Chow makes a very strong argument for the feminizing of the "Other", drawing on the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva. She describes the othering/feminizing process as

being part of an exchange of looks which puts China in the position traditionally occupied by the objectified woman under the classical Hollywood cinematic apparatus. While Chow points to the problems in Kristeva's arguments, which reinforce the notion of China as "absolutely 'other' and unknowable" (8), she concludes that "[t]he seductiveness of this metaphysics of feminizing the other (culture) cannot be overstated" (9). *Crouching Tiger* resists this feminizing of Chinese men in its unflinching presentation of Chinese men as complex sexual and romantic subjects. First there is the relationship between the desert bandit, Lo, and the swordswoman, Jen. Lo and Jen's relationship is revealed in flashback, and introduced with a lengthy fight sequence. This fight sequence not only provides part of Jen's history, but shows that she and Lo are equals, as signified by their matched martial skills. Lo is not simply an androgynous fighter, feminized by his lack of complex adult sexuality as in Chow's worst case scenarios. While Lo's martial skills are indeed formidable, it is his role as Jen's lover that is the most significant in the film. Lo is the only character in the film to truly come close to understanding Jen's insatiable anger. He understands and respects her intense need for freedom. Lo's character counters Chow's model in his relationship with Jen. Similarly, Mu Bai's role is as unrequited lover, whose sense of honour will not allow the consummation of his relationship with Shu Lien. Mu Bai and Shu Lien's frustrated love affair is presented as the central tragedy of the film. These two worthy members of *Jianghu* are presented as fighting along side one another, as an equal partnership. Lo and Mu Bai's partnerships with women and roles as lovers frustrate the feminization that Kristeva and Chow describe.

Crouching Tiger's representations of Asian womanhood also resists the "othering" and "feminizing" of Chinese culture by Western spectators and cinematic practices. These women, through their violence and their central position in the narrative, fracture gender

binaries that would divide East and West; active and passive; self and other; masculine and feminine. Hunt worries that “[t]he Chinese action heroine is ... vulnerable when crossing cultural and geographic boundaries; specifically to what I shall call ‘Deadly China Doll’ syndrome”(120).²⁴ He claims that the woman warrior can, too often “be appropriated as exotic fetish in the Western Orientalist imaginary” (120). The deadly China doll is endowed not only with martial ability, but with an “excess of womanhood” (120). According to Hunt, these excesses are present in the female characters’ costuming and their combination of martial violence with passive and demure mannerisms. In the previous chapter I described the ways in which the Western postmodern action cinema utilizes costumes, role playing and feminine masquerade to play with the ideas of the artificiality of gender construction. While films such as *Charlie’s Angels* use this exaggeration as a route to subversion, *Crouching Tiger* does not play with gender in quite the same way. Jen and Shu Lien cross the boundaries of masculine/feminine and active/passive through their martial arts practice and through their assumption of central narrative roles, but they are not presented in states of undress or in revealing costumes common to other films (both Eastern and Western) showing violent womanhood. This is a significant shift for the postmodern action heroine. Where earlier women warriors (in Eastern and Western genres) used their sexuality to disarm their foes and in so doing fetishized themselves, the women of *Crouching Tiger* do not do this.

The women of *Crouching Tiger* do not simply resist fetishization and eroticisation universally, but each attempts to create breaks in the patriarchal system in a different way. The strange and tragic history of Jade Fox, Jen’s mentor and the film’s villain, is presented with both melodramatic exaggerations of sentimentality, unlikely reversals and elements of a revenge story structure. Jade Fox murdered Li Mu Bai’s master because he would sleep

with her but would not teach her. She is angry at the system which provides Mu Bai with his martial expertise and would deny her instruction based on her gender. She steals the Wudan manual, learns from its diagrams and passes her knowledge on to her aristocratic charge, Jen. Jade Fox, played by former swordplay star Zheng pei-pei, violently attacks the patriarchal order which denied her education: she poisons her Wudan lover and lives as part of the *Jianghu* underworld. Jade Fox's attempt to fight free of patriarchy is the least successful of all the women in the film, as she is betrayed not only by the men who would take advantage of her and refuse to teach her, but by her own student. A future in which she and Jen are truly free of male strictures is denied to her not only by men but by Jen herself.

Hunt describes Shu Lien as bound by patriarchal tradition, as speaking for a masculine centred version of Kung Fu genre cinema, but Shu Lien's character, and her relationship to genre and structure within the film, is more complex than that of mere spokeswoman. She is not bound by the role of love interest or sidekick to the action hero. Shu Lien is an active agent in the diegetic world set up by the film. She is a professional, contributing member of society, well respected by her peers. Shu Lien is one of the few characters of the film, male or female, who successfully operates within *Jianghu* and also within mainstream, legal society. Her hybrid nature as a bridge between these two worlds allows her a unique opportunity to comment on the limits and borders of each category. Shu Lien also embodies the "middle class" of the film, as she does not share in Jen's aristocratic privilege (or strictures) and is still distanced from the illiterate world of Jade Fox or the police detective and his daughter. Shu Lien comments on the gritty day to day aspects of *Jianghu* while other characters romanticize it as a place of freedom and swordplay. She also cautions Mu Bai that Jen's world of the aristocracy has different rules

from theirs. She implies that there is a hierarchal difference between herself and Mu Bai and Jen.

Upper class Jen is at the centre of the film. All conflict is because of her, whether from her theft of the Green Destiny sword, her flight from her marriage or her refusal to become Mu Bai's student. Jen is angry at the systems which attempt to confine her – be they the underworld of Wudan or the upper world of the aristocracy. She is unfocused and irrational, with unclear motivations. The only consistency in Jen's character is her rejection of patriarchal rules. This rejection is absolute. Mu Bai claims that this obstinacy and unwillingness to be trained will result in her becoming a "poisoned dragon". It is unsurprising that Jen would be suspicious of Mu Bai's offer given her knowledge of Jade Fox's experience with Wudan. Generic conventions of *wu xia* dictate that the central character, in this case Jen, should be taken in hand by a wiser representative of the old order. Through their collaboration, a new order can be formed or the old order reformed. However, Jen refuses any kind of order - new or old.

Jen also rejects the genre convention of the melodrama and *wu xia*, which would see her fixed as part of a happy heterosexual couple. While Jen's sexuality is explored, she will not leave one marriage for another. Instead she refuses marriage altogether, violently fighting containment by any ordering system. Jen fights Mu Bai, Shu Lien, Lo and an entire restaurant full of gang members. She attacks those who would harm her or help her indiscriminately and she delights in the power and movement that her fighting affords her. Jen's fate at the conclusion of the film is her most enigmatic refusal to obey the rules. During the desert flashback Lo tells the story of a young man who wished for the health of his parents and so jumped from the mountaintop where he floated away, content in the knowledge that his wish had been fulfilled. At the ending of the film, with

Mu Bai and Jade Fox dead, Jen throws herself off the top of Wudan Mountain. Her wish and her fate are left ambiguous. Did she wish to restore Mu Bai to life, in order for him to happily marry Shu Lien and teach her Wudan secrets? Did she wish to return to the hedonism of the desert with Lo? Or did she wish for her teacher, Jade Fox to return to life? Given the fractured nature of Jen's identity over the course of the film and her inexplicable violence, the spectator is at a loss to assume that any outcome is more probable than another.

The ambiguity of this conclusion is uncommon to the *wu xia* genre as well as the melodrama and demonstrates Ang Lee's addition of an art cinema practice to his genre hybrid. Jen's jump from Wudan mountain is her final refusal to be considered under genre or gender tropes. A happy ending would have lives restored and marriages performed; a tragic ending would see Jen learning her lesson only for it to come too late. Neither happens. Jen takes herself out of the system and leaves it in pieces behind her. She leaves Lo and the spectator to attempt to assemble meaning under the surface of her final fall/flight. Hunt sees Jen's final gesture as choosing to

remain in flight, resist a fixed identity or space, not fitting neatly here or there. Here, perhaps, is both the fate and the romance of the *wu xia* heroine. She can fly, she can even soar, but she can never really afford to land (139).

Hunt's elegiac reading of Jen's flight at the end is rendered incomplete when Lee's film is considered not as a "pure" example of the *wu xia* genre, but as a transnational hybrid. Hunt, in this case, ignores Jen's narrative drive to resist landing because she knows that landing forces her to live by the rules.

In order to understand the role of women warriors as disruptive forces in *Crouching Tiger*, I will offer a close analysis of two fight sequences. These fights are the

film's most spectacular sequences, in terms of mise-en-scène and cinematography and also in terms of fight choreography. One is the showdown between Jen and Shu Lien in the training compound and the other is the fight which immediately follows between Mu Bai and Jen in the tree tops of the bamboo forest. One fight is between Jen and her potential role model and the other between Jen and her potential teacher. Despite her obvious affection for Shu Lien and her reverence for Mu Bai's martial accomplishments, Jen violently fights their influence. It is clear from these fights that Jen enjoys fighting Shu Lien and Mu Bai. Over the course of the film, Jen repeatedly shows a (socially) disturbing delight in her martial power.

The first fight takes place in Shu Lien's headquarters in the practice grounds for fighters. The stage is set, complete with a central ring and a variety of weaponry set up along the periphery. Jen is armed with Mu Bai's sword, and it is her possession of Mu Bai's sword which begins the fight: "That is Li Mu Bai's sword. Don't touch it," orders Shu Lien. The relationship of the two women to Mu Bai and to one another is complicated by the Green Destiny sword. Shu Lien's wish is to return the sword to Mu Bai, whereas Jen's desire is for the phallic power it affords. For Shu Lien, the sword represents reunion with Mu Bai, perhaps in the formation of a heterosexual couple, yet for Jen the sword represents freedom from the strict aristocratic life she has lead. By extension, the destructive potential of the weapon provides an interesting way to look at both characters' relationship to violence. On the one hand, Shu Lien uses the sword, and violence in general, as a means to earn a living and earn acceptance in Mu Bai's world of *Jianghu*. Whereas, Jen's martial violence is an extension of her all consuming and destructive desire to be free. This opposition is played out over the course of the fight at Shu Lien's house.

Over the course of her fight with Jen, Shu Lien uses every weapon at her disposal in the training grounds. All of them fail under Jen's command of the Green Destiny, and Shu Lien is wounded at the close of the film. The arm wound suffered by Shu Lien is one of the very few instances where blood is shown as part of the fighting. In other instances, the shots of blood are simultaneous with death, for example the head wound inflicted on the police detective. Given the rarity of blood, especially considering the amount of time the film spends in representing violent encounters, it bears noting. The wounding of Shu Lien ends her fighting role in the film and begins her position as mourning lover. She is narratively castrated, denied further kinetic power or an active role in the conclusion of the film. Jen's wounding of her has transformed her spectacle from one of violence to one of blood and tears. Now that Jen has dealt with the threat posed by Shu Lien to her possession of the sword and to her claim to Mu Bai's undivided attention, she can work out her rebellious issues with Mu Bai directly.

Jen struggles against Mu Bai, her only martial superior in the film. During her fight with him in the bamboo forest, the camera punctuates the flashes of swordplay with moments of slow motion close ups and long shots of characters flying through the trees. Mu Bai and Jen, both clad in flowing white robes balance on the treetops. Where Jen's wounding of Shu Lien has communicated her rejection of Shu Lien's example during the previous battle, the ethereal quality of the fight between Jen and Mu Bai communicates the high stakes of the fight and its psychological ramifications. The shots in this sequence are, on average, longer than previous fights and it is played out with the support of wire work, giving a spiritual and supernatural quality to the exchange.

As Mu Bai's economical movements become slower, Jen's movements become less graceful and more agitated. Jen falls from the treetops on several occasions. She is

losing the battle. The two finally set down on a rock overlooking a river. Jen agrees to become Mu Bai's student if he can take the Green Destiny from her in three moves. He does so in one. However, when Jen refuses to kneel before her new master the generic resolution dictated by either *wu xia* or melodrama is frustrated. Jen is robbed of her phallic power, but refuses to accept her position as subordinate to it. Jen's refusals lead to Mu Bai and Jade Fox's deaths, and to her ultimate release from the system of genre and patriarchy.

I am the Invincible Sword Goddess: The Excesses of Martial Arts

The women warriors of *Crouching Tiger* and the spectacles that they command represent a key trend in action heroines of recent cinema: a scavenging of Asian action tropes into Western action cinema and a new kind of violent gendered spectacle. The warrior woman in recent cinema, as described in earlier chapters, is a seasoned professional whose use of violence is never accidental. The importance of the function of martial arts in this respect cannot be underestimated. Martial arts is exactly that, an art which requires training and takes time and effort to perfect. The cinematic woman warrior masters these skills and is able to employ them in her narrative struggles and also in her representational struggles for power and agency.

All recent action heroines included in the *Hot Girl Kicking* films, from *Charlie's Angels* to *Resident Evil*, are martial artists to some extent. The inclusion of martial arts in films about woman warriors has dramatically altered their relationship to violence and aided in changing the action heroine's relationship to her own narrative. Martial arts is also a deciding factor in the way in which these films focus on constructing a perfected, naturalized version of martial womanhood. The generic convention of the training sequence shows the process of this construction visually in the film. This convention is

both a part of Western genres such as the war film, the muscular action film of the 1980s and Eastern genres such as the samurai film and the kung fu film. The training sequence, discussed at length in chapter II, is usually a montage sequence accompanied by music, which visually constructs the perfect body for the spectator. The perfect body of the hybrid action cinema is almost always white, despite the Asian roots of the martial arts on which her identity is formed. *Crouching Tiger* is one of the very rare instances where a non-white heroine (and entire action film) is embraced by Western audiences with box office sales and Academy Awards. Jen and Shu Lien's race is deeply tied to place and their martial identities depend on their location in China's past. As in the previous section, where China can become fetishized as a surface place granting unmediated access to spirituality and ancient wisdom to Western spectators, the Asian women of Lee's hybrid China can be read as having tapped into that wisdom by virtue of their nationality and ethnicity. According to Chow's framework, Jen and Shu Lien are able to access the ancient wisdom of martial arts because of their coding as Asian/Other. Here Lee's hybrid genre also frustrates an ethnocentric surface reading. Jen and Shu Lien are not action heroines confined to China, or to *wu xia*, but whose representations borrow freely from the elements offered by other genres.

Jen is not constructed as a perfected body in the manner of the Western action cinema. She is self taught from a manual stolen by an angry and sexually exploited woman. Jen's martial body is not showcased in the same manner as the Angels, in close up and under the gloss of several (pastiche inspired) costume changes. Jen has willed herself into the role of martial artist. She has constructed *herself*, rather than allowed the cinematic apparatus (or a teacher) to put her together. Where action heroines, such as the Angels, used their bodies to delight and distract their spectators, Jen uses hers for its

own sake. The mystery of her martial origins is extremely unusual for the *wu xia* and action cinema genres and is commented upon by the other characters of the film. Mu Bai recognizes her Wudan inspired fighting techniques and asks his potential student where she learned them. She replies that she is just "playing around". Jen continues to frustrate her potential teachers, her family and her lover with her playfully angry relationship to fighting. Jen's martial artistry is what defines her hybrid identity and the tool by which she resists incorporation into any ordering structures.

Crouching Tiger resists the unity of categories of genre and of ordering structures. Its play on the generic expectations of the spectators is dependent on its hybridization and the characterizations of its women warriors. Lee's hyphenated identity is part of this process of generic experimentation and resistance to national and generic rules. Further, he extends this hyphenation of subjectivity to the characters within the film. Under, and through, the surface gloss of *Crouching Tiger*, there is a significant shift in tendencies towards an employment of historical tradition and spectacle away from the mourning of a lost national or generic object, toward a representation of genre and tradition as fractured, complicated and above all, transnational.

CHAPTER IV:

THE HOT GIRL KICKING KILLS BILL:

Genre Masquerade and the Structure of Violence in *Kill Bill*

Quentin Tarantino's two volume film *Kill Bill* (2003/2004) offers up spectacular images of generic pastiche and female perpetrated violence. *Kill Bill*²⁵ is an homage to the global generic imaginary which follows the episodic revenge of the Bride as she systematically tracks down the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad and destroys them, each in the language of a different hybrid genre. A knife fight kills Vernita Green, a Samurai duel kills O-Ren Ishii, Budd dies in an El Paso snake attack and a melodramatic confrontation with Bill closes the film. Rather than following the structural, iconic and thematic systems of previous genre films, *Kill Bill* comments on these elements through its form and its content.

The cross pollination of multi-national genres is not only part of the structure of the film but also its subject matter. The use of genre on several levels aids in overloading the film, causing a genre-inspired short circuit for the spectator. This system overload occurs in the moments where the excesses of genre intrude upon the story telling and the story of genre intrudes upon the classical Hollywood style of the film. The spectacular fighting sequences in the film are the primary examples of these loaded moments. They combine the spectacles of genre with the signifiers of violence and gender discussed with respect to the films of the two previous chapters. *Charlie's Angels* and *Tomb Raider* play primarily with erotic excess and pastiche based on their previous incarnations, television series and

video games respectively. *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* translates and interprets Eastern and Western genres in combination with elaborately staged and emotive duels. *Kill Bill* utilizes not only the excess (of eroticism, cross cultural interpretation and violence) that characterizes the previous films, but mutates and hybridizes genre further leading to greater postmodern fracturing for both spectator and characters.

"Blood Spattered Angel": Genre Masquerade and Feminine Weakness

What is at stake over the evolution of these films' excesses is the opportunity for the warrior woman to take a subject position in her own narrative. It is for this cause that *Kill Bill's* Bride dons Bruce Lee's signature track suit, John Wayne's cowboy boots and a Samurai sword. This contested subjectivity is furthered by the functions of genre throughout Tarantino's film. In their work on the action cinema, Jeffery Brown and Yvonne Tasker have both dealt with the functions and effects of genre and its intersection with representations of gender. They have speculated that generic iconography, such as costumes and weaponry, contributes to a gender masquerade performed by the female action hero. In the muscular cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, the female action hero usurps the objects connected with her male counterpart and in doing so adopts some of his power. Brown has also commented on how later action films, specifically *Point of No Return* (John Badham 1993), also employ a masquerade of femininity to play on the expectation of audience and adversaries. *Kill Bill* represents a further step in the use of masquerade to further violent power and spectacle. Rather than exclusively utilizing the masquerades of femininity or masculinity, the Bride in *Kill Bill* also uses genre as masquerade.

The Bride disguises herself using genre icons and conventions to play on the viewer's gender expectations as well as their genre expectations. The Bride's performance

of violence misleads the spectator deliberately. A fracturing occurs here through a combination of violence and genre; one which blurs the distinction between gendered violence and violent gender. *Kill Bill* draws attention to the active and changeable construction of violent womanhood as a function of genre. The Bride is not simply a violent woman driven by her need to avenge herself and reclaim her child, she is a warrior whose arsenal draws liberally from genre cinema history in the interest of performativity. Gender is not an exclusive performance here; it intersects with violence and genre. The film shows the process of constructing violent femininity through several fight and training sequences and visually constructs the Bride's gendered identity through her experience of violence. She learns to fight, she is paid to kill, she is beaten and she avenges herself and her child. Over the course of the films, this violent process constructs her identity.

An example of this use of genre as masquerade is the "Showdown at the House of Blue Leaves" in *Volume 1*. This extended fight sequence is littered with hybridized and retrofitted genre signifiers adding to the spectacle of violence and to the construction of the characters. The Bride enters the House of Blue Leaves wearing a yellow and black track suit belonging to the 1973 kung fu film, *Enter the Dragon*, starring Bruce Lee. She faces an army of sword wielding Japanese schoolchildren before defeating O-Ren's psychotic seventeen year old body guard, GoGo.²⁶ On top of a glassed in traditional Japanese rock garden, the Bride mutilates Frenchwoman Sophie Fatale who is dressed, according to the voice over, like "a villain from *Star Trek*" (Roddenberry 1966-1969). She faces Cato-masked Johnny Mo before finally reaching the snowbound ceremonial garden where she faces O-Ren Ishii, represented as a deadly hybrid of Geisha/Yakuza/Samurai. This confusion and profusion of genre iconography frustrates

the traditional purpose of genre icons: to provide a quick and easier reference to character type, motivation and narrative function. The characters here have far too many signifiers to make them predictable.

Over the course of the drawn out battle several significant patterns emerge in the adversaries facing the Bride. The first and foremost is: the more hybridized the character, the more deadly. The character of the Bride draws from the widest base of genre cinema and therefore she is more deadly than the Samurai schoolgirl, GoGo, because the Bride has more generic weapons at her disposal. Likewise, Elle Driver is much less predictable than Vernita Green because it is unclear where she belongs generically. Vernita is clearly influenced by blaxploitation cinema, and therefore it is no surprise to the audience and to the Bride that she suggests a knife fight. Elle's pirate-inspired eye patch and her murder of Pai Mei are harder to locate, and therefore neither the audience nor the Bride knows what to expect of her.

The second pattern is that the most martially skilled characters are women, and their deaths are the most graphic. These deadly women are the centre of the spectacles around which the film revolves. Their elaborate choreography seems to be, in part, due to their status as women. This can be seen in the contrast between the Bride's fights with O-Ren Ishii, Elle Driver and Vernita Green versus her brief battles with Budd and Bill. The female members of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad have lengthy elaborate and theatrical fights with the Bride, whereas the male members have more brutal showdowns. In terms of the House of Blue Leaves battle specifically, the male opponents facing the Bride are quickly and expertly dispensed with (such as Johnny Mo) and the female opponents require further attention, a deceleration of pacing and greater skill (such as GoGo and O-Ren).

The rapid acceleration and excess of blood showered violence is tempered throughout the battle by pauses, quiet and humour. The Bride stops to spank one swordsman before sending him home to his mother. The frenetic pace of the alternating colour schemes belonging to the indoor battle are set opposite the quiet and serenity of the snowbound garden. The reflective moments are part of the carefully drawn out machinations of the protracted battle and services the construction of an even more pointed spectacle. The contrasts and pauses highlight the pacing of the fighters and the fight itself.

The gender roles constructed in this sequence are indicative of the entire film. The strong women rely on the masquerade of genres past as the source of their violent power. Generally speaking, these genre masquerades are borrowed from predominantly "male"²⁷ genres and tend to avoid the explicit erotic charge associated with the violence of exploitation cinema or earlier HGK Hybrid films such as *Tomb Raider* or *Resident Evil*. Unlike those previous films, images and iconography of more traditional femininity tend to appear at the moments of the Bride's greatest weakness. The most compelling example of this is the massacre of the wedding party in El Paso, Texas at the start of *Volume 1*. The Bride is backlit, dressed in a white wedding dress and veil and heavily pregnant. Everything about the moment signifies Western concepts of traditional femininity. However when the Bride walks down the aisle, she is set upon by the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad. This is (re)shown at the start of *Volume 2*, in long shot with the Bride in the deep space of the church background with the assassins' silhouettes stylistically frozen in tableau in the foreground. The massacre at the Two Pines Wedding Chapel is repeated constantly throughout the film as the point of origin of the Bride's revenge quest and a significant moment in her violent construction as generic and gendered subject.

At the Two Pines Wedding Chapel, the Bride is savagely beaten, shot in the head and left for dead. It is later revealed that the Bride spends four years in a coma where she suffers the loss of her child and repeated rapes administered by the attending male nurse. These violent acts are dependent on the Bride's gender status. Not only does feminine iconography signify weakness at key points in the film, it is also a motivating factor for violence. The Bride's gender marks her as a target in a different way than her male action hero counterparts, mostly obviously in the case of the rapes at the hospital. Unlike many other films, *Kill Bill* does not take this up as the narrative focus, as in films belonging to the rape revenge cycle suggested by Jacinda Read. Nor does it bypass the subject completely through an excess of masculine signifiers, as in a "muscular"²⁸ action film such as *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron 1992).

The film itself comments upon the Bride's performances of femininity during Bill's *Volume 2* speech about Superman and secret identities. In this monologue, which stops the narrative of film and offers a marked absence of spectacle, Bill explains that Superman was born extraordinary and that his secret identity as Clark Kent was his condemnation (and parody) of the human race as weak and commonplace. He likens this use of secret identity as critique to Beatrix Kiddo's performance of traditional womanhood during her almost wedding. Bill believes that Beatrix's transformation from assassin to bride and mother is artificial. He believes that her use of traditional feminine iconography is offensive and inappropriate and it is for this reason that he attacks her.

The film itself, however, does not share Bill's open condemnation (and hostility) towards Beatrix's use of traditional femininity. Her ability to use "female" genres such as the melodrama in the service of her subjectivity and violence, in addition to using "masculine" genres such as the action cinema, is part of the film's portrayal of her

character as a hybrid of both these gender identities. In the creation of this Bride-Assassin hybrid, the film is able to make cracks in the concept that genres can be definitively labelled as “masculine” or “feminine”. The final fight of the film demonstrates the power inherent in the process of the hybridization of powerful and useful icons and conventions regardless of their previous gender coding.

Violence at the Generic Crossroads

In defying static concepts and categories of genre and the dichotomy of masculine vs. feminine, *Kill Bill* repeatedly finds itself at what genre theorist Rick Altman in his book Film/Genre has labelled a “genre crossroads”. Altman asserts that all genre films include a crossroads where the spectator must choose between the desire for a real world cultural solution and the generic solution. According to Altman, genre wins at the crossroads and in that choice there is a counter-cultural pleasure driven by the desire for a socially unacceptable event. At this decisive moment, the spectator wishes for violence in the action film, for death in the thriller and for emotional anguish in the melodrama. In *Kill Bill*, these genre crossroads push the spectator towards a perverse desire for accelerating levels of violent spectacle. The celebration of violence is necessarily perverse, yet because it is generic violence it is charged with other emotive qualities. Violence in *Kill Bill* is associated with power, humour, professional skill and playfulness. While it is certainly debatable to label violence as celebration, in *Kill Bill* it marks the Bride’s attainment of her narrative goals (revenge and reunion) and her status as self reflexive subject.

Kill Bill represents a multiplicity of affective crossroad moments. Where Altman points to a tension between real world and generic solutions, *Kill Bill* offers a postmodern tension between several generic solutions. This is another way in which surfaces, this time of generic structure, are valued over the illusion of a real world referent. The domestic

showdown between Bill and the Bride offers a perfect example of a violent struggle at the generic crossroads. This moment, at the climax of the film, shows the Bride (now known by the name Beatrix) face the man she loved and swore to kill in a battle for her long lost daughter. The socially acceptable solution (a verbal or legal negotiation over the custody of their daughter, B.B.) is never an option for Bill and Beatrix. There remains only a tension between several generic solutions such as the tears of the melodramatic mode, or the violence of the Samurai film and the Chinese *wu xia* film. Either way, the solution will be played out through visual excess. It combines the improbable reversal of the melodramatic (the use of a truth serum dart) with the brief sword fight and final death of Bill. Here, violence solves everything. *Kill Bill's* crossroads do not offer peaceful solutions; the only choice remaining for the spectator is to wonder whether the conflict will be resolved as a Blaxploitation knife fight, a Samurai swordfight, a shoot out or hand to hand combat. Genre in *Kill Bill* functions, as in Altman's model, as a place of contestation. Yet rather than only offering the spectator the opportunity to enjoy pleasure in an anti-social solution so that they can blow off social steam, *Kill Bill's* violent solutions also allow a pleasure and commentary on the functions of genre and its uses in the composition of violence and gender.

"Unfinished Business": The Excesses of Repetition, Recycling and Resonance

Kill Bill's violent spectacle and genre commentary are not organized as a linear acceleration of violence. The structure of the film's narrative, through a series of episodes, repetitions and remakes becomes ritualistic. This postmodern elegy resonates through its use of pastiche, comforting and disturbing at the same time. The most obvious case of this repetition is in the use of genre itself. By its very nature, a genre is repetitive as it presents similar situations, types of characters, settings and objects. Similar

to pastiche, genre in *Kill Bill* comforts (in its presentation of the familiar) and disturbs (in its frustration of audience expectations).

This ceremony of repetition and recycling is a ritual performance of the excesses of the “hysterical sublime” (Jameson 34). An example of this obsessive delight in surface is the image of the Shaw Brothers’ Logo at the start of the film. This non-diegetic recall of previous genre films sets the stage for the repetitive flash of images to come and the film’s attitude towards these images – mourning the passage of an imagined original and celebrating a postmodern re-combination. Ritual takes an important place in *Kill Bill*, as it recalls not only social rituals with images of weddings and the funerals, but also the ritual of cinema-going practices through the use of the Shaw Brothers’ logo and the “Feature Presentation” title screen at the start of the film. *Kill Bill*’s ritual repetition functions nostalgically not only on an textual level (between distinct episodes in the film), inter-textual level (referencing and recycling other films) but also at an extra-textual level (recalling spectator experiences in the physical space of the theatre). It follows, therefore, that *Kill Bill*’s crack in the continuity of classical Hollywood narrative style, self reflexive use of genre, and destabilization of gender boundaries through violence inspires a sense of recognition on all of these levels.

This resonance outward due to repetition begins with several origin stories over the course of the film. First and foremost is the massacre at the Two Pines Wedding Chapel. As previously described, this moment is repeated several times over the two volumes of the film. It represents the start of the story of the Bride; it explains her reason for seeking revenge and establishes her targets. The Bride’s beating and almost murder is repeated in several different styles, from the black and white photography at the opening of the first film, to the over exposed western inspired silhouetting of the Bride at the chapel doorway

in *Volume 2*. This moment also recurs from the point of view of several different characters, the Bride, Bill and the other members of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad. This violent moment is the centre around which the film rotates and its repetition highlights its importance as the moment of violent initiation.

The other origin story featured in the film is the animated recreation of the murder of O-Ren Ishii's parents and the beginning of her career as an assassin. No other character in the film is given such a back story and no other part of the film is animated. Where the Bride's beginnings as an avenger are constantly replayed, O-Ren's creation as an assassin stands out as a singular instance. However, construction of O-Ren as an enemy parallels the (re)construction of Beatrix Kiddo as the revenge hungry Bride. Using doubles and echoes is another key part of how the film uses repetition: as revealing/revelling in the presence of postmodern simulacra. The repeated moments of the film draw their authenticity from their repetition not from any claim at fidelity to an original. The character of the Bride uses her status as simulacrum to great violent effect. She mimics, retrofits and repeats moments from other fights, martial arts techniques or usurps weaponry and costumes, and this is a contributing factor to her success as an avenger and assassin.

Doubling is part of the construction of characters and the narrative structure of the film, which is divided into two volumes.²⁹ The two volumes echo one another in a similar fashion as the origin stories of O-Ren and the Bride. There are, however, variations in the overall system of each film: *Volume 1* draws heavily from Asian influences to dictate its visual style and narrative pacing, while the second film draws more on Western tropes. The organization of the fight sequences are doubled over the course of the two volumes, as they both follow the three fight structure outlined in chapter I. This structure will be

outlined below in the following section where a closer analysis is offered of each fight sequence.

The repetition of this structure over the two films (or one if considering the two volumes as one film) suggests a never ending violent cycle and an endless repetition of the same fight. This is also true of the revenge structure of the narrative. When the Bride kills Vernita Green in her kitchen, her daughter Nikki is watching. First, the Bride tells Nikki her mother had it coming and that when she grows up, if she still feels “raw” about the murder she can find the Bride and fight her. The pattern of back and forth/cyclical violence is suggested by the possibility of future revenge scenarios. There is no ending or resolution to violence when each act of murderous revenge leads to another.³⁰ It is important to note that this repetition/ending cycle is not evaluated by the film as a negative, rather as “repetition with critical distance ... allow[ing] ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (Hutcheon 26). The critical distance and consideration of differences and contradictions is a crucial part of the film’s portrayal of fighting and repetition of violent moments. According to the cycle of revenge of the film, Nikki will democratically and fairly be allowed to reflect on her mother’s murder and will be allowed the opportunity to avenge and replay it should she deem it necessary.

“Fucking Around with Yakuza’s”: Internal Structures of Violence

Large scale repetition and episodic structures are key elements to the narrative impact of *Kill Bill*. The other crucial element to both the plot and the format of the film is the choreography and internal structure of the fights themselves. These fights are doubled for effect and are staged in order to produce maximum spectacle. Firstly, the fights serve narrative economy. Under the umbrella of a single violent moment, the fights are able to simultaneously offer psychological details, serve as communication between

characters and between film and spectator, to kinetically further the plot and to showcase a combination of violence and femininity. In this way, both the character of the Bride and the film as a whole use genre as a subversive weapon to undermine those (spectators and characters) who would underestimate her based on her gender – or at least to assume she is as she appears.

The overall organization of the fights over the system of the film follows the three fight structure which (to recap) looks like this: the first fight is always a victory establishing the heroine's fighting abilities; the second fight is a loss and reveals the vulnerability of the heroine; the final fight tests the lessons the heroine has learned and ends in the defeat of a singular villain standing in the way of her goal. At an inter-textual level, *Kill Bill's* violence recalls fights from other genre films and combines cinematic techniques of other media and countries, for example the wire work of Asian action cinema and the accelerating structure of the video game level. Generic knowledge of previous fights deepens the impact of the current fight for the spectator and adds to the martial skills of the characters. In the case of *Kill Bill*, with its temporally scrambled narrative and numbered episodes, it is possible to consider several options in an analysis of the three fight structure. The fights included below (the knife fight with Vernita Green, the burial by Budd and the final dual with Bill) are included because they offer up the fight as a genre spectacle and because they are key points turning the narrative of the film(s).

Knife Fight in the Suburbs: Vernita Green

The first fight in the film is the knife fight at the suburban Pasadena home of Vernita Green. This fight functions to establish the episodic structure of the film and its use of inter-titles. It provides information about the revenge cycle of the film's narrative and offers insight into the Bride's psychology. This psychological depth provides an

understanding of how the Bride will behave over the course of the film. The first fight also establishes the film's use of genre as a postmodern playground. Iconography such as the long shot of the orderly suburban neighbourhood, the ritual of house-wifely coffee belonging to the family melodrama is juxtaposed against a proposal of a good ol' fashioned knife fight, reminiscent of Blaxploitation films such as *Cleopatra Jones* (Jack Starrett 1973).

The violent intentions of the character known as the Bride and the martial skills of Vernita, the housewife, challenge the stability of gender roles. Both women are coded as traditionally feminine in some ways, for example their mutual agreement to hide their violence to protect Vernita's daughter. However, the violence of their fight frustrates those protective maternal signifiers and presents a crossroads where, under the hybrid genre rules of the film, the two women have a bloody and masterful knife fight. This combination of unexpected genre (and gender elements) sets the stage for the rest of the films' action. The domestic space of the kitchen, traditionally coded as safe and feminine, now becomes the site where the Bride exacts her revenge amidst a shower of children's cereal.

This first fight demands that the audience prepare itself for an unpredictable spectacle of gender characteristics and generic conventions. It establishes the audience as being in on the "inside jokes" that Tarantino will be presenting. In his article, "I Married Rambo", Mark Gallagher claims that the action cinema is always aware of its own cultural status and uses that to establish sly inside jokes with the spectator based on their previous genre viewing experiences. *Kill Bill* offers up these inside jokes at a dizzying pace – through the settings, the use of split screens, the speech patterns of the characters, the musical motifs and the performance of famous Japanese actor, Sonny Chiba. The

first fight is an establishing contract between the spectator and the text informing them of what they are to expect in the future of the film and insisting that they rely on their knowledge of genres and question the stability and status of those genres simultaneously.

Shotgun in the Desert: Budd

The second fight with Bill's brother, Budd, takes place in El Paso and establishes itself, through location, costume and weaponry as belonging (at least in part) to the western genre. Within this sequence, there is also a flashback to the Bride's training with Pai Mei in China, outlining a move she mastered which facilitates her later escape from the "lonely grave of Paula Schultz". This flashback plays on the idea of doubling as it shows one genre (the training sequence of the *wu xia* tradition) occurring within another. As in the standard three fight structure, the Bride loses this fight. Budd shoots her with a shotgun full of rock salt and then buries her alive. Although she escapes the grave, she does not succeed in killing Budd. This is a very short fight. The Bride sneaks up through the desert to Budd's trailer, approaches the door, only to be surprised by his shotgun. This western style of fighting is one of the Bride's weaknesses: she cannot fight a shotgun with a Samurai sword.

The fight with Budd also recalls the initial attack on the Bride at the Two Pines Wedding Chapel. At that moment it is not only feminine signs which prove dangerous to the Bride, but also Texas and the iconography of the western. The Bride is almost killed twice under the signs and syntax of the western. These two Texan incidents show the Bride at her most vulnerable, and show her weakness: her underestimation of her male targets, Bill and Budd and her (initial) inability to kill Bill. But the purpose of the second fight is also to learn and evolve. The Bride learns never to underestimate Bill again and this plays out her final showdown with him.

Not only is this second fight a diegetic learning experience for the character, the second fight is also a presentation of the spectacle of the suffering body, a convention common to the action cinema. Theorists such as Rikke Schubart³¹ have discussed masochism and the bodily suffering of the male action hero. This suffering is an opportunity to showcase the male hero's body and watch as he overcomes its weaknesses and takes the pain to become a stronger person. The sufferings visited upon the Bride by Bill and Budd in Texas serve the same function although with variation. The initial spectacle of the suffering and heavily pregnant Bride is laden with signifiers of femininity and motherhood that are obviously absent from the male action hero. Yet despite the disparity in signifiers, which add a further layer to the revenge quest of the film, the suffering of the Bride's body has a similar effect as those of her male counterparts. It serves to demonstrate her ability to overcome her pain and transcend the sufferings of her body by the sheer power of her will, and her ability to manipulate the language of genre.

Genre history can help to understand why the western genre, and its (heavily phallic) iconography of shotguns and deadly snakes is the most dangerous setting for the Bride, described elsewhere in the film as the "deadliest woman in the world". The genres retrofitted in the other battles of the film are, in their original forms, more open to a violent female protagonist than the western. The Chinese swordplay film, the samurai film, and the blaxploitation film have violent women as part of their history. While this is not to suggest that the woman warrior is the norm for these genres, it is to imply that they are more hospitable to gender play and are more likely to grant subjectivity to the violent woman at the centre of their narratives. The masculine space of the western genre is simply more dangerous for the Bride as is the western's status as one of most "pure" of genres. The western genre is resistant to the kind of hybridization that has been helping

the Bride in her violent quest thus far. This does not concede that the western is irreducible and static as a category, but, rather, that its status as the mythological origin story of America and its historically specific iconography make it more hostile to the Bride's struggle for agency.

This is furthered by the fact that the villains in the western section of the film tend to be the men who the Bride underestimates. The Bride does not expect that Bill will beat and shoot her when he surprises her at her El Paso wedding. The violence visited upon the Bride by male perpetrators in western settings (El Paso and in the hospital) does not function as celebratory spectacle of the Bride's abilities to manipulate genre in the service of violence, as it does in her more theatrical fights with women. In these moments, and perhaps because of the conventions of the western genre and the dynamics and social significance of male perpetrator/female victim, fighting becomes sinister. It also takes on a closer relationship to understated realism as it downplays the spectacular side of violence. It is also the only time firearms are used in the film. Beatrix's showdown with Budd can barely be classified as a fight, since it is so sudden. The Bride is offered no chance to retaliate or demonstrate her skills. She is shot and then sedated. The sound of that single shot is unusually loud. The same loud shot sounds out during the massacre sequence at the chapel. The film represents western iconography, of gun and desert, as sinister in its gendered violence. In the theatrical fights between two women, inspired by Asian genres and Blaxploitation, the violence is less dangerous for the Bride due to a fluid interpretation of genre and an attention to spectacle.

Killing Bill on the Patio: the Final Fight

In the final fight, the Bride finds herself in a setting and sequence reminiscent of the family melodrama. It is here that she must face the man she once loved and demand

that he give up their child. The sentimental excess is layered onto genre hybridization in this sequence, especially during Bill's lengthy monologue which likens the Bride's suffering to B.B.'s purposeful and curious murder of Emilio, the goldfish. Other devices in this sequence, such as the truth serum and the bohemian costuming, both heighten and distract from the melodramatic showdown which immediately precedes the physical showdown. Although this sequence is the final fight of the film and employs a common final fight convention of the "secret move", the actual violence takes up little time. It is the constant threat of battle overriding this sequence that adds layers of sentimental and violent excess to the melodrama.

Mark Gallagher describes a recent trend in the action cinema which conflates the more feminine genre of the melodrama with the traditionally masculine genre of the action cinema. While he uses this to describe the romantic subplot of *True Lies* (James Cameron 1994), his assessment of this genre recombination can also be seen at work in *Kill Bill*, culminating in final fight sequence. Gallagher's argument is that this recombination ups the stakes, because what is threatened in the melodramatic action cinema is not only the fate of the world but that of the nuclear family on which the world rests. Due to the postmodern nature of *Kill Bill*, it follows that the films' conflation of masculine and feminine genres is not as linear as *True Lies*. While the Bride does fight to recover her family, or rather her daughter, she must kill her daughter's father to accomplish that goal. At the moment when the domestic world of the nuclear family should be saved by appropriate violence, it is also completely destroyed.

What Happens at the End?

"The Bride aka Beatrix Kiddo aka Black Mamba aka Mommy"

Over the course of the fight sequences in *Kill Bill*, the Bride has used genre,

pastiche and frustrated expectations to bring herself closer to her revenge and to a realization of her identity as subject/mother, while rejecting her appellation of bride. The deliberate miscommunication and hybridization on the part of the film confront spectators with their mistaken assumptions about the stability, and readability, of genre conventions, syntax and iconography. *Kill Bill's* crossroads reveal genre as a masquerade and visually demonstrate the construction of violent and powerful womanhood in ritual repetition throughout the film.

The end of *Volume 2* is a unique and disjointed moment in the film. This excessively emotional moment of happiness and reunion is at odds with the coding of the rest of the film. Where violence had always been a celebratory and political solution to tensions, now Beatrix watches television, dressed in white, with her daughter. Given the excesses, hybridizations and reversals of the rest of the film, this moment of sincerity creates an unbelievable system overload for the spectator who is cued to read such domestic bliss as merely a pause before further (unseen but supposed) episodes of violence. The cycle of violence is so prevalent as a system of organization for the film that its resolution seems unlikely. Moments such as B.B.'s strange killing of her goldfish and love of kung fu films hint at future violence and the continuation of repetition as a structuring strategy, and echo also Nikki's possible future revenge.

It must be said that the ending does reinforce Beatrix's attainment of power and subjectivity. After all it was her goal to kill Bill and she has accomplished that. She has even managed to regain the child she believed to be dead. Despite its fracturing of the film system for the spectator, it does ultimately reward Beatrix for her revenge quest and allow her to experiment with abstaining from violence. The final sequence echoes the massacre at the chapel in terms of Beatrix's white costume, and the presence of her

daughter. It replaces the diegetic violence of Beatrix's beating with the distanced violence of the cartoon that B.B. is watching on television. In the end, Beatrix removes herself from violence by placing a television screen in between herself and her child. Given the acceleration and spectacle that the spectator has witnessed, it seems unlikely that the screen can offer protection for very long.

CHAPTER V:

RUPTURES AND RAMIFICATIONS:

Conclusions and Future Directions in Which the *Hot Girl* Can Take Her Kicking

In *Six Guns and Society*, Will Wright declares the western to be the mythology of contemporary U.S. society. He charges the genre not only with social meaning, but as a model for social behaviour. Westerns, according to Wright, bridge the distance between the past and present by teaching the spectator how to learn from the past and apply those lessons to the present. Wright's insistence that westerns are not only documents describing an imagined origin, but are also instructional, is key to his structural analysis. I have revisited Wright's interpretation of the western, in combination with postmodern theories, in order to ask some key questions: Does the *Hot Girl Kicking* category I have formed mark the resurgence of a contemporary Amazon, charged with the symbolic weight of the past and instructing burgeoning women warriors of the future? Are postmodern action heroines models for social action like cowboys? What is at stake in their stories? Why are they organized the way they are? The violent women in contemporary postmodern action films (especially those belonging to the hybrid sub-genre suggested and described in this thesis) are central to a belief that violence is equal to power: in usurping the traditional male subject position of the action hero, does the contemporary action heroine take on his agency and power?

However, violence is not interchangeable with equality and subjectivity.³² Rather, the violence wielded by the action heroine is an excessive spectacle performing a

function. It is the functionality of that violence which serves as a more appropriate model to interpret the lessons of the warrior woman.

What can be learned from the bloody stories of revenge, betrayal, adventure, and action performed by the action heroine? Over the course of the previous four chapters, patterns of structure, functionality and spectacle emerge in a significant body of films grouped together due to their similar postmodern-emphasis on surface, fracture and cross cultural genre hybridization. Chapter II determined that the quest to construct the perfect violent female body reveals a privilege based on class, ethnicity and sexual orientation, yet also puts irreversible pressure on the formal system of classical Hollywood form and destabilizes the boundaries of gender and genre. Chapter III explored Asian influences paying close attention to issues of translation and reinterpretation. A close analysis of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* revealed the pervasive influences of transnational popular culture and its inseparability from the action genre in postmodernity. Chapter IV dealt with the postmodern genre play in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*. The influences, reworking and translation over the course of these chapters outlines the key elements which mark this hybrid as different from other representations of violent womanhood. At stake in all of these films is the collapse of boundaries and the dismantling of traditional dichotomies. In each chapter cracks are exposed in the systems which order the films which are the result of the excesses of the films (of gender, genre and violent spectacle).

Break the Boundaries

Essentially, my structural analysis of the postmodern action heroine observes the effect of combining an obsession with body engineering, cross cultural postmodern culture and hybridization as one leading to a rupture of boundaries. The boundaries are

compromised between nations, gender and genres, which reveals the assignment of boundaries as suspect and arbitrary. Further to that, breaking these boundaries calls into question the validity of the restrictive structures, such as patriarchy, U.S. cultural imperialism and classical Hollywood form. These structures are not eroded through direct assault, but fractured at the formal level. The narrative of a film such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* does not tell a story about rebelling against Hollywood, and its patriarchal system. However, through a combination of Eastern and Western genres, Lee's film unsettles the predictability of genre cinema and concludes with Jen's mysterious refusal to be a part of a patriarchal system which would contain her.

All of the films I have slated as belonging to the postmodern hybrid sub-genre of the *Hot Girl Kicking* put tension on oppressive ordering structures and break down boundaries. The U.S. films in the first chapter did so through an excess of (hyper) feminine signifiers interlaced with those that signify masculinity. Representing an almost hysterical and excessive image of femininity draws attention to the process which builds a perfect woman by including certain traits while excluding others. Likewise, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and recent Asian imports such as *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*, hybridize Eastern and Western genres in their presentation of female martial artists and break the boundaries between East and West. The fracturing caused by this hybridization ultimately reveals that the boundaries were never stable in the first place. *Kill Bill* is the most excessive film discussed in terms of length (2 volumes and 4¼ hours), in terms of genre recombination (everything from comic books to blaxploitation and *Star Trek*), and also in terms of gender (the Bride dresses like Bruce Lee to fight a female samurai). Structuring systems rely on exclusive categories. Patriarchy rests on the clear separation of the category of "man" from "woman" and U.S. cultural imperialism relies

on the separation of “us” from “them.” *Kill Bill*’s use of pastiche confuses all of these categories in its many recombinations, and brings up the threat that these categories could disappear completely as functional foundations. As an example, Bill is not active because he is male, and his gender does not dictate his function in the plot; rather, generic influences and iconography cue the spectator’s expectations – and, of course, summarily frustrate these expectations.

In using excess and in hybridizing forms (and functions), an action film can fracture oppressive organizing matrixes. However, there are limits and parameters to this emancipation. Representations of action heroines do not obliterate the patriarchy, genre system and Western neo-colonialism through violence and excess; the films put pressure and suspicion on these forms yet can never quite escape or destroy them. This may be due to the limits of genre. Even in hybridization, there is still investment and value placed on genre as a category. Even though the *Resident Evil* films rely on the combined tropes of horror, action, martial arts and combat film genres, they depend upon the audience’s familiarity with the genres in their less hybrid or excessive forms. While these films offer a site for contesting the value of sticking to the rules of one genre, they do rely on the existence of agreed upon rules to do so.

U.S. action blockbusters such as *Resident Evil* seem to be bound by stricter genre rules than independent films such as *Kill Bill* and Asian art films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. These films are able to break through, or circumvent, certain rules because their origins³³ lead to an expectation of difference. There is a varying degree of success in the system-breaking potential of films. Generally speaking, success depends on the use of those elements associated with postmodernity: the fracturing of unifying narratives, the use of multiple voices and alternative viewpoints, and the attention to

surface. For example, *Kill Bill's* hybrid characters and dizzying use of intertextual references create a greater tension than *Charlie's Angels'* visual inside jokes.

Read the Surface

In looking at the structures of the action cinema and its sub-genres, and using postmodernism as a guide, perhaps the most important element (one which is not considered in other works on violent women) is the attention to surface. It runs counter to analytical intuition to judge things by their appearance and surface. However, given the postmodern emphasis on surfaces throughout the films, this is the most effective approach to considering the effects and ramifications of representing violent womanhood. The postmodern action film featuring a female protagonist creates tensions and ruptures to organizing systems at a surface level; it is written on the bodies of the heroines through their parodic use of costuming and on the genre structure of the film's organization of violent spectacle.

However, just as there are limits to the films' potential to break with systems holding them back, there is a downside to judging them based on the surface, the structural, and the immediately recognizable. Over-valuing surface limits characters, nations and ethnicities to type. Complexity is necessarily limited by an attention to characters as functions and while the films do offer viewpoints which are alternative to the dominant ideology, they are sometimes stereotypical. The world of *Kill Bill* presents Asians as interchangeable with their nation's genres: in the film's diegesis, every Japanese man, woman and child has mastered martial arts.³⁴ There is even a sort of "samurai class" on the airlines flying in and out of Japan in which several patrons are shown flying with their samurai swords by their sides. Yet despite the limitations of surface judgements, analyzing according to what they present is a unique opportunity to examine violent women, not as

examples of “girl power” or victims of feminist backlash, but rather in light of generic function and an emerging role in the global popular culture imaginary.

In distancing the *character* of the violent woman from real world violence and real world women, there is more opportunity for critical reflection. Just as Rick Altman’s crossroads suggested a choice between anti-social pleasure and real world resolution, a surface/structural analysis provides an opportunity to examine the anti-social pleasure. Rather than wonder at the uncomfortable social ramifications of a man hitting a woman, the postmodern action film represents this act as a spectacle coded for enjoyment and titillation. For example, one sequence in the domestic action film, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (Liman 2005), shows a bone crunching showdown between spouses. In reading the surface, the function of showing Jane Smith as an equal (and subject to violence equal to other male characters) is to reinforce her subjectivity and the (darkly humorous) effect of a husband and wife beating each other, which stops the narrative, highlights the theatrical nature of violence in the film and calls into question gender roles.

Forget the Real World

Had we taken the other road at Altman’s crossroads, the real world ramifications are that we are witness to a man beating and attempting to murder his wife, who then beats and attempts to murder him. In reading the sequence in this way, violence must necessarily be the focus because violence clearly does not provide a solution to marital problems. Violence is an inappropriate problem solving mechanism in domestic situations and it is uncomfortable to be faced with images of a man kicking his wife. When violence is a theatrical number, merely one excess among many, we can see that Jane Smith is a player in the game, not merely a bystander or victim. From there, the game itself is under scrutiny.

Another significant trend is that the popular media seems intent on taking the real world route at Altman's crossroads in considering action heroines as role models for young women and as the embodiment of feminism. Whether they are condemning or praising the characters of an action film, reviewers consistently comment upon the action heroine's behaviour as a possible literal example on which to base future behaviour. Given the violent nature of the action cinema in general, it is somewhat surprising that this particular debate should figure so prominently as a very real concern to the popular media. Yet most reviews and critical considerations of action heroines address her influence on the spectator (especially the female spectator). Peter Travers in Rolling Stone magazine comments on *Charlie's Angels*, saying: "Even if the Angels fly better as eye candy than as feminist role models, it's silly to clip their wings. These kickass Barbies bring heart to a machine-tooled genre" (2). On the negative side, William Arnold of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer comments on *Tomb Raider*:

it's also scary to keep reading (even in my own newspaper) how Lara Croft is such a wonderful new feminist role model for young women. We're talking here about a sadistic egotist who greedily vandalizes the cultural monuments of the Third World and embodies the spirit of Columbine. A role model? God help us all. (2)

Despite differences of opinion regarding the social benefit/danger of the action heroine, there is a drive to judge the heroine as if she were functioning in the real world. The films themselves defy this kind of assignation of real world referent by their postmodern emphasis on pastiche and surface and through a showcase of the process of construction.

Wright also brings up the tension between real world and genre situations, stressing that genres³⁵ are models for social action not in an imitative fashion, but in a functional one. The instructional element, Wright's social model, is one in which a female

fighter does her job well, and finds pleasure in that job. The social model of the action cinema, and its postmodern permutations, incorporates the assets of several cultures, from martial arts to boxing.

Finally the model of the action heroine provides an opportunity for those who have been previously marginalized to be heard and actively contest the processes which put them on the periphery. The image of the *Hot Girl Kicking* runs counter to patriarchal notions of femininity, in her position as an empowered member of the workforce, and an active subject rather than sexualized object. While this model for social action may seem simplistic in its description of a martial "femtopia," the emancipatory potential here cannot be overstated. It is especially useful to consider the postmodern action cinema as a place of contestation which puts forward a femtopia while acknowledging and parodying the limitations and roadblocks in the way to creating such a model for action.

Our heroine has now drop-kicked her way to the possibility of freedom and postmodern rupture with past restrictive systems. She has built her arsenal with Japanese swords, Chinese kung fu, western guns, blaxploitation knives and the feminine wiles of sexploitation. She inhabits the *Jianghu* underworld of professional warriors and exists in a spectacle outside of time. Remember her in this way: in a slow motion strut facing the camera. Cue the wind machines as the smoke clears from her final battle. She emerges bloody and victorious, bearing the wounds of her struggles against the world, Hollywood and the men who would limit and objectify her. Weary now, she can rest on her laurels until the next episode begins:

O-REN ISHII: "You didn't think it was going to be that easy did you?"

THE BRIDE: "You know...for a second there, yeah, I kinda did."

END NOTES

¹ This thesis will for the most part consider Tarantino's *Kill Bill Volume 1* and *Kill Bill Volume 2* as one film, and will refer to the combination of the two as *Kill Bill*.

² Perhaps corresponding with the rise of second wave feminism.

³ Tasker points to a sequence in *Black Belt Jones* where the hero tells the heroine to stay home and do the dishes. The heroine promptly shoots them and declares them done.

⁴ This is exemplified in Quentin Tarantino's collaboration with rapper, the RZA, in composing the score and compiling the sound track for *Kill Bill*.

⁵ This concept is further investigated as presented by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in chapter III.

⁶ The training sequence demonstrating Charlene's transformation from adolescent gymnast into assassin outlines her training in martial arts, and also in wine tasting and strip-teasing.

⁷ Theorists such as Jeffrey A. Brown and Sherrie A. Inness.

⁸ The films demand an analysis because they demonstrate the effects and symptoms of postmodernity on representations of gender and violence.

⁹ In the sequel, *Tomb Raider: Cradle of Life*, the second fight also marks a betrayal by Lara's love interest. In the first film, the romantic interest is redeemed; in the second, he is killed.

¹⁰ This shift in representations of violent femininity is heavily influenced by the warrior woman tradition in Chinese and Japanese literature and film. Portraying a female fighter has been much more common and acceptable, though not usual, in Asian genres than in Western ones. In appropriating the fighting techniques of Asian cinema, the action cinema has also tapped into this history of socially accepted female fighters.

¹¹ In addition to Yvonne Tasker, theorists such as Rikke Schubart and Jeffrey A. Brown also point to this phenomenon in the action cinema.

¹² As per Linda Hutcheon and Frederic Jameson's definitions of postmodernity.

¹³ See Chapter Two: *Black Buddies and White Heroes: Racial Discourse in the Action Cinema in Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*.

¹⁴ In much the same way as Inness' semi-tough women.

¹⁵ Not to mention the plague infected zombies who are all that is left of the marginalized urban population unable to evacuate the city.

¹⁶ Ang Lee's statement from the liner notes of the *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* DVD, released by Columbia TriStar in June of 2001.

¹⁷ Leon Hunt describes *Jianghu* as "the world of vagrants" which carries with it its own laws and rules which, while strict, offer the *wu xia* warrior woman "a freedom of movement far from the constraints of the circumscribed, more Confucian world of the Kung Fu film..." (124).

¹⁸ The same has also been said of *The Ice Storm* and *Ride With the Devil*.

¹⁹ Lee was born and raised in Taipei, Taiwan. Taiwan has a unique relationship to mainland China, and remains a distinct culture separated from the mainland by politics and historical context. While Taiwan is not a separate country, it does maintain distinct regional control over the island from the capitol in Taipei ever since it was claimed as a nationalist refuge by the Nationalist armies of Chang Kai-Shek in 1949. On top of this marginal status within the country of China, Lee emigrated to the United States in 1975 and therefore is not only Chinese and Taiwanese, but Asian-American.

²⁰ Further to this, the title of the film comes from a Chinese saying which translates as keeping something important hidden.

²¹ The film is also an adaptation of a serial novel, and takes into consideration other *wu xia* serial novels and earlier films. Lee also includes elements of Hong Kong Action cinema, as exemplified by stars Michelle Yeoh and Chow Yun-Fat, both of whom are world renowned for their Hong Kong careers.

²² The generic and representational patterns traced by this thesis all describe a wide mainstream American release, and it is for this reason that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is considered primarily in the context of its Western reception rather than its Eastern (co)production or reception. While I recognize that this one-sided consideration is problematic, it is the patterns in popular cinema and their use of cross-cultural translation which are of primary consideration in this thesis.

²³ Hunt quoting Cheung (120).

²⁴ Hunt continues to describe the status of Asian women under the 'Deadly China Doll' syndrome. "The Asian woman is a prime object of what Asian-American critics call 'racist love'...if Asian men are represented as emasculated and asexual, Asian women are 'only sexual, imbued with an innate understanding of how to please and serve' (quoting Cheung 1990: 236)" (120).

²⁵ *Kill Bill* is referred to throughout chapter IV as either *Kill Bill*, meaning the two volumes seen as a whole, or *Volume 1* and *Volume 2*.

²⁶ The deadly Japanese teenagers are reminiscent of current trends in Japanese cinema which explore the monstrous aspects of girl-child figures. *Ringu* (Nakata 1998) and *The Suicide Club* (Sono 2002) are two such examples. The reference to dangerous Asian woman/childhood, found also in *Kill Bill*, is a reinterpretation of the "Hungry Ghost" archetype from Japanese mythology, literature and film. These characters were wronged women, unable to assert themselves in their life times, who returned to seek justice after death. This storyline, according to film historian Gregory Barrett, was extremely popular to Japanese women throughout history as it empowers them and shows them obtaining a kind of victory, albeit after death. The force of this justified feminine rage attains supernatural proportions and the hungry and vengeful ghost returns to terrify audiences and male transgressors alike.

²⁷ As defined by Yvonne Tasker, Jeffrey Brown, Linda Williams and Mark Gallagher in their descriptions of the action cinema as a traditionally "male" genre versus the melodrama as a traditionally "female" genre.

²⁸ As in the "masculinity" cinema of the 1980s coined by Yvonne Tasker in *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*.

²⁹ While it is true that the separation of the film into two volumes is due to financial and time restraints, this two volume structure does nonetheless contribute to the nostalgic recall of the format of serial pulp novels, magazines and adventure stories of the fifties, sixties and seventies.

³⁰ This is reminiscent of Japanese Samurai revenge stories who point to patterns of revenge and counter revenge. It was a convention in the revenge plot line of a Samurai film that the avenger could not let even one family member of his target exist under the same sky as him. The excessive ramifications of this convention created circular and accelerating structures of violence and revenge in the course of the films.

³¹ Susan Jeffords and Yvonne Tasker have also outlined the functions of the suffering masculine body in the action cinema.

³² A point introduced by Claudia Herbst in "Lara's Lethal and Loaded Mission: Transposing Reproduction and Destruction" and discussed in greater detail in chapter II.

³³ Mostly it is the directors, and their auteur status, which leads to an expectation of something other than a generic formula.

³⁴ It should be said that almost everyone in *Kill Bill* has martial arts training irrespective of their ethnicity; but it is shown as more likely, and in larger numbers, in Tokyo than in Texas or Mexico.

³⁵ Wright's genre study is limited to his consideration of the western; however, I project his interpretation to include many other U.S. and Asian genres as well.

WORKS CITED

- Altman, Rick. Film/Genre. London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1999.
- Barrett, Gregory. Archetypes in Japanese Film: The Sociopolitical and Religious Significance of the Principal Heroes and Heroines. London: Associated University Presses.
- Beltrán, Mary. "Más Macha: The New Latina Action Hero." Action and Adventure Cinema. Ed. Yvonne Tasker. London: Routledge, 2004. 186-200.
- Brown, Jeffrey A. "Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and the *Point of No Return*." Cinema Journal. 35, No. 3, Spring 1996. 52-71.
- . "Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness: The Bad Girls of Action Film and Comic Books." Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture. Ed. Sherrie A. Inness. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004. 47-74.
- Chow, Rey. Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Ciecko, Anne T. "Transnational Action: John Woo, Hong Kong, Hollywood." Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender. Ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997.
- Clover, Carol. Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Creed, Barbara. The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Dariotis, Wei Ming and Eileen Fung. "Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee." Transnational Chinese Cinema: Identity, Nationhood, Gender. Ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.
- Gallagher, Mark. "I Married Rambo: Spectacle and Melodrama in the Hollywood Action Film." Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media. Ed. Christopher Sharrett. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999. 199-225.
- Haraway, Donna J. Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Herbst, Claudia. "Lara's Lethal and Loaded Mission: Transposing Reproduction and Destruction." Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture. Ed. Sherrie A. Inness. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004. 21-46.
- Hunt, Leon. Kung Fu Cult Masters. London: Wallflower Press, 2003.
- Hutcheon, Linda. The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory Fiction. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Inness, Sherrie A. Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.

- Jameson, Frederic. Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
- Jeffords, Susan. Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994.
- Neale, Steve. Genre and Hollywood. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Read, Jacinda. "Narratives of Transformation: the Rape-Revenge Cycle." The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000. 22-58.
- Schubart, Rikke. "Passion and Acceleration: Generic Change in the Action Film." Violence and American Cinema. Ed. J. David Slocum. New York: Routledge, 2001. 192-207.
- Staiger, Janet. "Hybrid or Inbred: The purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History". Film Genre Reader III. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. 185-199.
- Tasker, Yvonne. Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Tung, Charlene. "Embodying an Image: Gender, Race, and Sexuality in *La Femme Nikita*". Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture. Ed. Sherrie A. Inness. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004. 95-122.
- Tudor, Andrew. "Genre". Film Genre Reader III. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. 3-12.
- Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess". Film Genre Reader III. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. 141-160.
- Wright, Will. Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.

FILMOGRAPHY:

Alien. Dir. Ridley Scott. 20th Century Fox, 1979.

Aliens. Dir. James Cameron. 20th Century Fox, 1986.

Alien³. Dir. David Fincher. 20th Century Fox, 1992.

Alien: Resurrection. Dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet. 20th Century Fox, 1997

Alien vs. Predator. Paul Anderson. 20th Century Fox, 2004

Aliens. Dir. James Cameron. 20th Century Fox, 1986.

Barbarella. Dir. Roger Vadim. Dino de Laurentiis Cinematografica, 1968.

Barb Wire. David Hogan, Dark Horse Entertainment, 1996.

Batman. Dir. Tim Burton. Warner Bros., 1989.

Black Belt Jones. Dir. Robert Clouse. Sequoin Films, 1974.

The Brood. Dir. David Cronenberg. Mutual Productions, 1979.

Buffy: The Vampire Slayer. Dir. Fran Rubel Kuzui. 20th Century Fox, 1992.

Carrie. Dir. Brian De Palma. Redbank Films, 1976.

Cat Ballou. Dir. Elliot Silverstein. Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1965.

Catwoman. Dir. Pitof. Warner Bros., 2004.

Charlie's Angels. Dir. McG. Columbia Pictures, 2000.

Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle. Dir. McG. Columbia Pictures, 2003.

China O'Brien. Dir. Robert Clouse. Golden Harvest Ltd, 1990.

Coffy. Dir. Jack Hill. American International Pictures, 1973.

Cleopatra Jones. Dir. Jack Starrett. Warner Bros., 1973

Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold. Dir. Charles Bail. Warner Bros., 1975.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. Dir. Ang Lee. Columbia TriStar, 2000.

C.S.I. Crime Scene Investigation. Creat. Anthony E. Zuiker, 2000 - .

Eat Drink Man Woman. Dir. Ang Lee. Central Motion Pictures Corporation, 1994

Elektra. Dir. Rob Bowman. 20th Century Fox, 2005

Enter the Dragon. Dir. Robert Clouse. Concord Productions, 1973.

Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill! Dir. Russ Meyer. Eve Productions, Inc., 1965.

Fatal Beauty. Dir. Tom Holland. MGM, 1987.

The Fifth Element. Dir. Luc Besson. Gaumont , 1997.

Foxy Brown. Dir. Jack Hill. American International Pictures, 1974.

G.I. Jane. Dir. Ridley Scott. Caravan Pictures, 1997.

Hero. Dir. Yimou Zhang. Alliance Atlantis (Can), 2003.

Heroic Trio. Dir. Johnny To. Buena Vista Home Video, 1993.

House of Flying Daggers. Dir. Yimou Zhang. Columbia TriStar, 2004.

The Hunger. Dir. Tony Scott. MGM, 1983.

Jackie Brown. Dir. Quentin Tarantino, Miramax, 1997.

Kill Bill Volume 2. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. Miramax, 2004.

Kiss of the Dragon. Dir. Chris Nahon. Europa Corp., 2001.

Lady Snowblood. Dir. Toshiya Fujita. Toho Company Ltd, 1973.

The Last Emperor. Dir. Bernardo Bertolucci. AAA Productions, 1987.

The Matrix. Dir. Andy Wachowski & Larry Wachowski. Warner Bros., 1999.

The Matrix Reloaded. Dir. Andy Wachowski & Larry Wachowski. Warner Bros, 2003.

The Matrix Revolutions. Dir. Andy Wachowski & Larry Wachowski, Warner Bros, 2003.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Dir. Doug Liman. New Regency Pictures, 2005.

Naked Weapon. Dir. Siu-Tung Ching. Media Asia Films Ltd., 2002.

The Next Karate Kid. Dir. Christopher Cain. Columbia Pictures, 1994.

Out of Sight. Dir. Steven Soderbergh. Jersey Films, 1998.

Point of No Return. Dir. John Badham. Warner Bros., 1993.

Private Benjamin. Dir. Howard Zieff. Warner Bros, 1980.

Red Sonja. Dir. Richard Fleischer. Dino De Lauretis Productions, 1985.

The Replacement Killers. Dir. Antoine Fuqua. Brillstein Grey Entertainment, 1993.

Resident Evil. Dir. Paul W.S. Anderson. Constantin Film Produktion, 2002

Resident Evil: Apocalypse. Dir. Alexander Witt. Constantin Film Produktion, 2004

Ride with the Devil. Dir. Ang Lee. Universal Pictures, 1997.

Ringu. Dir. Hideo Nakata. Kadokawa Shoten Publishing Co. Ltd., 1998.

Romeo Must Die. Dir. Andrezej Bartkowiak. Silver Pictures, 2000.

Sense and Sensibility. Dir. Ang Lee. Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1995.

Sin City. Dir. Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller. Dimension Films, 2005.

So Close. Dir. Corey Yuen. Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia, 2002.

Species. Dir. Roger Donaldson. MGM, 1995.

Star Trek. Creat. Gene Roddenberry. Series 1966-1969.

The Suicide Club. Dir. Shion Sono. For Peace Co. Ltd., 2002.

Terminator. Dir. James Cameron. Hemdale Film Corporation, 1984.

Terminator 2: Judgement Day. Dir. James Cameron. Artisan Entertainment, 1992.

Tomb Raider. Dir. Simon West. Paramount Pictures, 2001.

True Lies. Dir. James Cameron. 20th Century Fox, 1994.

The Wedding Banquet. Dir. Ang Lee. Central Motion Pictures Corporation , 1993.

Underworld. Dir. Len Wiseman. Lakeshore Entertainment, 2003.

Wing Chun. Dir. Woo-ping Yuen. Century Pacific, 1994.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altman, Rick. Film/Genre. London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1999.
- Arons, Wendy. "If Her Stunning Beauty Doesn't Bring You to Your Knees, Her Deadly Drop Kick Will': Violent Women in the Hong Kong Kung Fu Film". Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies. Ed. Martha McCaughey and Neal King. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001. 27-52.
- Barrett, Gregory. Archetypes in Japanese Film: The Sociopolitical and Religious Significance of the Principal Heroes and Heroines. London: Associated University Presses.
- Beltrán, Mary. "Más Macha: The New Latina Action Hero." Action and Adventure Cinema. Ed. Yvonne Tasker. London: Routledge, 2004. 186-200.
- Bordwell, David. Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2000.
- Brown, Jeffrey A. "Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and the *Point of No Return*." Cinema Journal. 35, No. 3, Spring 1996. 52-71.
- . "Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness: The Bad Girls of Action Film and Comic Books." Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture. Ed. Sherrie A. Inness. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004. 47-74.
- Chow, Rey. Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- . Writing Diaspora: The Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Chen, Pauline. "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon – Film Review". Cineaste. Vol 26. Issue 4. (Fall 2001): 71-2.
- Ciecko, Anne T. "Transnational Action: John Woo, Hong Kong, Hollywood." Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender. Ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997.
- Clover, Carol. Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Creed, Barbara. The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Dariotis, Wei Ming and Eileen Fung. "Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee." Transnational Chinese Cinema: Identity, Nationhood, Gender. Ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.
- Gallagher, Mark. "I Married Rambo: Spectacle and Melodrama in the Hollywood Action Film." Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media. Ed. Christopher Sharrett. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999. 199-225.

- Haraway, Donna J. Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. "The Life Cycle of Cyborgs: Writing the Posthuman" The Cyborg Handbook. Ed. Chris Hables Gray with Heidi J. Figueroa-Sarriera and Steven Mentor. New York: Routledge, 1995. 321-335.
- Herbst, Claudia. "Lara's Lethal and Loaded Mission: Transposing Reproduction and Destruction." Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture. Ed. Sherrie A. Inness. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004. 21-46.
- hooks, bell. Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Hunt, Leon. Kung Fu Cult Masters. London: Wallflower Press, 2003.
- Hutcheon, Linda. The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory Fiction. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Inness, Sherrie A. Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.
- Jameson, Frederic. Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
- Jeffords, Susan. Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994.
- Kei, Sek, Rolanda Chu & Grant Foerster. "The HK Martial Arts Film".
<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/31/hk_brief1.html> November 17, 2004.
- King, Neal & Martha McCaughey. "What's a Mean Woman like You Doing in a Movie like This?" Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies. Ed. Martha McCaughey and Neal King. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001. 1-27.
- Logan, Bey. Hong Kong Action Cinema. Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 1995.
- Neale, Steve. "Prologue: Masculinity as Spectacle" Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema. Ed. Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. London: Routledge, 1993. 9-23.
- . Genre and Hollywood. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Norris, Chris. "Mixed Blood". Film Comment. Nov/Dec 2003: 26-28.
- O'Brien, Geoffrey. "Devotional Furies". Film Comment. Nov/Dec 2003: 22-25.
- Read, Jacinda. "Narratives of Transformation: the Rape-Revenge Cycle." The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000. 22-58.
- Schubart, Rikke. "Passion and Acceleration: Generic Change in the Action Film." Violence and American Cinema. Ed. J. David Slocum. New York: Routledge, 2001. 192-207.
- Sharrett, Christopher. "Kill Bill, Vol. 1 – Film Review". Cineaste. Vol 29. Issue 2 (Spring 2004): 96.

- Silver, Alain. The Samurai Film. Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 1977.
- Staiger, Janet. "Hybrid or Inbred: The purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History". Film Genre Reader III. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. 185-199.
- Stringer, Julian. "Category 3: Sex and Violence in Postmodern Hong Kong". Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media. Ed. Christopher Sharrett. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999. 361-379.
- Tasker, Yvonne. Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Tung, Charlene. "Embodying an Image: Gender, Race, and Sexuality in *La Femme Nikita*". Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture. Ed. Sherrie A. Inness. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004. 95-122.
- Tudor, Andrew. "Genre". Film Genre Reader III. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. 3-12.
- Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess". Film Genre Reader III. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. 141-160.
- Wright, Will. Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.